

**THE IDEOLOGY AND AESTHETICS OF
ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER'S MUSICALS:
FROM THE BROADWAY MUSICAL TO THE
BRITISH MEGAMUSICAL**

by

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INTRODUCTION

A Dialectical Method for the Analysis of Musicals: From Fredric Jameson to Andrew Lloyd Webber

Andrew Lloyd Webber is the most successful composer/ producer in the history of musical theatre. His musicals have traveled all around the world, from the UK and the USA to Ireland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Sweden, Australia, Canada, Japan, China and South Africa. *Cats* (1981) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), his two mammoth international blockbusters, have been seen by more than one hundred million people and have taken in a cumulative gross of almost \$6 billion. Such shows seem to be tailor-made for a global, cosmopolitan culture, in which mass artifacts transgress national borders and function more and more like multinational franchises and international brand-names, achieving the same level of recognition as Coca Cola and Nike. In this unashamedly commodified global landscape, where products of every possible origin compete for attention, Lloyd Webber's shows have been amongst the shiniest and loudest. Insanely over-budgeted and technologically cutting-edge, they have offered a barrage of impressive visuals, overscored with the composer's trademark pop-operatic anthems. Grand, excessively emotional and ravishingly romantic power-pop arias, like "Don't Cry for Me Argentina," "Memory" and "The Music of the Night," have captured the imagination of audiences and have filled the theatres all around the world, making Lloyd Webber not only the most well-

known and well-paid composer that musical theatre has ever produced, but also a theatrical Czar, a business mogul and an international brand-name in his own right.

Despite his unprecedented financial success and the adoration of the audience, Lloyd Webber has been the subject of intense critical controversy. In Britain, where he was born and brought up, the critical response has been mostly divided, but, in the US, Lloyd Webber has been subjected to at times savage and humiliating criticism and has been largely dismissed as an opportunist, in spite of his impressive output, the development of a personal aesthetic and the consistency of his success over the years. Led by Frank Rich, chief drama critic of the prestigious *New York Times* throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, most of the Broadway musical “authorities” declared open war on Lloyd Webber, by consistently providing the most malicious reviews that a commercial composer/ producer of his success and status has ever received. In their opinion, Lloyd Webber constituted an anomaly and aberration to the canon of musical theatre. Although his works revitalized the Broadway musical both aesthetically and economically, by introducing aesthetic forms that met with stupendous audience acceptance and broke box office records, for most of the critics Lloyd Webber represented the decadence of the musical genre which, in their view, had reached its peak during the so-called “golden” era of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. Criticisms like these have created the impression that Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals (and their imitations) belong to an artistic league out of Lloyd Webber’s reach, being something like the “Cherry Orchards” and “Waiting for Godots” of musicals. Thus, a good vs. bad, high vs. low opposition has been created that duplicates within the genre of musical theatre the well-known opposition between high and mass art, producing the illusion that somehow the Rodgers and

Hammerstein's and Lloyd Webber's musicals belong to opposite realms of aesthetic production.

One of the main reasons for such critical misconceptions is probably the fact that Lloyd Webber is a foreigner, who has dared to dominate an art form, in which Americans have excelled for most of the twentieth century. During the "golden" age, from the 1940s to the late 1960s, New York was the centre of light musical entertainment, defining how a musical should sound or look. Broadway's biggest hits were seen in most foreign countries not only on the stage, but also on the screen, as high-profile, big-budgeted film adaptations of Broadway's top-grossers became international hits and the best ambassadors for American musical theatre aesthetics. However, by the 1970s, the well-established formulas had grown rather stale, failing to pay off and leading Broadway into deep economic crisis. In the midst of this crisis, the so-called "British invasion" started, as a string of bewilderingly successful musicals, originating in London, took New York and the whole of the U.S. by storm, becoming the biggest money-makers in the history of Broadway and using their American triumph as a ticket for their exportation all over the globe. These shows saved the economic fortunes of Broadway and, in the process, altered the economy of musical theatre, transforming it from a cottage industry into a multinational corporate enterprise with multimillion-dollar risks and multibillion-dollar gross potential. From an obscure, little-known composer, Lloyd Webber suddenly became the titan of Broadway, launching one musical supertanker after the other and easily crushing all local competition at the box office. Among his "victims" have been the more idiosyncratic and introverted shows of Stephen Sondheim, who was idolized by Rich and is highly respected by the Broadway establishment. Sondheim is the most talented

American theatrical composer/ lyricist of his generation, Hammerstein's disciple, and thus the last connection with the "golden" era. It is not surprising, then, that many people in New York wanted him to be in Lloyd Webber's position, and so resented the British invader for preventing the ascension of an American-Jewish royalty onto the throne of Broadway.¹

This critical resentment has made Lloyd Webber a taboo subject for academic study. Michael Walsh, who wrote the composer's most informed biography and was the first to provide a balanced critical evaluation of his creative output, remarked that, when the first edition of his book appeared in 1989, he "was widely taken to task by critics for the effrontery of treating Lloyd Webber and his work seriously" (256). This same prejudice continued throughout the 1990s, and it is only within the first decade of the new century, when his box-office appeal has significantly diminished, that Lloyd Webber has finally been considered a valid subject for academic research. In 2004, the British invader was officially recognized as a Broadway master, as the second volume of the series *Yale Broadway Masters* was devoted to him. The book, simply titled *Andrew Lloyd Webber*, is written by John Snelson and offers an in-depth musicological analysis of the composer's major works.² In 2006, another important publication arrived, this time by Jessica Sternfeld, with the title *The Megamusical* - a neologism that has been widely used in order to define the type of shows created by Lloyd Webber. Although Sternfeld's study is also mainly a musicological one, her

¹ Broadway has been literally dominated by American-Jews, as Andrea Most shows in her illuminating study *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004).

² I have to note that this book has proven very helpful for the present study, since I lack an academic musicological training and, without Snelson's insights, I could not have been as precise in my analysis of Lloyd Webber's compositional style as I should.

contribution lies in defining the musical genre that has been popularized by Lloyd Webber and identifying its main characteristics.

As the prefix “mega” denotes, the megamusical is a show conceived on a grand scale. Musically, a megamusical offers a series of so-called “Big Tunes,” luxurious power-pop ballads with dramatic upward key changes and lush harmonic resolutions, using the full power of an amplified, strings-filled orchestra, in order to attack the audience head on and bring the house down. A distinctive characteristic of megascores is the continuous musicalization of dramatic action, through the combination of full musical numbers and recycled melodic fragments, for the creation of an operatic effect. This is the reason why these shows are also called pop-operas, although the correct musicological term would be pop-operetta, since the complexities of classical composition found in opera are largely avoided in favor of directness and simplicity, which also characterize the relatively lighter operettas. The plots fit the music in epic size and operatic grandeur: they are mostly “sweeping tales of romance, war, religion, life and death” (Sternfeld 2), featuring towering heroic or ambivalent, darkly anti-heroic figures. This larger-than-life effect is also replicated in the imperial monumentality that characterizes the set design, which sometimes extends to the auditorium in order to provide a total, environmental theatrical experience. Obviously, the aim is to overwhelm the senses and this aim is achieved not only through the elephantine proportions of the sets, but also through the effect of continuous stage movement, as computer-generated hydraulic machinery enables an almost filmic succession of constantly changing panoramas. Finally, the megamusicals are marketed in a manner that befits their grand scale, as costly advertising campaigns create the

necessary hype in the media that transforms the opening of a show into a big event and generates heated anticipation, which is reflected in record-breaking advance sales.

In her book, Sternfeld identifies these characteristics not only in Lloyd Webber's shows, but also in other exported British megaproductions, which applied the same formulas, like *Les Misérables* (1985) and *Miss Saigon* (1989), and American shows that borrowed and developed this aesthetic throughout the 1990s, most notably the Disney shows. I believe that the next step after Sternfeld's definition of the genre is to analyze it from a cultural perspective and investigate the reasons for its vast popularity, and this is one of the main objectives of this study. Lloyd Webber, clearly, could not have come to prominence in a cultural vacuum. For almost twenty-five years (from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s), he has been one of the major forces of popular culture, and such lasting success is a proof that his aesthetic choices resonate with dominant cultural tastes. Indeed, a brief comparison of his shows with other hugely successful mass-cultural artifacts of the same period shows that similar trends are repeated, constituting, thus, a common aesthetic, which has been labelled by various cultural critics as "postmodern." For example, the blockbuster films, which emerged in the 1970s and quickly became the dominant, most expensive and lucrative form of filmmaking, share many similarities with the theatrical musical blockbusters: a preference for heroic or super-heroic subject matter and epic-sized, nearly continuous symphonic scores; a monumentality in terms of production design, which is enabled by the digitalization of the filming process; a desire to provide total, environmental and intensely synaesthetic experiences, not only through the revolutionization of surround sound design, but also through the advent of digital 3D, which promises to transform the viewing experience into a thrill ride, comparable to

those offered by high-tech theme parks; and, finally, an aggressive self-promotion, which transforms every movie release into a pseudo-event of global cultural importance.

This comparison between the megamusicals and blockbuster films allows us to outline a common aesthetic, which is characterized by a larger-than-life quality: from the choice of subject-matter, the style of musical composition, the set design and the promotional techniques employed to the transformation of spectatorship, through the excessive use of cutting-edge technology, into an overwhelming and immersive spatial experience, which aspires to merge represented space with the actual viewing space. We must note that the same larger-than-life aesthetic invades everyday life, which also approaches the status of total theatre through the spectacularization and theme-parkization of public spaces, from restaurants, hotels, clubs and airports to the centre of the city itself. Within these multimedia immersive environments the real is denied in favor of the hyperreal: the lines between art and life, fantasy and reality are blurred and the individual is seduced by idealized, digitalized projections of himself/herself, cultivating a desire for the transcription of everyday experience in ultimately hyperrealistic, mythical, larger-than-individual-life terms. In the following chapters, we shall examine in detail the prevailing socio-economic, ideological and psychological structures that enable the popularization of this aesthetic. However, even from this summary presentation of postmodern society and its artifacts, it becomes obvious that Lloyd Webber's shows have expressed effectively on the theatrical stage the way people live and, most importantly, fantasize, and for this reason have met such tremendous audience approval and have influenced profoundly the development of musical theatre.

Lloyd Webber's influence still lives on today when his popularity has waned and New York has become once again the musical theatre metropolis, exporting its products both to London and all around the globe. His influence is detected not only in the Disney shows and megamusicals like *Wicked* (2003), which continue from where Lloyd Webber left off, but also in the musical comedies and farces, which are promoted as the antidote to the megamusical. Shows like *Hairspray* (2002), *Spamalot* (2005) and *Young Frankenstein* (2007), may not exhibit the quintessentially Webberian faux-operatic pretensions in terms of their subject matter and their musical influences, but are still filled with nearly continuous music and conceived on a mega-scale as far as the stage design and the use of technology are concerned. Moreover, just like the British megamusicals, they try to create a permanent euphoric state and provoke a delirious audience response, by unleashing a barrage of intricate stage images "edited" to the rhythms of bombastic pop tunes and uniting dramatic action, pumping music, restless dance, sweeping lights and cinematic set changes into one uninterrupted continuum. Since this delirious, epic-sized kind of musical has been invented and popularized by Lloyd Webber, it is safe to define the postmodern phase in the development of musical theatre (both on Broadway and all over the world) as the Lloyd Webber era.

The present study could end with the elucidation and exemplification of this argument, if it did not aspire to be not only a synchronic, but also a diachronic analysis of the megamusical. In other words, this study has a double focus: it aims at providing a culturally informed reading of Lloyd Webber's musicals, but also at investigating whether these shows constitute a radical break - even an anomaly and aberration, in the history of the twentieth-century musical theatre, as most critics seem

to argue - or develop already existing trends, which reach their aesthetic maturity through the megamusical. Such a diachronic investigation of the relationship between the megamusical and the traditional Broadway musical proves to be particularly frustrating and difficult, mainly because of the lack of any critical study of the musical as a genre that would have provided a frame according to which we could evaluate and situate Lloyd Webber's contribution. The existing historical works on the Broadway musical (most of which have been used in this study) tend to be simply presentational and descriptive and often infuriatingly biased: they focus on specific works and creators or survey the creative output of the "golden" decades in the history of American musical theatre, stopping somewhere between the 1960s and 1970s, when every trace of the "good old days" vanishes, as Sondheim proves to be both unwilling and unable to gain mass audience approval and the British imports start gradually to occupy the Broadway stages. Although these books are valuable in identifying aesthetic trends, their biases prevent them from attaining a panoramic view of the development of musical theatre aesthetics throughout the twentieth century, and, thus, clarifying the links between different articulations of the same genre or illuminating the continuity between apparently discontinuous generic manifestations.

From all these standard historiographies, only Martin Gottfried's *Broadway Musicals*, published in 1979, attempts such a panoramic examination and evaluation of twentieth-century musical theatre. Gottfried's main objective is to provide a concise introduction to Broadway musical aesthetics, by presenting the key composers and directors. What differentiates his book from many other similar attempts is that his presentation and evaluation of all the Broadway "legends" and

their output is determined by their contribution to the attainment of a certain aesthetic goal: the creation of a thoroughly musical theatre, in which music blends with dialogue, lyrics, dance and scenery in one unified, uninterrupted continuum. In other words, for Gottfried, the development of the Broadway musical has a teleological orientation and it is according to this orientation that he rethinks the history of the genre. Thus, from the rigid compartmentalization between the songs, the dances and the prose sequences that characterizes the musicals of the 1920s and 1930s, we move to the more organic – or “integrated,” as they are usually called - musicals of the 1940s and 1950s. These shows do not only strengthen the dramatic links between the musical and the prose sequences, but also try sometimes to achieve an uninterrupted musical flow, through the use of lengthy musical sequences, in which smooth alternations between prose, vocal music and instrumental music are achieved. In this period, we also witness the move from a decorative to a more dramatic use of dance, which gives rise, during the 1950s and 1960s, to the choreographers-directors, who reconceive the musical as a hyper-kinetic organism, by incorporating dramatic action within extended song-and-dance sequences. The unification of the elements of musical theatre is further enhanced by the more conceptual directors of the late 1960s and 1970s, who rethink the musical stage in more pictorial terms, as a three-dimensional ever-evolving painting, and start using the scenery and the lights as interactive components of the stage action.

In his book, Gottfried makes a passing reference to Lloyd Webber’s *Evita* (1978), only in order to repeat the standard critical reaction, that it was a rather mediocre musical piece given a bold and groundbreaking staging by the most

conceptual of all musical theatre directors, Harold Prince.³ However, in *More Broadway Musicals: Since 1980*, the follow-up volume to his original discussion of Broadway musical aesthetics, published in 1991, Gottfried's perception of Lloyd Webber has radically changed. He accepts him now not only as an economic necessity, but also a revitalizing aesthetic force, as his pop-operatic compositional techniques constitute an important step towards the creation of a thoroughly musical theatre. Gottfried pays particular attention to Lloyd Webber's avoidance of the verbose and somewhat awkward operatic recitative in favor of a fluid and pop-friendly speech-in-music, achieved mainly through the recycling of fragments from his main melodic set pieces.⁴ By weaving and dissolving into each other his musical fragments, his ear-catching refrains, the composer creates a delirious, total musical flow, which unravels in rapid succession a collection of brief but big aural images, that correspond to equally brief but big dramatic moments. In this way, he presents us with his ideal of a musical theatre that is restless, kaleidoscopic, almost cinematic, and demands an equally cinematic staging. This is the reason why in Lloyd Webber's musicals computer-generated set changes are employed in order to create an ever-changing and shape-shifting stage area, that not only revolves, but also splits, rises or sinks from sight in order to keep up with the momentum of the dramatic action and the musical score. The perfect synchronization of vocal and orchestral music with the appearance and disappearance of new scenic structures, that rapidly zoom in and out, roll on and off, fly in and out, is known as set choreography. This new kind of

³ See Martin Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, B.V., 1979) 126.

⁴ See Martin Gottfried, *More Broadway Musicals: Since 1980* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991). Gottfried devotes chapter 3, "Andrew Lloyd Webber" 53-77, to the discussion of the composer.

choreography, whose aim is to transform the stage into a pictorial organism in constant motion, combines the efforts of the choreographers-directors to transform the musical into a piece of kinetic art with the interactive use of stage design, popularized by the conceptual directors, but also raises these previous experimentations to a new, more ambitious level, as the stage pictures are now gigantic and the canvas, on which they are painted, is vast.

More recently, in 2006, Scott McMillin in his book, *The Musical as Drama*, perceives a similar continuity between musical theatre aesthetics from the “golden” to the Lloyd Webber era, but also views the historical development of aesthetic forms from a more panoramic perspective than Gottfried. He argues that the aesthetic goal towards which the experimentation from the integrated musical to the megamusical leads is the Wagnerian ideal of total theatre: the creation of the great synaesthetic work of art, in which all the different arts merge.⁵ This ideal has inspired throughout the twentieth century many theatre practitioners, and especially directors, from Erwin Piscator and Antonin Artaud to Peter Brook and Robert Wilson, who treat the various arts as interactive scenic discourses, antagonistic partners, battling for dominance on a stage, which is primarily conceived as a field of intense perceptual activity. As Hans-

⁵ See Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2006). McMillin presents this argument in chapter one, “Integration and Difference” 1-30 and chapter seven, “Narration and Technology: Systems of Omniscience” 149-78. The problem with his analysis is that, although he recognizes the existence of a certain underlying logic in the development of the aesthetic form from Rodgers and Hammerstein to Lloyd Webber, he tries to undermine the power of his argument, obviously because he dislikes the megamusicals. Like so many historians and theoreticians of the musical, he tries to discover an “authentic” form of musical theatre, which can function theoretically as the antidote to the megamusical. Since McMillin is perceptive enough to recognize the similarities between the critically glorified integrated musicals by Rodgers and Hammerstein and the degraded megamusicals, he finds a model of “authentic” musical theatre in the pre-integrated musicals of the 1920s and 1930s. He supports that the compartmentalization of song, dance and drama is the true essence of the Broadway musical. However, as we shall see in chapter two, “The Era of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the Origins of the Megamusical: From *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*,” and more specifically in section two, “Problems of Integration,” this compartmentalization is the outcome of historically specific economic reasons and cannot be considered in a transhistorical manner as the “true” form of the genre.

Thies Lehmann has shown, such experimentations have led to a “*visual dramaturgy*” (93), which achieves the “retheatricalization” of theatre through a renewed emphasis on the theatricality and materiality of the performance (51). In this way, the theatre is liberated from the dominance of the dramatic text, which is now “merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition” (46). A similar undermining of the authority of the dramatic text can be detected in the development of musical theatre, from the integrated musical to the concept musical and the megamusical: prose sections are submerged, incorporated in lengthy song-and-dance sequences or are totally eliminated, while plots and characterizations become schematic and telegraphic, and, especially with the advent of the megamusical, often function as pretexts for the elaborate visuals. For the American critics, this dismissal of traditional dramatic values and the adoption of what Lehmann would define as “postdramatic” ones is exactly what confirms the aesthetic decadence of the megamusical, which, according to them, offers nothing but “spectacle.” However, one can argue that their biases prevent them from recognizing that what is derogatorily and summarily dismissed as “spectacle” may still have a different aesthetic value, which must be appreciated according not to dramatic but rather to postdramatic evaluating standards.

Nevertheless, one can understand the reluctance of the critics to recognize the artistic value of megamusicals or their aesthetic affinities with the loftier and more elitist experimentations taking place in postdramatic theatre. After all, the megamusicals represent the apotheosis of commercialism and global capitalism, while the visual dramaturgy of the directors’ theatre has always been perceived as anti-commercial, obscure and solipsistic, an enemy of cultural populism, resisting the

capitalist forces of commodification. In his book, Lehmann justifies the revolutionary potential of a postdramatic, predominantly visual theatre, by going back to the theories of the *Tel Quel* group. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, prominent members of the French journal *Tel Quel* like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, devised the theory of textuality, whose aim was to create a model of aesthetic and cultural revolution, influenced by the high-modernist and avant-garde artistic practices of the past, that could inspire similar neo-modernist experimentations in the present.⁶ According to this theory, the narrative, cause-and-effect organization of many mass-cultural artifacts reflects the instrumental, means/ ends rationality of a middle-class capitalist mentality. The antidote to this instrumentalization and, hence, commodification of art is a quintessentially formalist, *textual* aesthetic, which foregrounds aesthetic form instead of narrative content, the materiality, the texture of the word (in poetry and fiction) or the image (in theatre and cinema) instead of their meaning-carrying functions. However, nowadays, this textual aesthetic, that once seemed so resistant to commodification, appears to be thoroughly commodified: megamusicals, blockbuster films, MTV videos, TV commercials - our postmodern visual culture in its entirety - have become obsessed with the “textuality” of the image and the intensification of its sensual impact, through the use of technology, sometimes at the expense of any narrative coherence or meaningful content.

In fact, one can easily summarize the whole history of the twentieth-century mass-cultural aesthetics in terms of a gradual absorption and commodification of this “textual” visual aesthetic, to the point that, nowadays, it is impossible to talk about

⁶ The classic texts, where this theory is elaborated, are Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) and Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

avant-garde experimentation in purely formal aesthetic terms, as every seemingly revolutionary aesthetic trend is instantly appropriated by the cultural mainstream. This larger Gestalt field of mass-cultural aesthetic development should be the background against which the development of the twentieth-century musical theatre is analyzed: its teleological orientation towards a total, intensely synaesthetic theatrical aesthetic, which seems to be achieved through the megamusical, must be seen as one more manifestation of popular culture's effective absorption of a previously avant-garde "textual" aesthetic practice. Thus, what will be attempted in the following chapters is an historical analysis of the megamusical as part of an evolving musical theatre aesthetic, which, in its own turn, is also part of an evolving mass-cultural aesthetic. However, this historical analysis cannot be accomplished without resolving the contradictions inherent in the relationship between an aesthetic of "textuality" and a capitalist economy. The critic that can be most helpful in the resolution of these contradictions is Fredric Jameson, mainly because he has devoted his whole career to the analysis of aesthetic production against the backdrop of the capitalist system of economic production.

As a Marxist critical theorist, Jameson understands capitalism as a total system of relations between the infrastructural and the superstructural levels of social existence. His aim is to prove the determination of the latter by the former, and so evoke the image of a social totality thoroughly penetrated by and structured according to a capitalist economic logic. By the 1970s, when Jameson initiated his theoretical project, this classic Marxist distinction between economic base or infrastructure (forces and relations of economic production, technological development, commodification, universalization of exchange value) and superstructure (politics, art,

philosophy, religion, legal system, education etc.) had come to be considered outmoded and vulgar. However, in our current, thoroughly and unapologetically commodified, turbo-capitalist societies of the West, this distinction becomes once again relevant, as we can grasp more clearly than ever before how capitalist economy produces hegemonic forms not only of ideological, political, educational or artistic practice, but also of subject formation, desire or even phenomenological perception of the world. In Jameson's hands the relation between infrastructural and superstructural levels becomes a subtle analytical instrument, highlighting the complexities, contradictions and dilemmas generated by capitalism's gradual colonization of every mode of socio-political, psychological or phenomenological experience. This analytical subtlety derives, partly, from Jameson's understanding of capitalism as an ever-evolving and ever-mutating economic system, producing in each one of its moments of expansion a different cultural logic.

Appropriating Ernest Mandel's economic model in *Late Capitalism*,⁷ Jameson argues that there are three stages in the development of capitalism in its mature form, three quantum leaps in the organization of capital, which constitute three distinct historical periods: (a) free-market capitalism, which extends throughout the nineteenth century and is characterized by the growth of capital in largely national markets; (b) monopoly capitalism, which extends from the late-nineteenth century to the post-World-War-II era and is characterized by the concentration of capital in national state-trusts, competing with each other in the world market and entering into imperial rivalry for the control of the colonized nations; and (c) late or multinational

⁷ For the way in which Jameson uses and modifies Mandel's model, see Christian A. Gregory, "Stranded Economies," *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Sean Homer and Douglas Kellner (New York: Palgrave, 2004) 77-93.

capitalism, which explodes in the 1970s and extends until our days, and is characterized by the revolutionization of communications technology and the exponential growth of international corporations, transcending the national boundaries. For Jameson, to each one of these moments of economic modification corresponds a different mode of cultural production, which reflects the changes in the internal reorganization of capital: to free-market capitalism corresponds realism, to monopoly capitalism modernism and to late capitalism postmodernism. These different historical moments of cultural production must be understood as “cultural dominants” that inform a whole range of social, ideological, existential, psychological, phenomenological and aesthetic phenomena (Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory, Vol. 1* 67). In the present study, we shall focus on the historical move from monopoly capitalism and modernist culture to late capitalism and postmodern culture. Particular emphasis will be placed on modernism’s rigid divisions between high and mass art, content and form, the representational and the “textual” and the gradual erosion of such ideological boundaries as we approach the typically postmodern triumph of the “textual,” the thorough commodification of high art and the high aestheticization of mass art. This large process of cultural transformation, as well as the economic modification it presupposes, will be the last and vaster Gestalt field evoked, against which the aesthetic form of the megamusical as well as the history and the ideological coding of this aesthetic form will be examined.

This diachronic examination of economic and cultural interrelatedness will help us answer many important questions, which are pertinent to the understanding of the historical development of a megamusical aesthetic. Is there a relation between the modernist preoccupation with total theatrical experiences and what Walter Benjamin

sees, in the period of monopoly capitalism, as a spectacularization and theatricalization of public spaces (arcades, department stores, world fairs), which offer increasingly synaesthetic and immersive, total experiences?⁸ Is the late capitalist phenomenon of the theme-parkization of public space a continuation of the process described by Benjamin? If so, why then can the same phenomenon of the theatricalization of everyday life inspire total theatrical visions, which are an integral part both of an ideological and aesthetic revolution in a modernist culture and, by contrast, exemplary manifestations of ideological containment and aesthetic conformism in a postmodernist one? Did the negative and revolutionary role that these theatrical experiments had in a modernist culture delay the absorption of an aggressively visual, “textual” aesthetic by the Broadway musical, which achieved critical prestige with a more traditional realist theatrical aesthetic? Why do American critics insist on forming their evaluating criteria according to this more conventionally “dramatic” aesthetic and fail to understand that the Broadway musical flirts consistently with a “visual dramaturgy,” which inevitably leads to the megamusical? Some of Jameson’s insights will help us answer these questions, without excluding, at the same time, other theoretical approaches, from more traditionally Marxist to current psychoanalytic or post-structuralist ones. In other words, this is not a strictly Jamesonian reading of the history of megamusical aesthetics. After all Jameson himself, does not offer a specific and restrictive model of analysis, but, rather, opens up a problematic about the relation of culture and economy throughout the history of the capitalist mode of production.

⁸ See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT P, 1989).

The first chapter, “Historicizing the Musical Number: From Vaudeville to MTV,” addresses this problematic, by presenting how the fragmented form of the commodity is reflected in the form of the structural unit of the musical theatre, the musical number, which emerges as an ideologically precise and aesthetically complete representational (or, sometimes, even non-representational) fragment. The insights from this chapter will help us understand, later on, such phenomena as the compartmentalization of the pre-integrated musicals, the rise of montage as the organizing spatial principle of musical staging and the increasingly higher concentration of the musical on the dramatic present and its phenomenological presence. The second chapter, “The Era of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the Origins of the Megamusical: From *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*,” focuses on the “golden” age and investigates how the Broadway musical achieves a syntagmatic, temporal organization of the musical number within a narrative continuum in the integrated musicals. At the same time, particular emphasis is given to the cultural-economic reasons why this syntagmatic integration gradually gives way to a paradigmatic, spatial organization, which anticipates the radical pictorialism of the concept musical and the megamusical. The third chapter, “Counterculture and the Birth of the Megamusical: From *Hair* to *Evita*,” documents the emergence of Lloyd Webber’s megamusicals out of the countercultural textual/ postdramatic aesthetics of the interconnected rock musicals and concept musicals. The first megamusicals, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*, are analyzed as ideologically ambivalent reflections of the move from countercultural politics and aesthetics to an emerging postmodern radical conformism. The fourth chapter, “Blockbuster Aesthetics and the British Invasion: From *Cats* to *Les Misérables*,” focuses on megamusical aesthetics in its mature form

and analyzes its relation to the economic, ideological and psychological structures of the postmodern/ late capitalist society. Particular emphasis is given to the hyperspatial techno-aesthetic of *Cats* and its influence on postmodern musical theatre aesthetics. Finally, the fifth chapter, “Apotheosis and Decline of the British Megamusical: From *The Phantom of the Opera* to *The Lion King*,” offers a close reading of the ultimate megamusical, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and, then, examines the reasons for Lloyd Webber’s decline. This study closes with a brief discussion of Disney, whose current conquering of Broadway and the international megamusical circuit would be unthinkable without the economic and aesthetic innovations, introduced by Lloyd Webber.

One of the ambitions of this study is to produce many dialectical reversals, which are defined by Jameson as the “paradoxical turning around of a phenomenon into its opposite ... the transformation from negative to positive and from positive to negative” (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 309). The most obvious of these dialectical reversals is that, instead of constituting an anomaly and aberration in the history of twentieth-century musical theatre, Lloyd Webber’s megamusicals are the inevitable conclusion of the canonical experimentation which took place on the musical stages of Broadway. However, the goal of any dialectical analysis is not just to reverse an opposition, but rather to move beyond the categories of the positive and the negative, by demonstrating that binary and oppositional systems of evaluation are always ideological and historical. In fact, every dialectical analysis is a “doubly historical” process, which treats as historical phenomena not only the objects of its analysis, but also the concepts through which these objects have been understood, and so exposes their ideologically conditioned and subjective character (336). The ultimate aim is to

reveal an objective historical process - which, in our case, proves the unmistakable continuity between the Broadway musical and the British megamusical.

CHAPTER ONE

Historicizing the Musical Number: From Vaudeville to MTV

1.1. Defining the Musical Number

Every analysis of the musical as a genre should start with a definition of its structural unit, the musical number. A preliminary definition, which, nevertheless, does not reveal too much without the appropriate exemplification and elucidation, is that the musical number is a representational fragment. Let's take an example, one of the well known and most characteristic ones: Barbra Streisand's first number, "I'm the Greatest Star," from *Funny Girl* (1964). *Funny Girl* is a stage biography of Fanny Brice, the leading comic star of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, the most famous revue series in the history of the genre.⁹ "I'm the Greatest Star" is Fanny's "wanting" song, an anthem of self-assurance and determination, showing us the heroine alone but fully armed with confidence against a world that rejects her because of her unattractive looks. As Streisand's first solo in her first (and last, as *Funny Girl* became her ticket to Hollywood) leading Broadway part, the number has an extra-textual function, too. It is going to prove that the media buzz is right: Streisand, already a well-known figure in New York's nightclub circuit, a familiar face from TV appearances and a most promising newcomer in the recording industry, is going to explode upon Broadway, too, by proving that she *is* the greatest star. As Ethan Mordden, one of the musical theatre's leading historians, puts it, with this number Streisand stopped the

⁹ The *Ziegfeld Follies* are discussed briefly in the last section of this chapter, "Thinking in Fragments." A more detailed presentation of the revue as a genre is provided in the fourth chapter, "Blockbuster Aesthetics and the British Invasion: From *Cats* to *Les Misérables*," and, more specifically, in the third section, "From Revue to Pop Opera."

show, made *Funny Girl* a hit and went on to become Barbra (*Open a New Window* 129). There are many numbers that launched successful careers, but “I’m the Greatest Star” is the number that “launched the biggest star career in show-biz history” (120).

“I’m the Greatest Star” shows that the musical number must be, first and above all, a “perfect instant:” a carefully chosen moment, extracted from a narrative whole and “promoted into essence, into light, into view” (Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* 70-3). It is the number that establishes Fanny’s character and sets off the “Yes, I *will!*” backstage plot of the narrative. Moreover, it is the key number of a larger, all-inclusive “Yes, I *will!*” narrative, of which the musical itself is only a part: it is the culmination of all the publicity built around Streisand herself before the opening of the show. Composer Jule Styne and lyricist Bob Merrill strategically decided to have Streisand declaring in the first number of her first leading role that she is the greatest star. Either the show flops and Streisand becomes the laughing stock of 42nd street or it hits big and she becomes the part of popular legend. For French theorist Roland Barthes, such “urban legends” are the very stuff of a secular culture’s mythologies, in which a dominant, official ideology promotes, naturalizes and essentializes its core values. For this reason, the musical number, as the structuring unit of one of the most popular and self-consciously mythological forms of entertainment, is a carefully chosen moment that is afforded in advance with “the greatest possible yield of meaning” (73), in other words, with the maximum ideological significance.

“I’m the Greatest Star” is a paean to star magnetism. The cult of the star is one of the most fundamental myths of capitalist society, because it restores a metaphysical certainty into a post-theocratic, over-rationalized world, incapable of any kind of transcendence. The star is an almost messianic figure, the chosen one, part of a

providential scheme, destined to “make it” in the world of show-business. As film producer Samuel Goldwyn famously said “God makes the stars. It’s up to the producers to find them” (qtd. in Dyer, *Stars* 16). What is interesting about every star’s success story is that the outcome confers retrospectively a teleological significance to every event of the star’s biography. Most significantly, every hardship is part of the whole process, the obstacle that the individual must overcome in order to meet his/her “destiny.” Fanny had to overcome the universal rejection she experienced, while Streisand had to cope with the show’s disastrous tryout in Boston, before the last-minute arrival of director/ choreographer Jerome Robbins, who “doctored” (as Broadway jargon puts it) the show, made her success story possible. Every success story is quite naturally a story about success, so the stories of those who did not “make it” are never represented on stage or in film and never become legendary. For example, Libi Staiger was rumored to be the next big Broadway star one year before Streisand, with a show called *Sophie* (1963), based on the success story of another Broadway legend, Sophie Tucker. The show flopped and stopped Staiger’s career. In spite of the outcome, *Sophie*’s creators knew very well which was the moment with the maximum ideological significance, the moment to isolate and illuminate. This was another anthem of determination and self-assurance functioning both as the character’s establishing number as well as Staiger’s moment of glory, quite (in)appropriately called, “I’ll Show Them All.”¹⁰

Moreover, the musical number, and especially one designed to be a showstopper, like “I’m the Greatest Star,” is not simply the moment of maximum ideological significance but also the moment when the ideality of meaning is coupled

¹⁰ Mordden compares *Sophie* with *Funny Girl* in chapter seven, “Eye on the Target: *Funny Girl*,” from *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 120-30.

with the highest possible emotional intensity. Human emotions are part of a culture's ideological coding. As Richard Dyer points out, emotions must not be essentialized and understood in a trans-historical manner, but rather conceived as “culturally and historically determined sensibilities,” peculiar to each era (*Only Entertainment* 19). In other words, they must be viewed as part of Barthes's mythological process, as psychosomatic intensities standardized through excessive narrativization, conventionally and consensually inserted “into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning” (Massumi 28). The musical is part of a standardized narrativization of reality that works through repetition, and for this reason the musical writer has to discover in each variation on a pre-existing master-narrative the key emotional moments and bring them to light. The musical number is this illumination of an all-too-meaningful and all-too-emotional moment, fully and unambiguously acted out on stage.

The emotional excess, inherent in every kind of musical theatre, is achieved, of course, through the medium of music. Theories and studies on the relation between music and emotion date back as far as the baroque period and ever since the status of music as the “tonal analogue of emotive life” (Langer qtd. in Dyer, *Only Entertainment* 19) has preoccupied such diverse disciplines as musicology, psychology, anthropology and philosophy.¹¹ The kind of music that the musical number employs is the popular song format, “a structure which works through a system of chord progressions and modulations leading away from, and back to the

¹¹ For a review of the literature and the developments in research on the relation between music and emotion see Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda eds., *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

tonic key, along relatively formulaic lines” (Laing 9). The melodic line “is a controlled and perhaps even restricted line, not only by the dictation of the tonal system but also, of course, by the range of the human voice” (9). The popular song must be understood as a hybrid form combining the non-representational language of music with referential language in order to achieve a lyrical extension of speech, the transfiguration and lifting up of everyday, vernacular language into a higher, more expressive realm (Feuer 52-3). This is the reason why the popular mode of musical composition does not allow the limitless harmonic, chromatic or tonal experimentation that instrumental composition, in its classical or avant-garde variant, does; the vocal line and the meaning-carrying lyrics have to be dominant over the instrumental accompaniment (Laing 10).

Different styles of popular music are associated with different modes of emotional expression, and the formal analogy between a musical form and a particular type of emotion creates a symbolic relation that through repetition becomes standardized. This standardization enables the audience’s immediate response to a song’s content. Thus, in *Funny Girl* the more jazzy, syncopated, staccato melodic lines of “I’m the Greatest Star” or “Don’t Rain on My Parade” instantly become signs of determination and dynamic self-expression; while lush ballads, like “People” or “Who Are You Now?,” whose origins lie as far back as the European operetta tradition, totally Americanized by such composers as Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers, immediately point to the lyrical expression of romantic longings. Popular songs are one of the most efficient modes of Barthes’s mythological signification, musicalized narrative fragments able to transform “the reality of the world” into a frozen “image of the world” (Barthes, “Myth Today” 130), emotively accepted

“without wondering where it comes from” (140). Musical theatre has always produced popular hits that promoted an unproblematic relation to existing social contradictions and antagonisms. In the days of the Great Depression, for example, while musical plays like *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) were using the emotional power of music in order to awaken labor consciousness, Cole Porter’s songs, over-abundant as ever with melodic elegance and urban sophistication, glorified the mad glad world of the privileged upper class, where “Anything Goes,” making it an unproblematic object of desire for the underprivileged ones. As Styne cleverly puts it, Porter writes the type of song “that makes a shopgirl know 21 or El Morocco [famous nightclubs] without ever having been there” (qtd. in Green 159); and, as Barthes accurately adds, when the working class lives up to the upper middle class status in imagination, “that is, at the cost of an immobilization and impoverishment of consciousness” (“Myth Today” 129), dominant ideology is ex-nominated and becomes pseudo-physis.

Before Elvis Presley, the Beatles and the rock era, Broadway was the main provider of popular music. The prominent titles from musicals were selling sheet music and later on records, they were appearing in the top positions of the Hit Parade and were achieving the maximum airplay on the radio. They were the key ingredients of a mediatized, mass, popular culture. For this reason, a Broadway composer and lyricist had to write songs that were serving simultaneously two functions: on the one hand, they had “to function out of context as good mainstream pop,” while on the other, they had to serve “contextually within the show” (Mordden, *Open a New Window* 117). For *Funny Girl*, Styne and Merrill provided songs with big hit potential, which function, at the same time, organically within the show. Especially, the lush, melodramatic love songs capture perfectly Fanny’s despair at her collapsing

personal life, while at the same time they provide Streisand with potential hits in the power-ballad tradition, in which she had already established herself as a recording artist. In the 1960s, Streisand was one of the few vocalists that were achieving big commercial success with an exclusively Broadway-type of sound, and *Funny Girl's* love theme, "People," became one of the biggest hits to come out of a musical as well as one of the biggest in Streisand's career.

All the characteristics of the musical number that we have already identified, its function as an instant of maximum ideological and emotional significance, standing out of a narrative context and serving both contextual and extra-textual goals, can be summarized in one word: semi-autonomy. The musical number seems to enjoy a peculiar and privileged semi-autonomy within the context of a musical play. It almost claims to be a small and all-too-powerful performance in itself, a fact that becomes obvious when we consider the performing style that it sometimes commands and demands. Let's take into consideration Streisand's performance in "I'm the Greatest Star." It is a consummate piece of acting encapsulating not only the essence of the role but the whole acting range (which is quite limited, to be honest) of Streisand's career.¹² It starts as an exaggeration of comic skills by a person (Fanny or Streisand?) who knows that only self-parody can compensate for the lack of conventionally attractive looks and help her gain the audience's attention and sympathy; then, self-parody turns to anger and anger to determination and the whole number slowly builds into an anthem of triumphant egotism. It is not accidental that the melody unfolds in the second, more (melo)dramatic part of the number, fully exploiting Streisand's extraordinary vocal range. Now in a performing delirium, she underlines every high

¹² Streisand's showstopping performance has been faithfully reproduced in William Wyler's film adaptation of the Broadway show.

note she reaches with broad gestures, magnified by her notorious over-long fingernails (now in full view). As she rears back to belt out the long finale, the transformation from ugly duck to swan has been accomplished. This transformation is the whole narrative trajectory of the play as well as the thematic motif repeated in most of Streisand's subsequent movies.

This is the very essence of the showstopping number. Everything is in its right place: ideological and emotional significance, music, lyrics, acting style; and the audience is left with no other choice than to stop the show, stand up and applaud, as if the show is over. Many times the audience may cheer so loudly and for so long that the performance is not able to go on – “The Rain in Spain” number from *My Fair Lady* (1956) is the prototypical example here. Such erasure of any distance between stage and auditorium is rarely achieved in the theatre, and the musical in its history exploits more and more the power of the showstopper until almost every number in a show aspires to showstopping status. In this way, the musical theatre becomes an art “by vocation anthological” offering a “continuous jubilation made up of a summation of perfect instants” (Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* 69-70). If we take into consideration that, apart from music, the musical number exploits the effects of many other arts associated with immediate affective response, like dance, light design and set design (especially in its special-effects variant), then we reach an interesting conclusion: the musical number aspires at being a total art in itself, a minimalist version of the Wagnerian ideal of *Gesamtkunst*, the merging of all arts in an all-inclusive art form of the future. Now, we can reach a first full definition of the musical number: it is a representational fragment that synthesizes every possible means of artistic expression in order to achieve an audience reaction of explosive proportions.

1.2. The Old Razzle Dazzle

Where did this rich but minimalist theatrical form come from? Which are its origins? The 2002 film adaptation of Bob Fosse's stage musical *Chicago* (produced on stage in 1975) leads us back not only to the very origins of musical theatre, but also to the origins of mass culture in general. It reminds us of the first form of mass popular entertainment, which is, now, long forgotten: vaudeville. The film is a very good introduction to the world of vaudeville and its representational structure and helps us understand how the structural unit of musical theatre, the musical number, was originally formed, evolved and mutated throughout the twentieth century, not only on stage but in other media as well.

Set in the 1920s, *Chicago* tells the story of Roxie Hart, a naïve young woman married to a “dumb mechanic” but dreaming of being a vaudeville star. Instead she ends up in jail after killing her lover, who supposedly had connections in the vaudeville circuit, but was actually taking advantage of her naiveté in order to have some “fun.” In prison, Roxie is educated in the ways of the world and hires a Machiavellian lawyer, Billy Flynn, who knows how to manipulate the mass media of the era, press and radio. He transforms her into America's sweetheart and after a sensational trial-cum-show, acquits her. Roxie wants to capitalize on her hard-earned publicity and realize her dream, but finds out that in a world that searches feverishly for the next big thing, she is old news. In an act of desperation, she joins forces with her former inmate and nemesis, Velma Kelly, notorious murderess and forgotten vaudeville star, and finally her dream comes true. Their “murderous” double act truly rocks Chicago!

“The first time, anywhere, there has been an act of this nature. Not only one little lady but two! You’ve read about them in the papers and now here they are – a double header! Chicago’s own killer dillers – those two scintillating sinners – Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly.” These are the words of the announcer introducing the dynamic duo in the end of the film. The whole story and especially this finale may seem too exaggerated to contain even a hint of realism, but they are not. Apart from the fact that *Chicago* is roughly based on a true story, “freak” acts like Roxie and Velma’s were quite frequent on the vaudeville stage. Vaudeville historian Robert W. Snyder gives us an all-too-real example: “When chorus girls Lillian Graham and Ethel Conrad were released on bail after shooting Graham’s wealthy lover, the Victoria put them onstage as ‘The Shooting Stars.’ They packed the house” (90). Newsmakers of any kind could appear on the vaudeville stage like “participants in sexual scandals, prizefighters, wrestlers, bicycle racers, runners, sharpshooters, and suffragists” (90). Apart from faux celebrities aspiring to their own fifteen minutes of fame, the bill could also include everything from dog acts, acrobats, gymnasts, jugglers to major stars of the legitimate stage, like Ethel Barrymore and Sarah Bernhardt, presenting extracts from their famous roles, as well as many comic sketches, and, of course, elaborate song and dance routines.

So, what exactly was vaudeville? Nothing but “a series of individual acts strung together to produce a complete bill of entertainment” (12). Although “[t]o an outsider, the sequence of acts looked as random as the scenes glimpsed from a trolley car on a busy city street” (66), the whole performance was carefully structured, so that the succession of the individual acts would lead to a climax, which invariably included a performance from the biggest star of the bill. Not all performances were for all kinds

of audiences. There were big-time and small-time circuits: the first were attracting “respectable” middle-class audiences with star performances, more tasteful and less risqué acts in theatres located in major shopping and entertainment districts; while the second were attracting the working-class and the ethnic groups with cheaper prices, more boisterous and vulgar humor in neighborhood vaudeville houses. This hierarchy shows that the vaudeville business was a well organized one, bureaucratic and centralized. A small number of powerful producers owned or collaborated with a large number of theatres around the U.S. to which they disseminated standardized products, the individual acts. In this way, from the late nineteenth century vaudeville became the major form of the entertainment business that together with the press, and later on radio, formed what today we call mass culture. Until the 1920s, the film, still in a primitive technological stage, could not even compete with vaudeville in popularity and mass appeal.

For the audience the experience that vaudeville offered was a very enjoyable one:

It moved fast, had a wide range that kept you always absorbed – no one act was on long enough so that you lost interest – the evening shifted from excitement to excitement, but on different levels – high comedy, sophistication, slapstick, dancing, singing – sentimental – jazz – acrobats – animals – a panorama that was gorgeous, funny, tearful, each in turn – a kind of entertainment audiences could lose themselves in, individually and collectively. (Florence Sinow qtd. in Snyder 129)

For the performers, however, it was a very difficult and demanding, even cruel job. A performer that was not a star could never feel secure, as acts could be easily dropped

and replaced by the managers, if they met the audience's disapproval.¹³ For this reason, the performer should always be alert, learn how to adjust himself/ herself to the specific demands of the particular audience and, most importantly, have absolute command of the stage. His/ her primary objective was to "establish a fine-tuned rapport with spectators" (108), win them over, make them feel part of the show, and cultivate a feeling of familiarity and intimacy that must feel spontaneous, though it is carefully planned and calculated: "that genial familiarity, that confiding smile which seems to break out so spontaneously, the causal entrance and glance round the audience – all have been nicely calculated and their effect registered" (Caroline Caffin qtd. in Snyder 109). The performer, in the limited time that he/ she had at his/ her disposal, should win the battle with the audience and create the maximum possible effect on them, if he/ she wanted to retain his/ her job and popularity. This was the strategy of every successful performer, like Maggie Cline, for example, the so-called Irish Queen, "who inspired audiences to sing along in what a journalist called an 'earthquake obbligato'" (23).

It is not accidental, then, that the biggest stars of the American musical theatre, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, "graduated" from vaudeville. On its stage they learned their craft and, then, went on to dominate the stage of modern musical theatre: Marilyn Miller, George M. Cohan, Eddie Cantor, Fred and Adele Astaire, The Marx Brothers, and the queen of Broadway, Ethel Merman. It is not,

¹³ Sometimes this disapproval could be expressed in rather extreme ways, especially in small-time theatres, ranging from booing to the throwing of tomatoes. This kind of lively interaction between stage and auditorium was a characteristic that vaudeville retained from the mid-nineteenth century concert saloons from which it originated. Especially, in the early, "disrespectful" days of vaudeville, the notorious "gallery gods," the "fancy men" in the galleries, most of the time drunk and accompanied by prostitutes, were always making their presence intensely felt with their outbursts and generally rowdy behavior. Even when vaudeville hit big-time and the gallery gods were tamed (though never completely), "the dialogue between artist and audience remained critical" (Snyder 106).

also, accidental that all of today's directors and historians complain about the poor quality of the story-lines and plots of these early musicals, which makes them virtually unrevivable without heavy rewriting. As we shall see in the next chapter, in those days the musicals were dominated by the persona of their stars and were built around them. Those musicals were nothing but collections of perfect numbers, perfect acts loosely tight together in a semblance of a plot, highlighting their stars' abilities and specialties and exploiting their particular connection with their audience. As Gottfried points out, every big number is a transaction directly between star and audience and "the difference between an actor and a star is the sexual relationship with the audience. This is love on its way to ecstasy" (*Broadway Musicals* 278). Of course, Gottfried romanticizes this relationship, but, in all its flamboyance and extravagance, his description really captures the special connection that a celebrated performer establishes with his/ her audience. This connection is central not only to the early and dramatically amateurish musicals, but also to the later, well-made ones, integrated as they are called. Even in these, the star is never totally in-character, especially in a big number, but exhibits his/ her awareness that he/ she is being watched, scrutinized, even adored. The characteristic example here is Carol Channing's "knock-'em-dead" performance of the title number from *Hello, Dolly!* (1964). She self-consciously performed it as an excuse for her apotheosis by the audience.

This carefully crafted feeling of immediate and free communion between stage and auditorium, which is created by carefully directing the audience into the show, is one of the most important and lasting elements that vaudeville bequeathed to the musical theatre. The other is the concept of the perfect act that the performer has to

put on stage. As former vaudevillian and then big Hollywood star, James Cagney, puts it: “Vaudevillians by persistent trial and error and unremitting hard work found out how to please ... they spent years perfecting those acts” (qtd. in Snyder 108). In the little amount of time they were afforded, they had to deliver their best, a self-contained piece that makes the biggest possible impression and has that explosive quality, which is able to sweep the audience away. This demand for absolute mastery over one’s tools, for achieving the maximum efficiency of expression within the most limited amount of time has led to the association of the brilliant performer with a perfect machine.¹⁴ Such an association is not just a metaphorical schema with no grounding in historical reality. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the age, in which the discovery of the quickest, most economical means of achieving a specific end was a project of paramount significance in every kind of business. In this age, the systematic organization and instrumentalization of human activity in terms of greater efficiency is not restricted in the factories but tends to engulf the whole of the social.¹⁵ The industrial systems of efficiency are applied both in the organization of state apparatuses and modern corporations, creating the new image of a bureaucratic, administrative world. In this way, the bureaucratic organization of society tends to

¹⁴ Fantasies of absolute mechanization of the performer’s body are also encountered in the avant-garde theatrical experimentations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The radically formalistic and imagistic movements, which endeavour “to bring to the stage the pictorial variety and richness that characterized the more strictly visual arts” (Garner 55), systematically “attempt to subordinate the actor to the formal requirements of the mise-en-scène, to discipline or otherwise eliminate a recalcitrant corporeality that threatens to disrupt the stage’s aesthetic integrity” (58). The most radical vision of mechanization as elimination of the human body was Gordon Craig’s ideal of the Über-marionette, while Erwin Piscator and especially Vsevolod Meyerhold insisted on the rigorous gymnastic, acrobatic training of their acting troupes, so that they gain an almost mechanical control over their bodies.

¹⁵ The influence of industrial modes of efficiency is detectable not only on mass culture and avant-garde theatrical experimentations, but also on modernist prose and poetry. For more on the relation between the instrumentalization of human activity and modernism, see William Solomon, “Second Technologies: American Modernism and Silent Screen Comedy,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 6. 2 (2005): 66-91.

replicate the structures of the factory; and as Marxist theorist Georg Lukács points out: “[t]he internal organisation of a factory could not possibly have such an effect – even within the factory itself – were it not for the fact that it contained in a concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society” (90).

As we have already seen, vaudeville was one of these bureaucratic corporations, and even something more than that. It was the first “nationwide entertainment industry” (Erdman 43), the first form of “mass-marketed, centrally planned, industrially organized entertainment” (47), that brought “the field of entertainment into the age of big business – or perhaps, vice-versa” (64). Whereas before vaudeville, “staged entertainment had ... been an ad-hoc assemblage of localized theaters and short-term contracts, there was now a large, bureaucratic entity that delineated and controlled nearly every aspect of production and marketing” (61). This kind of control was achieved through booking syndicates, the most powerful of which was UBO (United Booking Office), founded mainly by impresarios Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Franklin Albee. A Standard Oil-type of trust, UBO counted some two hundred theatres nationwide in its ranks and it was the major mediator between performers and managers, directing acts around the circuits. Moreover, it tried to standardize its product as far as possible by “control[ing] who could perform, where they could perform, how much they were paid, and ... what they could do on stage” (Snyder 34).

This kind of management, administration and bureaucratic organization quickly erased the amateurism, which characterized the mid-nineteenth century concert-saloons, from which vaudeville originated. Performers had to give their best (whatever that was) because they were aware of being watched, scrutinized,

evaluated: “Detailed, almost scientific reports were kept on each act, its performance, reception, and length, and filed with the central booking syndicates” (Erdman 59).

The sense of being immediately replaceable and the threat of being blacklisted created the urge to perfect and standardize the act, to achieve the maximum efficiency of expression and provoke the most intense audience response; to develop, in other words, to the maximum an instrumental, means/ ends rationality and conceive the means of artistic expression as a tool mastered and directed towards the achievement of a practical end. This instrumentalization of artistic expression led not only to the conception but also to the ethos of the brilliant performer as a perfect machine, delivering each night a knock-out act. This performative ideal was bequeathed to the musical theatre, was systematically cultivated throughout the years and culminated in our days in the concept of the “triple-threat” performer: the performer who is highly and equally competent in singing, acting and dancing not in order to be a star but in order to get a job in the chorus line.

By being the first large-scale entertainment industry, vaudeville not only altered the way in which a performer conceives artistic expression, but also exhibited the way in which art is conceived, in general, in capitalist society. In vaudeville, different kinds of artistic expression and different kinds of entertainment merge and become equivalent as commodities. No distinctions exist between high and low, as long as the individual acts deliver at the box office. Musical theatre’s so-called “democratic” nature, which becomes its most distinctive characteristic, derives from this equivalential leveling of different and, many times, mutually exclusive modes of artistic expression. Sometimes, this leveling brings exciting results. For example, in *West Side Story* (1957), Leonard Bernstein’s score becomes an amalgam of Gustav

Mahler, Igor Stravinsky, Richard Wagner and cha-cha and mambo, symphonically orchestrated, while Jerome Robbins' choreography combines classical ballet and modern dance with popular dance steps. When the thick musical texture of Bernstein's score combines with Robbins' intricate dance vocabulary in such numbers as "America," inventing a Latino-chic of epic proportions, we understand that the concept of the knock-out act has traveled a long way.

Such a long way, actually, that we forget its origins. Hence, the usefulness of *Chicago*. It takes us back on the vaudeville stage, where everything started, and communicates very effectively to modern audiences what an explosive, knock-out vaudeville act really means. Each number delineates all the characteristics of the vaudeville act, that we have already described: the lively communication with the audience, the perfection in terms of execution, the self-contained character of the act, its ideality as a perfect moment closed in itself. For Billy Flynn, the devilish lawyer who knows very well the secrets of show-business, all these characteristics derive from one basic rule: you have to use every kind of possible means in order to achieve your end, to win your audience over. You have, in other words, to deliver the perfect act, whether it is a quality act or a dog act, whether it is a sex act or a freak act, whether you can, actually, act or cannot act. What counts is to knock the audience dead, by manipulating them on every possible level, by giving them the "old razzle dazzle." His courtroom circus number explains us both his philosophy and his practice, which is actually the philosophy and practice of popular aesthetics in general and in every phase of its evolution:

Give 'em the old razzle dazzle

Razzle dazzle 'em

Give 'em an act with lots of flash in it
And the reaction will be passionate ...
What if your hinges all are rusting?
What if, in fact, you're just disgusting?
Razzle dazzle 'em
And they'll never catch wise! ...
Give 'em the old three ring circus
Stun and stagger 'em
When you're in trouble, go into your dance
Though you are stiffer than a girder
They let ya get away with murder
Razzle dazzle 'em
And you've got a romance ...
Long as you keep 'em way off balance
How can they spot you got no talents?
Razzle dazzle 'em ...
And they'll make you a star!

Most importantly, *Chicago* uses the cinematic language in such a way as to communicate the dynamism of a live act through a mediated form of entertainment. Every number is almost a small film within the film, with its own distinctive color palette and its editing obeying the rhythm of the music. Strung together, they create a chain reaction of thrills, whose purpose is clearly to provoke the audience's applause, despite the fact that no live performance takes place. This visceral cinematic language is not, actually, so much cinematic; it is, rather, heavily influenced by video aesthetics

as exemplified in TV commercials and MTV. This is where we find this kind of musical, rhythmical editing, the obsessive foregrounding of the image's texture and, above all, the systematic exploitation of the dynamics of the representational fragment as an aesthetic device that can achieve an aesthetic quality of great intensity in the most limited amount of time. By using contemporary video aesthetics in order to communicate the power of the vaudeville act, *Chicago* creates a sense of diachrony that forces us to search for possible links between the "primitive" popular culture of the early twentieth century and the digitalized one of the twenty first. Immediately, we can spot similarities. If we take into consideration that many vaudeville houses had continuous, back-to-back performances, the very structure of variety entertainment, individual acts of varied length strung together in a seemingly arbitrary way, can be detected in television (and of course radio, the more primitive form of private variety entertainment). If we replace the comic sketches with the sitcoms, the melodramatic highlights with soap-opera episodes and the song and dance routines with the video clips, we realize that the media forms may have changed but the underlying structure remains more or less the same.

1.3. Thinking in Fragments

These similarities, that *Chicago* forces us to trace between our own popular culture and vaudeville, are not accidental. Vaudeville created the first society of the spectacle. As Guy Debord has shown, this is a society "where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as *eminently* perceptible" (26). Spectacle is the thorough aestheticization

of reality, which is achieved through the thorough commodification of the previously relatively autonomous aesthetic realm. The sphere of the aesthetic emerged “at the dawn of modernizing Enlightenment” as a realm dissociated “from the rational and the scientific,” a “newly constituted marginal space” where “the sensory and the sensible” take flight (Jameson, *Late Marxism* 162). The aesthetic functioned as “a Utopian realm of beauty ... beyond the fallen empirical world of money and business activity,” whose constitutive autonomy provides it with the “capacity to condemn ... the totality of *what* is ... by its own very existence” (*The Ideologies of Theory, Vol. 2* 196). The rise of spectacle signals the point when the aesthetic loses its constitutive autonomy and negativity, it is instrumentalized and commodified. This process is evident already in the nineteenth century, but the twentieth century is differentiated by the fact that the utopian transfiguration of reality is not simply commodified but becomes a mass produced and consumed commodity.

Chicago comments on the colonization of reality by spectacle by placing the musical numbers in Roxie’s mind. Her mind is filled with images, filled with theatrical idealizations of the real world, transubstantiations of the actual into the virtual through the employment of an elaborate *mise-en-scène*. When the cruel reality presses on her, she escapes in a world of her own, where reality is transformed into a glamorous vaudevillian number: the other “merry” murderesses of the Cook County Jail become lethal burlesque queens, her victimized husband a tragic clown, the street-wise, ruthless matron a Red Hot Momma, who knows exactly how to get what she wants; similarly, her trial becomes a circus, whose main attraction is the moment she takes the stand, her lawyer’s manipulation of the press a puppet show and her transformation into his mouthpiece a ventriloquist act.

Many of these idealizations include the utter spectacularization and eroticization of the female body, a fact that reminds us that vaudeville, and not the Hollywood movie, was the first medium to exploit widely and systematically “the female body as a visually consumable sexual object” (Erdman 84). Vaudeville took the erotic theatricalization of the female body from “the burlesque stage, with that venue’s all-male, working class connotations” and brought it into wider public view (88). Managers and performers managed to couch the burlesque hall striptease “in the trappings of high art” (89) through the reproduction of famous paintings flirting with nudity or by making the near-nude female body “the center of a technological or special effects display on stage” (91). This tradition reached its climax in the revue, the form of variety entertainment that surpassed in the 1920s vaudeville in popularity, artistry and respectability; and, specifically, in the *Ziegfeld Follies*, in which producer Florenz Ziegfeld accomplished his self-appointed “mission,” the glorification of the American Girl. In a spectacular combination of pointillist production design by Joseph Urban, surrealistically extravagant costumes, special effects and a parade of statuesque, larger-than-life and lightly clad chorus girls, Ziegfeld produced a very popular image of femininity “as a complex amalgam of sex, exploitation, and the unobtainable” (Kantor and Maslon 18).

Vaudeville’s eroticization and commodification of the female body was another element bequeathed to the musical theatre, which, all through the 1920s and 1930s, made the female and sexually-charged dancing chorus one of its integral parts. In the 1930s, the erotic spectacularization of the female chorus found its most spectacular mutation, when it was transferred on the big screen by director/ choreographer Busby Berkeley in the four show-musical extravaganzas made for Warner Brothers, 42nd

Street (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Footlight Parade* (1933) and *Dames* (1934). Through the use of extreme high-angle photography, mirrors and careful floor painting, Berkeley achieved the utmost objectification of the female chorus' semi-clad bodies by turning them into abstract expressionist patterns. Their legs and faces become "parts of a great transformational machine: the 'shapes' are like kaleidoscopic views which contract and dilate in an earthly or watery space, usually shot from above, turning around the vertical axis and changing into each other to end up as pure abstractions" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 60-1). What this process never omits is the infamous "crotch shot," the traveling of the camera between the girls' legs, which reduces each individual girl to the area between the abdomen and the knees. For film musical theorist, Rick Altman, "the crotch shot is the semantic unit *par excellence* of the show musical, while the identification of the camera/ audience as male and the show as female constitutes the very foundation of the show musical's syntax" (223). From Berkeley's crotch shot to today's videos by hip-hop artists like Eminem, Nelly or 50 Cent, who have their chorus girls "tarting it up" and posing in the most humiliating positions imaginable, the distance is not very long. The only difference is that we have returned to the vulgarity of the burlesque hall, parceled, of course, in glossy soft-porn photography of the highest digital quality.

Obviously, then, the term spectacle is not a neutral one, that refers simply to the aesthetic transformation of reality. The spectacle is rather the aestheticization of a socio-politically specific relation to reality or, in other words, the aestheticization of ideology – in the case of the spectacular representation of the female body, a patriarchal one. It is the process through which our stereotypes, which are, for Barthes, the secular equivalent of myth, acquire aesthetic quality and become

idealized. Still, the term “spectacle” and, more crucially, “society of the spectacle” has for Debord even more important implications. It points to a society that relates to reality in a fragmented way or, even better, through representational fragments. As images are detached from every aspect of life and merge into a common stream, a fragmented reality is created, a reality comprised of many autonomous fragments that never add up to a coherent whole, but constitute a “pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation” (Debord 12). By assigning particular cultural privilege to the sense of sight, “the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived,” the spectacle becomes “the opposite of dialogue” and any kind of critical processing, active understanding and radical evaluation (17). Barthes had already anticipated Debord by defining myth as an ideological fragment and by describing it in predominantly visual terms, self-evident, “immediately visible” and depthless:

it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (“Myth Today” 132)

What a society of the spectacle, a society saturated with visual mythological fragments, achieves, then, is the “miraculous evaporation of history” (141); and as Lukács, has shown, only history understood as a totality of processes and developing tendencies can liberate the social from its “petrified factuality” (Lukács 184) and enable the individual to re-conceive the ossified socio-economic reality in a state of becoming and constant flux.

Every analysis of spectacle eventually leads back to Lukács, because he was the first theorist to analyze the objective socio-economic preconditions, which make possible the emergence of a society of the spectacle. The spectacle as the proliferation of autonomous image-fragments is possible only in a fragmented society, and this is the society of monopoly capitalism, which is established in the late nineteenth century. As we have already seen, this is the time when the instrumentalization of human activity, endemic in the capitalist mode of production, intensifies and extends beyond the realm of industrial production and its factories and engulfs the whole of the social. This systematic instrumentalization is dictated by the economic makeup of society in this era. The concentration of capital in a handful of interlocking trusts, companies and monopolies, whose interests are regulated and promoted by the gradually more interventionist state, transforms national economy “into a single vast combined trust” (Nikolai Bukharin qtd. in Mandel 315): a gigantic and complex national corporation. The laws of greatest efficiency, instrumentality and, hence profitability, which were first discovered and applied within the factories, are now extended to all statutes regulating life. The whole of the social is subjected to the process of rationalization, which effects “the exact breakdown of every complex into its elements,” providing one with the ability “to predict with ever greater precision all the results to be achieved” (Lukács 88). In this way, social totality is fragmented, analytically decomposed and compartmentalized into many self-regulating institutions and these institutions into many autonomized, self-sufficient component parts. This breakdown of social totality produces a seemingly random pluralism of many overlapping fragmented experiences in the present: a variety of punctual, immediate subjective experiences, which cannot be easily reduced or defused by their

assimilation to something more general, or more abstract, or more intellectual-generic (Jameson, *Late Marxism* 160). For Lukács, this new phenomenological experience has important implications for the way in which ideology is disseminated and naturalized. A society, in which its subjects relate to reality in a fragmented way, does not enable a historical understanding of the social totality as a complex of developing tendencies in a state of becoming. Instead, it promotes the acceptance of its laws and core values as fixed and immutable, as absolutes, which are “nothing but the fixation of thought ... the projection into myth of the intellectual failure to understand reality concretely as a historical process” (Lukács 187).

This fragmentation of social reality into “the parts, the *aspects* of the total process that have been broken off, artificially isolated and ossified” (184) is called by Lukács reification, and constitutes for him the quintessential condition of the modern individual. Reification is the objective precondition for the proliferation of myths as de-politicized stereotypes as well as for their aestheticization and spectacularization. Reification is also the objective precondition for the privileging of the representational fragment as the predominant mode of ideological and popular artistic expression, which finds its ideal manifestation in the musical number, from theatre, to film and MTV: in its tendency to combine all the forms of artistic expression in an explosive combination, the musical number becomes the most “efficient” and dynamic of all kinds of representational fragments. Finally, reification is the objective precondition for the emergence of a society of the spectacle, which finds its first and most primitive expression in various forms of stage variety entertainment, with

vaudeville being one of the most popular ones.¹⁶ By creating a microcosm on stage, incorporating many separate parts, many snapshots of reality that never add up into a coherent whole and cannot be grasped in a linear, analytical way, but only in a fragmented one, vaudeville replicates in its representational structure the structure of a reified society: a society that relates to reality through autonomous mythological fragments, spectacularized stereotypes.

The sexual objectification of the female body was not, of course, the only ideological stereotype created or popularized on stage. Mythological figures like the shrewd Yankee, the rowdy, exuberant Irishman and the childlike, happy, good-hearted African-American, always in blackface, whether the performer was black or white, were cultivated systematically by vaudeville and became an integral part of an American mythology. The conformity to an official ideology, that many acts exhibit, is, actually, natural. First and above all, the acts are commodities competing with each other, and for this reason, they have to be “efficient” on an ideological level as well. To put a successful act over often demands to grasp the ideological makeup of society both in its stasis and evolution and respond accordingly. Now, if an act is a commodity it has to exhibit the structural characteristics of a commodity as well, and it actually does. If the commodity is a fragment abstracted from a concrete socio-economic process and is felt to be alienated from human activity, the act is an ideological fragment abstracted from a concrete socio-historical process and is felt to be immune to historical explanation. Both appear to be reified objects closed within themselves and seemingly autonomous, static and impenetrable things-in-themselves.

¹⁶ Variety entertainment is not an exclusively American phenomenon. Throughout Europe, there were many popular variety stages, each one with its distinctive characteristics, dictated by the different national backgrounds: the cabaret stage in Germany, France, Spain and Russia, the music-hall stage in England or the revue stage again in France, whose *revue à grand spectacle* was popularized in America by Ziegfeld.

It seems, then, that in a society that commodifies every aspect of human activity, every aspect of human activity, in its turn, including artistic expression, takes the form of a commodity.

This is, actually, Lukács' fundamental thesis: reification as the all-informing condition of the modern individual is the outcome of a vast transformational process of the social, whereby capitalist economy remolds the objective world – as well the subjective stance towards it – in its own image; or, in other words, according to the structural characteristics of the commodity form. The commodity form determines the outward form of society as a whole (hence, its image in monopoly capitalism as a seemingly autonomous corporation, a mysterious, impenetrable thing-in-itself) and structures accordingly its individual parts, from economic transactions, to ideological coding, to artistic expression: everyone reflects the petrified factuality, the reified objectivity, the fragmented, seemingly autonomous nature of the commodity.

Actually, the whole history of the musical number can be described as the gradual exploration and self-realization of its status as a commodity, not only in terms of its economic function, but also in terms of its aesthetic form; an exploration and self-realization of its inherent dynamics as a representational, and even non-representational, fragment, ideologically precise and aesthetically complete. Many times, especially in its high-tech mutation, the musical number can also appear as extremely self-indulgent and self-absorbed, exploring a realm of blank intensity and pure sensation, hermetically closed in itself, enjoying its self-reflexivity and celebrating its isolated splendor. In other words, it appears as the perfect commodity, if the commodity is defined as an object, whose “entire material being [is] devoted to its own self-representation” (Eagleton 62).

The high-tech solipsism of the musical number can be traced predominantly in the music video aesthetic of our late capitalist, postmodern culture, which is, significantly, sometimes called an MTV culture. MTV offered us an impressive “synergy” between heavy capitalist investment, cutting-edge technology and progressive visual aesthetics; especially so, in Madonna’s pioneering videos, that employed the most idiosyncratic photographers and avant-garde, art-house directors in order to provide some of the most minimalist, aesthetically dense and ideologically concentrated (as well as ambivalent) artifacts ever produced. Above all MTV’s musical sequences were among the first postmodern mass-cultural artifacts to explore systematically the non-representational realm. They offer a new breed of musical number, a more physical, visceral and dynamic one, employing an extremely stylized vocabulary that comprises quick cuts, brief shots frantically, almost hysterically edited, images either over-accelerated or hyper-kinetic or extremely slowed down; and, with the advent of the 1990s, the excessive use of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) according to the new rules of digital hyperrealism. These are musical sequences that almost make human perception their subject matter and aim, in a provocative way, at testing the perceptual abilities of their audience by making the production of sight itself visible and, with the advent of digital surround technology for domestic use, the production of sound itself audible. It seems that the image begins to call for a different kind of visual and auditory attention, its depths and tenebrosities projecting something like an audio-visual hermeneutic which the eye and the ear scan for ever deeper layers of meaning (Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* 127).

As we have already seen, the movie musical absorbed this new aesthetic with very successful results, in the case of *Chicago*. But the movie musical that first

introduced this aesthetic and reconceived the whole genre for the MTV generation and the multiplex era was Baz Luhrmann's far more baroque, excessive and flamboyant *Moulin Rouge* (2001). Its musical numbers literally explode on the screen, raising the adrenaline to a level far beyond what any movie musical has ever attempted. Here, you don't get just one big production number, as in Berkeley's abstract-expressionist sexual extravaganzas or in the classic MGM/ Arthur Freed musicals, like Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris* (1951), but rather every number is designed as a big production number. Even a simple ballad, like "Your Song," can turn into an elegant Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers-like choreographed courtship sequence, with Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor dancing on the clouds, above an impressionistically designed Paris, occasionally illuminated by flashes of Bollywood kitsch.

Long before Luhrmann introduced this aesthetic to the movie musical, the stage musical was already accustomed to it and enthralled by it. None other than Lloyd Webber made this aesthetic extremely popular on Broadway, West End and all over the world. He reconceived the new dynamism of the musical number for the stage in terms of both music and staging. He introduced his unique pop-operatic mode of musical composition, a mode that combines the straight-forwardness and immediacy of the popular-song format with operatic intensity, mainly delivered through his lushly orchestrated anthem-like melodies. Lloyd Webber's pop-operas redefined and exploited the notion of emotional climax to the point that the word climax loses its meaning and significance. In his shows we can no longer talk about an emotionally significant or climactic moment, illuminated through music. Every moment, every number is conceived as all-important, so that the widely amplified orchestra reaches

to a thunderous swirling climax every three or four minutes. One can complain that his compositional method results in an emotional rape; but the truth is that Lloyd Webber delivered a new kind of excitement and affective intensity, which lies beyond the traditional identification with story and characters. His pop-operas turned the musical experience into an intoxicatory euphoria, a perpetual “high.”

The bombastic musical lyricism of the number is also matched by a dynamic staging, which makes the power of the theatrical image, the exploration of its entire affective potential, its main *raison d'être*. Lloyd Webber's shows introduced the notion of film-like set choreography. Through the aid of computers, sets move gracefully on the stage, they cut, dissolve, track in and out as convincingly as a camera lens and create the illusion of cinematic flow and film, or even video, montage. The aim is to create the sense of continuous movement and ever-changing perspective, even within the same number, to “cut” rapidly from one image to the next, without permitting the spectator to fully absorb (and never get bored with) the represented stage pictures. To this purpose also helps the light design, which abandons realism in order to make architectural statements and even underline or counterpoint the unraveling and climax of the melody, with the aid of choreographed computerized moving lights. In this way, every number creates an acute sense of present-ness that comes before the spectator with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect and finally engulfs him/ her with undescrivable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 27).

More than any other kind of musical, our postmodern megamusicals exhibit this tendency to conceive each and every number as a perfect moment offered to the spectator as a piece for him/ her to cut out and take away to enjoy (Barthes, *Image*,

Music, Text 71-2). In other words, the musical number is offered to the spectator as a fetish object. And this is a term that has both Marxist and psychoanalytic connotations. Marx was the first to describe the commodity as an autonomized, solipsistic fragment attributed with almost metaphysical powers. Marxist-psychoanalytic theory finds today a perfect analogy between the commodity and the object of desire, which appears to the subject as an equally “enigmatic,” “mysterious,” “mystical” object (Marx 164).¹⁷ As French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan showed us the modern ego, the ego created by a middle-class capitalist society, is a reified structure, narcissistic and closed in itself. What every person seeks is “self-reification” (Ragland 98), the validation of recognition from others, the verification of the ideal he/ she imagines himself/ herself to be (36) – an ideal that derives from unconscious identifications, which go as far back as the first years of infancy. For this reason, “[d]esire is not for objects in and of themselves ... but for the fulfillment one equates with constancy, consistency, oneness, unity and stability – a guarantee or grounding to one’s life” (43). Accordingly, the object of desire always functions as a fetish, it exerts a “mystical” power on the subject, it is the validation of the unconscious identifications that constitute one’s identity. And the musical number in all its history did nothing but offering idealized objects of desire, perfect fetishes affirming the ideological subject positions of its spectators.

Significantly, Lacan formulated his first theory of narcissism, in the famous mirror stage essay, as the identification with an idealized, perfected image of the

¹⁷ For such expanded Marxist-psychoanalytic definitions beyond the very popular but limited feminist-Freudian formulation of fetishism as a generalized sexual perversion, see Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: BFI, 1996) and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

self.¹⁸ If we take into consideration that a society of the spectacle disseminates idealized images of the self, or of the ideologies that constitute it, we can understand why for Debord spectacle is the latest and most advanced form of reification. Spectacle is the absolute reaffirmation of identity formation cultivating the blind belief in what capitalist society “*can deliver*” (Debord 20), that is, an endless idealization, fetishization of its own ideologies, which form and constitute its subjects in the first place. Of course, what Debord could not predict is the turn that spectacle would take in postmodern culture, manifested not only in our megamusicals but in our aesthetics in general. Today, in a supreme moment of auto-reflexivity, the very capitalist techno-aesthetic machine that fetishizes reality becomes a fetish in itself. Hence, our culture’s insatiable appetite for mega-budgeted techno-aesthetic form, which offers not only a surplus-pleasure, but many times becomes the main pleasure, with the ideological representational content functioning as a pretext and excuse for the suspension of a perpetual present of audio-visual thrills. This is the absolute triumph and absolute commodification of high aestheticism. The consumption of empty aesthetic form that offers nothing but “the promise of rich sight: not the sight of particular fetishized objects, but sight itself as richness, as the ground for extensive experience” (Dana Polan qtd. in Mulvey 12).

So, let’s turn to our first question. What is the musical number? A representational fragment, a mythological fragment, an ideological fragment, a perfect

¹⁸ See Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative to the Function of the I,” *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977) 1-7.

act, a commodity, a fetish object, even a high-aestheticized object.¹⁹ Now, that we know what the musical number is, it is time to see how it functions in a narrative context and how it evolves gradually throughout the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first.

CHAPTER TWO

The Era of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the Origins of the Megamusical: From *Show Boat* to *West Side Story*

2.1. The Musical Play

The years from the early 1940s to the late 1960s are considered by musical theatre historians as the “golden” era of the Broadway musical. These are the years when the American musical flexed its muscles and matured as an art form and also developed as a capitalist enterprise producing not only stage super-hits, but also million-selling cast albums. Moreover, this was the era when the Broadway musical became a prestigious American institution with both national and international appeal. The combination of big business with cultural prestige made the top-grossing musicals of the era hot commodities for a Hollywood industry in deep economic crisis, which was willing for the first time to pay huge amounts of money for the movie rights of Broadway’s top-grossers. Capitalizing on the built-in publicity of

¹⁹ My analysis of the musical number is indebted to Roland Barthes’ analysis of the tableau in “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana/ Collins, 1977) 69-78. Barthes analyzes the tableau as an autonomous, detachable fetish object. Such “detachable” objects, like the tableau, appear, not only in melodrama, but in other theatrical forms like opera or operetta throughout the nineteenth century and must be conceived as results of reification on popular aesthetics. However, these “objects” are not yet fully formed, autonomous, autotelic, self-enclosed numbers. The number appears as a fully autonomized fetish object/ commodity in variety entertainment and restructures radically the traditional forms of musical theatre.

many of these shows, Hollywood produced some of the most successful films in its history. The string of big-budgeted film adaptations of Broadway super-hits culminated in one of the biggest commercial triumphs in Hollywood's history; the movie that saved the economic fortunes of Fox studios after the disastrous production of *Cleopatra* (1963). This film was no other than the movie version of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* (1965, originally produced on stage in 1959), the first movie in film history that managed to outgross the original Hollywood blockbuster, *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

It is not accidental that the most successful film musical of all time was adapted from a Rodgers and Hammerstein show. These two men are identified with the Broadway musical's "golden" era. They dominated the Great White Way by producing an unparalleled string of hits (at least until the days of Lloyd Webber), many of them mammoth ones; and most importantly their aesthetic innovations exerted such an influence on other composers and lyricists that the musical's "golden" era is often called the Rodgers and Hammerstein era. Their groundbreaking innovation consisted in making the musical a piece of dramatic merit. No musical number would be used in order to showcase a star's specialties, no song would be written just for the purpose of becoming a pop hit. Every number should first and above all fit the character and the dramatic moment. For this reason their musicals are praised for the high level of integration they exhibit, i.e. the synthesis of prose sequences, music and dance into an organic whole, with songs and production numbers contributing to the character and plot development. For the first time in the American musical's history, such traditional dramatic values as narrative coherence and character development become of paramount importance in a musical's

composition. As Kantor and Maslon put it, “Rodgers and Hammerstein provided a new kind of commodity, a show that could work on its own dramatic merits, and not be held hostage to a gifted star or contemporary tastes” (195).

Let’s take a characteristic example from the Rodgers and Hammerstein canon, *South Pacific* (1949). This was their fourth stage collaboration and the one that established them as the indisputable titans of Broadway. *South Pacific* was in every respect a BIG show. It was a big money-making machine holding “the record for the highest gross receipts (\$ 9,000,000) of any Broadway musical” (Green 218) – at least in the genre’s “golden era.” It was the first supermusical, a highly publicized event with a huge advance sale (Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* 244). It also acquired big cultural significance, as it became the second musical in the history of the genre to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, “most remarkable for a musical but especially one in a season that counted plays by Maxwell Anderson, Arthur Miller ... Tennessee Williams, Sidney Kingsley, and Clifford Odets” (Mordden, *Rodgers & Hammerstein* 121). It had really big stars, Broadway darling Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza, the reigning bass of the Metropolitan Opera; and this rare “meeting of grand opera and Broadway musicals was an occurrence of immense occasion, not to mention a commercial brainstorm” (Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* 194). Its score, although perfectly integrated, produced nothing but big hits and enduring standards: “A Cockeyed Optimist,” “Some Enchanted Evening,” “There Is Nothin’ Like a Dame,” “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair,” “I’m In Love With a Wonderful Guy,” “Younger Than Springtime,” “Honey Bun,” “This Nearly Was Mine,” to name just a few! Moreover, it dealt with big issues, like racial bigotry and intolerance during the American war against the Japanese. The war-time setting also provided the

chance for the display of big emotions, larger-than-life events and exciting characters: flag-waving patriotism, military suicide missions and star-crossed lovers engaged in doomed love affairs. Epic in its breadth and scope but also intimate in its character portrayals, hilariously comic at some points but also deeply and painfully emotional and moving, *South Pacific* is “a show that had been universally regarded as Broadway magic” (Mordden, *Rodgers & Hammerstein* 122).

Based on three short stories from James Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947),²⁰ the musical explores the relationships of the men and women of the U.S. armed forces in the Pacific Theatre during World War II, and especially the ways in which they are forced to face and deal with their racial biases and prejudices. The primary plot line centers on the love affair between Emile De Becque, a middle-aged French planter and a man with a “past,” and Nellie Forbush, a young and warm-hearted Navy nurse from the American South. Despite their different national backgrounds and the age barrier that separates them, they are powerfully drawn to each other and plan to marry. However, when Nellie learns that Emile has fathered two mixed-race children with a Polynesian woman, her racist upbringing makes her unable to go on with her marriage plans, and she deserts Emile. The couple is finally reconciled when Emile, who was originally neutral to American politics, participates in an almost suicidal intelligence mission of the U.S. army, is nearly killed and returns back as an (American) hero. The second plot line centers on the doomed romance between the repressed, WASPy lieutenant Joe Cable and the local Tonkinese girl Liat, the daughter of the mysterious, threatening, almost devilish Bloody Mary. Bloody

²⁰ The primary plot line is taken from “Our Heroine” and the secondary one from “Fo’ Dolla’.” A third story “A Boar’s Tooth” provides the comic character Luther Billis. See James Michener, *Tales of the South Pacific* (New York: MacMillan, 1966).

Mary is the Tonkinese souvenir seller, but also, on a symbolic level, an Earth Mother figure and gatekeeper of the island Bali Ha'i, a paradise on earth and "the repository of all the white man's fantasies about the exotic South Pacific" (Most 158). For the first time in his whole life Cable feels alive in Bali Ha'i, where he makes love with Liat, but, eventually, is forced to abandon her, because of the racial and class barriers that separate them. When he realizes his mistake it is too late. He dies in the same intelligence mission in which Emile participates, but, at least, before his death he fully realizes the vanity of the conventions that ruled his whole life.

Let's turn now to Act One, Scene One of the play in order to study the level of integration that Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals exhibit. At the rise of the curtain, we see Emile's plantation home. Two Polynesian kids are playing and singing a French children's song, "Dites-Moi." This is a typical scene of domestic bliss in a Rodgers and Hammerstein show, and many like this one will be reproduced a few years later in the ultimate family show, *The Sound of Music*. A servant enters and leads the children away, as Nellie (Martin) and Emile (Pinza) enter. Although this is a big moment - the entrance of the two stars of the evening - nothing ceremonial takes place, as in most star entrances in musicals. Martin and Pinza are totally in-character: two would-be lovers on a date, chatting about trivial matters in order to hide their obvious nervousness. They start talking about their past and the reasons that led them far away to the edge of the earth. This conversation slowly builds to Martin's first number, "A Cockeyed Optimist." This is a character song and its aim is to reveal Nellie as funny and sunny, vibrant and exuberant, optimistic in a naïve but also self-conscious way, a person that prefers to shut her eyes to the ugliness that surrounds her and look at the bright side of life:

I could say life is just a bowl of jello
 And appear more intelligent and smart
 But I'm stuck
 (Like a dope!)
 With a thing called hope
 And I can't get it out of my heart ... Not this heart! (Hammerstein and
 Rodgers 276)

Nellie's warmth and energy are underlined by the music of Rodgers, who conceives Martin's number as a charm song, i.e. a song "with steady rhythmic accompaniments and an optimistic feeling ... with a steadier sense of movement than one finds in most ballads" (Lehman Engel qtd. in Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* 179). Rodgers uses the same compositional technique for all of Martin's numbers, which are either charm or comedy songs, delineating her character in such a wholeheartedly winsome manner that it makes her racist outburst at the end of the first act both disturbing and highly dramatic.

After Martin's first number ends, a few more lines of dialogue follow, in which the two characters become conscious of the erotic tension between them. They both feel attracted to each other but are also insecure, and their thoughts are expressed in the next number, "Twin Soliloquies," two intermingling interior monologues expressing their unspoken yearnings and fears. The music slowly builds, speeding up on a jagged vocal outline until the orchestra steals the climax from the two characters and leads the melody to a dramatic instrumental conclusion (Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin'* 266). What the two would-be-lovers do not dare to express verbally is expressed through the obsessively repeated and constantly growing in volume

melody. This is the opposite of operetta, in which strangers do not hesitate to declare grandiloquently their undying passion and devotion after falling in love at first sight (266). Obviously, Rodgers and Hammerstein play with the form of the grand romantic duet, as bequeathed by the European operetta, by adding a touch of realism to it and using it in such a way as to add more depth to their characters. As the music fades, their nervousness is expressed in a little bit of dialogue, until Emile makes the first step and reveals his feelings in the show's signature number, "Some Enchanted Evening," describing the first enchanted moment he fell in love with Nellie. Once again traditional aesthetic forms are subverted. Although the clear melodic line suggests that we are in a "secure" pop territory, the lush orchestration and Pinza's grand manner of vocal delivery create an operatic intensity resulting in a hybrid, pop-operatic musical form (that later would become the trademark of none other than Lloyd Webber). This is a love confession of epic proportions underlining not only Emile's passion but also his difference as a character from Nellie. She expresses her feelings in more staccato, rhythmic, American musical styles, he in more histrionic, baroque, European ones.

With the finale of the number, Emile and Nellie understand that they are meant to be together despite their obvious differences as characters. Nellie leaves and Emile is ecstatically happy. The two Polynesian kids re-appear and join him in a reprise of "Dites-Moi." Now, we learn that they are his children and the threat that will lead to the crisis in his relationship with Nellie is subtly introduced. Thus, in a tight and economically built first scene, Rodgers and Hammerstein have introduced and delineated vividly their main characters, communicated their feelings and created the necessary suspense for what is going to follow. All the numbers, despite their big hit

potential, serve the necessities of the dramatic text, contributing to character and plot development. Hammerstein, writing both the dramatic text (in collaboration with the director, Joshua Logan) and the lyrics, chooses carefully, almost like a painter, the moments with the maximum emotional as well ideological significance that should be brought to life through music (American optimism, European grandeur, the sublimity of erotic passion); while Rodgers uses his music in such a way as to exhaust and communicate straightforwardly the emotional potential of the scene. Moreover, as we have already seen, Rodgers and Hammerstein are not afraid to borrow aesthetic forms from disparate modes of musical theatre, opera, operetta, musical comedy or even farce, play with them and bend them to fit their dramatic purposes. The old rule of vaudeville, that all aesthetic forms are equivalent and can be employed according to the rules of maximum efficiency irrespectively of their cultural origins, applies here. Every kind of musical form can be used, altered, mixed with other forms in order to produce the most effective, according to the dramatic moment, number.

South Pacific is a text rich in such aesthetic mutations and transgressions. Even in the dramatic construction of their text, Rodgers and Hammerstein play with traditional rules of musical theatre. One of the oldest rules of comic opera, operetta or musical comedy dictates a plot constructed around two couples, a “serious” one, which is also the primary one, and a secondary, comic one, which often reflects in a comic manner the events described in the primary, “serious” plot line. *South Pacific*’s plot is also structured around two couples, but the way the two couples function deviates considerably from the norm. The secondary couple provides no kind of comedy at all. It is a variation on the *Madama Butterfly* myth, ending with Cable’s death and with Liat in utter desolation. In this way, *South Pacific* seems to have two

“serious” couples. However, Rodgers and Hammerstein manage to find space for comedy, not only in the character of Luther Billis, the “one-man corporation of get-rich-quick schemes” (Mordden, *Rodgers and Hammerstein* 113), who provides much of the show’s farce, but also in their primary couple. Emile and Nellie’s different cultural backgrounds and the age barrier that separates them provide much of the fun in the first act, before Nellie’s racial prejudice introduces the somber tone into their courtship. This fun reaches its climax when Nellie is asked to spy on Emile in order to discover “hidden skeletons in his closet” and realizes that this man is too much for her. This realization builds in one of the most memorable and enjoyable comic numbers in the show, “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair.”

This is one of Martin’s most (in)famous moments not only in the show, but also in her career. She expresses to her girlfriends her determination to wash Emile “right outta her hair,” while actually shampooing her hair on stage. Predictably, Martin’s eight-times-a-week onstage shower became one of the most widely publicized moments of the show and one of its main attractions. This is clearly a gimmick, reminiscent of vaudeville specialties – all dancing, all singing, all bathing! – but still a gimmick that makes the audience go crazy and a testimony to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s showmanship. They know that they have to allow Martin to play with the audience, manipulate her star power and create this atmosphere of immediate communication with the auditorium, which is one of the trademarks of the Broadway musical. But they do it in a way that does not disrupt the dramatic cohesion of the whole piece. The number comes at the right moment and is in perfect accord with the rule that they apply in Nellie’s characterization, that is, writing for her only charm or comedy songs - a strategic decision that exploits Martin’s gamine’s charm and also

adds another layer of fun and comedy in their primary romantic couple. Martin's comic charms are further explored in the soldier's Thanksgiving variety show, where she performs a drag act, "Honey Bun," wearing a man's uniform. As Ethan Mordden informs us, the "photographs of her in her navy whites with the overhung black tie became a kind of signature for the show" (*Beautiful Mornin'* 267). But the number that tops all of her appearances is the simplest of them all, "I'm In Love With a Wonderful Guy."

This is a signature Rodgers and Hammerstein number, a pure and genuine outburst of joy that demands nothing more of the performer than to deliver it in an exuberant way in front of the audience. It expresses Nellie's conviction that, after all, Emile is the right guy for her in such an immediate and winsome manner that it made director Harold Clurman remark: "When Mary Martin tells us, with radiant good nature, 'I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love with a wonderful guy,' one doesn't murmur 'Who cares?' but 'Congratulations, congratulations, congratulations to you both!'" (qtd. in Green 216). Hammerstein's lyrics pile up simile after simile in order to express Nellie's happiness, inventing a string of would-be clichés before he concludes the song with a simple and triumphant affirmation of love:

I'm as trite and as gay

As a daisy in May

(A cliché coming true!)

I'm bromidic and bright

As a moon-happy night

Pouring light on the dew.

I'm as corny as Kansas in August

High as a flag on the Fourth of July!

If you'll excuse

An expression I use,

I'm in love

I'm in love

I'm in love

I'm in love

I'm in love with a wonderful guy! (Hammerstein and Rodgers 317-8)

Rodgers manages to express both the lyricism and the energy of the lyrics by conceiving the number as a dizzying waltz. However, one must not think that the number is reminiscent of the Viennese operetta tradition. Rodgers was unique among the composers of his generation in totally americanizing the waltz. He managed to maintain the sweep of the dance, while replacing European bravura with an American jazzy rhythmical energy, so that his waltzes would sound very contemporary, fresh, up-to-date and pop. "I'm In Love With a Wonderful Guy" is one of his most powerful and effective: romantic and soaring while at the same time vibrant, explosive and infectuous, almost inviting the audience to sing-along.

With the same ease that Rodgers americanizes the sound of operetta in some of his numbers, he can also succumb to operetta's antique but over-abundant melodic richness in other numbers, when the dramatic situation dictates it. A characteristic example is "Younger Than Springtime," lieutenant Cable's grand solo, sung after he makes love with Liat in Bali Ha'i and expressing the overwhelming and rejuvenating feeling he experiences. In terms of melody and lyrics, the song appears generic and

stereotypical, one of many found in every romantic operetta written by Victor Herbert, Rudolf Friml or Sigmund Romberg: a passionate celebration of love sung by a handsome tenor to his beloved. What is not stereotypical, however, is this number's staging by Logan. Just before the beginning of the number Cable and Liat gaze at each other. He takes her in his arms and starts removing her blouse. The lights dim to complete darkness as the music mounts ecstatically. When the lights come up, Cable is shirtless and with Liat in his bare arms launches into the rhapsodic "Younger Than Springtime." And, of course, we understand that he is not simply describing romantic love but sexual ecstasy; he uses a traditional romantic discourse in order to express how it feels to have your first ecstatic sexual experience. This mixing of the romantic and the exalted with the sexual and the carnal, this combination of the soaring melody with the sexually charged atmosphere on stage is what makes this number so electrifying. This is not traditional romantic operetta but romantic operetta with a hard-on!

The highlight of the show, however, comes towards the end, with the notorious number "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught." This is Cable's passionate denunciation of all the racial prejudices with which he has grown up in his upper class environment. The song provoked public outrage in the American South during the show's national tour and was vehemently criticized as an outrageous piece of propaganda in Atlanta.²¹ Many people suggested, long before the show's tour and as early as its preview period, that the number should be "killed." After all, the play was already too long; one small number could be easily dropped without harming the

²¹ In her interesting analysis of the show, "'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in *South Pacific*" in *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* 153-82, Andrea Most describes vividly the scandal this song provoked.

dramatic flow of the whole piece. But at Rodgers and Hammerstein's insistence, the number remained – their word counted, since they were the main producers of the show – and the existence of this song is probably the main reason for which *South Pacific* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. For one moment in the show, racial biases are not presented in a melodramatic manner as personal dilemmas that have to be resolved, but are alienated as the human products of history, society and culture, naturalized through ideological discursive practices.

Nellie is unable to explain her racist feelings and says: “There is no reason. This is emotional. This is something that is born in me” (Hammerstein and Rodgers 346). To her words Cable replies: “It’s not born in you! It happens *after* you’re born...” (346), and then launches into his violent castigation of his racist upbringing:

You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear,
 You’ve got to be taught from year to year,
 It’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear –
 You’ve got to be carefully taught!

You’ve got to be taught to be afraid
 Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
 And people whose skin is a different shade –
 You’ve got to be carefully taught.

You’ve got to be taught before it’s too late,
 Before you are six or seven or eight,
 To hate all the people your relatives hate –

You've got to be carefully taught!

You've got to be carefully taught! (346-7)

However, the powerful anti-racist message of the song, as well as of the show, is undermined by some stereotypical portrayals of Asian characters. The threatening and sometimes ridiculed Bloody Mary “seems to have come directly from World War II film stereotypes of grinning Chinese peasants with betel-stained teeth,” while her daughter, Liat, “embodies the classic stereotype of the exotic oriental woman:” she is a docile and willing sexual object, treating her Western lover as a god (Most 158). Moreover, although Liat is an ideal character for musical treatment, since she is modeled by Michener on one of the greatest operatic heroines, Puccini’s Butterfly, Rodgers and Hammerstein do not give her a single song to sing and almost deprive her of speech, too. Overall, she appears less as a character than a crude plot device that facilitates Cable’s castigation of intolerance.

Andrea Most argues that such ideological inconsistencies and contradictions can be explained if we read *South Pacific* not so much as a play about racism but as “a story of Cold War anxieties” (155) at the height of the Red Scare, Communist paranoia and xenophobia. In this light, Cable’s liberal anthem is not exclusively an anti-racist manifesto but an exposition and denunciation of a generalized and pathological fear of difference that took America by storm in the post-World-War-II years and was threatening any group, whose mode of behavior could be considered non-conformist and abnormal. One of these groups was the Jewish community; and even assimilated, highly respected but also openly liberal-minded Jewish artists, like Rodgers and Hammerstein, had to prove their adherence to the American Creed without endorsing “the flagrant violation of civil liberties practiced by the House Un-

American Activities committee” (173). Fearing, like many other Jews, “the connections they perceived between anti-Communist demagoguery, neofascism, and antisemitism” (154),²² Rodgers and Hammerstein remind their audiences that the commitment to liberal causes, such as cultivation of tolerance, the support of equal rights and the protection of civil liberties, is the highest manifestation of the American democratic spirit (174). In this way, they reaffirm their Americanness, and, thus, anti-Communism, while, at the same time, “critiquing the methods and rhetoric of anti-Communist demagogues” (154).

Such a reading of the play is supported by Rodgers and Hammerstein’s treatment of Emile. Most is right to argue that the character is modeled according to the European, mostly German, Jewish intellectuals who fled to America in order to escape the Nazi persecution (170). His ethnic difference and radical antifascist stance make him initially suspect for “un-American activities,” but, gradually, he proves to be a model American, believing in democracy, romantic love, marriage and family values, and, finally, risking his life for the American nation. In this way, Emile’s trajectory as a character offers one more verification of the assimilationist ideology of the melting pot, according to which it is not the ethnic background but the belief to the American ideals that makes somebody truly American. The musical ends with the assimilated all-American hero joining his all-American, “corn-fed” girl, who triumphs over her fear of difference and embraces his two mixed-race children. In a highly

²² Most points out that “Jews were commonly associated with the Communist Party and other left-wing groups. Vocal antisemites ... associated the Communist menace with Jews, insinuating that Jewish influence was corrupting American politics and culture” (154). This association of anti-Communism with antisemitism is also evident in the Georgia legislators’ attack on *South Pacific*: they equated the play’s antiracism with pro-Communism and “implied that the New York (often a code word for Jewish) theater was receiving its directions from Moscow” (154). To this attack “Hammerstein replied that he was surprised by the idea that ‘anything kind and humane must necessarily originate in Moscow’” (153).

suggestive final tableau, the four of them form a nuclear family, ready to implant their all-American values in the new frontier of the South Pacific.

This final tableau shows that the play is not only a reaffirmation of Jewish assimilation, but also a fantasy of cultural colonization. The previously mysterious, savage and sexually-charged foreign land is suddenly domesticated and thoroughly americanized. Rodgers and Hammerstein's next super-hit, *The King and I* (1951), will offer a more detailed account of cultural colonization in the story of Anna, who brings the "barbaric" court of Siam into "the Promised Land of Western civilization" (183). This epic narrative of Western imperialism reveals fully the limits of Rodgers and Hammerstein's democratic liberalism and sheds more light on their reluctance to deal honestly with racial difference in *South Pacific*. To recognize the political rights of racially discriminated groups, in other words to recognize them as subjects, automatically entails the recognition of their representational rights, their freedom to express their difference in the cultural mainstream and probably propose a moral and sexual ideology that questions the dominant one. Rodgers and Hammerstein offer a liberal utopia, where political rights are freely granted but not representational ones. Such liberal utopia is attuned to the expansionist and neo-colonial politics of post-World-War-II America, which was forced to adjust its racial outlook during the Korean War to fit its imperialist goals. The racial other could be now welcomed to the American family as long as it was willing to shed its cultural otherness and be thoroughly democratized and americanized. In this light, Rodgers and Hammerstein's "race musicals" (including their 1958 hit *Flower Drum Song*) are imperialist fantasies of cultural colonization, in which the assimilationist ideology, that both creators as

American-Jews firmly support, becomes the ideal vehicle for the americanization of the non-Western world.

The disclosure of the ideological subtext that informs and determines *South Pacific*'s narrative structure and its distribution of musical numbers does not discredit the musical's aesthetic value. On the contrary, the ideological complexity of the show is a testimony to the maturation of the musical's aesthetic form, which is now able to handle social antagonisms and offer utopian resolutions for them in ways that rival the techniques of legitimate realist drama. For this reason, Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals were labeled as "musical plays:" a term that highlights both the more serious subject-matter as well as the aesthetic consistency and organic unity of these shows, and distinguishes them from the more lighthearted and unintegrated musical comedies of the previous decades. We should now turn to these shows that precede the Rodgers and Hammerstein era in order to see how the Broadway musical was originally formed and how it was radically transformed under the influence of the musical play.

2.2. Problems of Integration

Every historical account of the American musical starts with problems of integration. In the late nineteenth century, when the genre slowly takes its definitive form, many musical comedies emerge with mechanical farcical plots, not really interacting with the songs, which "drop in like guests at an open house" (Mordden, *Sing for Your Supper* 218). The tunestrack and the prose sections constitute two different texts, running in parallel and intersecting in the most contrived and generic manner. This lack of musico-dramatic synthesis is perplexing, because, at the same time, many successful European operettas in America had provided a model for

integrating music, lyrics and prose. As John Bush Jones remarks, “[w]hat is hard to explain ... is why this demonstrably popular model was largely ignored by American musical theatre writers and composers during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first two or three of the twentieth” (10). One answer to this question is that indigenous musical comedies and European operettas, as well as their American imitations, are two different genres, each one having disparate origins and following its own developmental route. The origins of operetta lie in such musico-dramatic forms as the French *opéra-comique* or the German *Singspiel*, which were differentiated from the more lofty Italian opera not only in their combination of prose with music, but also in the introduction of a lighter and more tuneful musical score, a score “with a popular ring to it, an informality, a gay warmth and looseness” (Gänzl 20). Nevertheless, these forms of musical theatre, as well as the mature operettas of Jacques Offenbach or W. S. Gilbert and Arthur S. Sullivan, were still heavily influenced by opera. This influence is evident in operetta’s tendency to overwhelm, despite the occasional use of prose, the action with music, and so narrate mainly through music, making, thus, musico-dramatic synthesis an immediate given of the genre.

Although such European imports as Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore* and Franz Lehar’s *The Merry Widow* took America by storm, in 1878 and 1907 respectively, and spawned many imitations,²³ they did not influence significantly the writing of musical comedies, which followed a model deriving from variety entertainment. Before the establishment of vaudeville as a monopolistic big business in the end of the nineteenth century, there were other forms of variety, offering a

²³ For an overview of operetta’s history in America, see Gerald Bordman, *American Operetta: From H.M.S. Pinafore to Sweeney Todd* (Bridgewater: Replica Books, 2000).

mélange of entertainment and preparing the road for the emergence of vaudeville: minstrel shows, circuses and burlesques. The influence of these variety forms on indigenous musical comedies was so strong that the first specimens of the genre were variety musicals or revusicals, using an excuse of a plot for a succession of autotelic, self-enclosed specialty numbers: *A Glance at New York in 1848* (1848), *The Brook; or, A Jolly Day at the Picnic* (1879), *A Trip to Chinatown* (1890). Out of the world of variety entertainment emerged the first influential figures of American musical comedy, Edward Harrigan and George M. Cohan, who gradually popularized and established the more dramatically ambitious form of the book musical, mixing a fully developed prose text (the book) with interpolated songs and dances.²⁴ Although the musical numbers had a secondary, more decorative role in relation to the book, they, nevertheless, exhibited the performative dynamism, ideological significance and emotional power of the vaudeville act. Especially in the musical comedies of Cohan, who was an experienced vaudevillian, there was always a place reserved for such stirring patriotic anthems like “The Yankee Doodle Boy” (better known as “I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy”), “You’re a Grand Old Flag” and “Give My Regards to Broadway.”²⁵

The musical number acquires a more central role in the musical comedies of the 1920s, mainly because the first “star scores” emerge. In this decade, the Broadway

²⁴ The origins of the book musical can be traced back to the genre of the ballad opera, whose most successful and enduring offering was John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), combining a self-sufficient satirical dramatic text with recycled popular ballads of the period, set to new lyrics by Gay.

²⁵ Although these numbers were carefully placed in the dramatic text, so that they lead to a climactic emotional overdrive, we cannot still speak of proper integration, mainly because Cohan’s offerings were comedies with a few songs, rather than fully developed musicals. The first serious step towards integrated musical comedies is largely considered to be the series of shows presented during World War I at the Princess Theatre, a tiny playhouse on the very edge of Broadway’s theatre district. Still, even in these shows, integration is not fully achieved, because the numbers constitute carefully placed musical material added to a self-sufficient prose text, rather than being an inseparable part of it.

musical finds its distinctive melodic, harmonic and rhythmic identity in a popular jazz idiom, epitomized by such star composers as George Gershwin, Rodgers and Cole Porter. At the same time, the first totally American lyricists, like Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart and Porter again, emerge and capture the blasé cynicism and world-weary sophistication of the era in a fresh lyrical style that becomes the first sample of a totally American popular urban poetry. All these ingredients produced exemplary musical numbers that are considered today real gems, but the shows in which they appeared are largely forgotten and unrevivable, due to their almost complete lack of musico-dramatic synthesis. Their excuses of a plot provide a string of topical jokes about Florida millionaires, boxing, bootleggers and Havana gambling, more reminiscent of self-contained vaudeville sketches than constituting a linearly, logically developed narrative. Moreover, the thin storylines are ceaselessly humiliated by irrelevant numbers and specialty acts, showcasing the talents of the stars (Mordden, *Make Believe* 4). In the 1920s, the Broadway musical produces some of its biggest and most competent stars, like Marilyn Miller, Eddie Cantor, Fred and Adele Astaire and The Marx Brothers, so most of the shows are largely built upon the despotism of performing talent (4).

In 1927, at the very peak of the jazz revolution on Broadway and amidst the generalized carefree insouciance, the American musical achieved its first major breakthrough and produced its first real classic. This was the year of *Show Boat*. If *Gone With the Wind* is considered the Great American Movie, *Show Boat* is the Great American Musical. This was the show that foreshadowed what the Broadway musical could achieve in the future and proved that musical theatre could become an art complete in itself, “protean and unpredictable, capable of taking any form it needs to,

tackling any subject” (183). It is not accidental that one of the people responsible for this groundbreaking work was no other than Oscar Hammerstein, and his achievement in *Show Boat* cannot be exaggerated. He combined the representational structures of variety entertainment and the book musical with the ideal of musico-dramatic synthesis, bequeathed by the operetta tradition, and so produced the first Broadway musical that blends successfully the different genres that ran in parallel for many years without achieving any satisfying intersection. Moreover, with *Show Boat*, Hammerstein set the rules of a musical realism, which would be the trademark of the later musical plays he wrote with Rodgers. He avoided the cardboard characters and stock-in-trade situations of romantic operettas as well as the formulaic farcical patterns of musical comedy, and, instead, presented recognizable American characters, whose life-stories constitute a coherent plot unfolding in a linear manner with all the separate episodes carefully and causally connected. The seriousness of the subject matter, the delicate balance between romance and comedy and the more rationalized use of melodramatic devices make *Show Boat* the first Broadway musical that has dramatic merit and Hammerstein the first American book writer and lyricist that deserves the title of playwright. As Mordden points out, “Hammerstein turned a vaudeville into stories with point. There were many influential composers and lyricists, but Hammerstein was the only influential storyteller” (*Rodgers and Hammerstein* 209-10).

In his effort to rationalize the Broadway musical, Hammerstein was helped by Edna Ferber’s best-seller, on which the musical is based. This is an epic novel presenting the life-story of Magnolia Hawks against “the ever-changing panorama of the essential American invention, show business” (*Make Believe* 206). Against the

backdrop of succeeding show-biz forms – from the floating theatres running across the Mississippi to the night-club stage, the vaudeville circuits and finally the legitimate stages of Broadway – and in a time-span covering fifty years – from the 1870s to the 1920s – the novel traces Magnolia’s cruel education in the ways of the world: she sees all the people she loved in her life fumble and fail, while her puritanical and tyrannical mother, the matriarch Parthenia Hawks, rails and reigns; she witnesses racism sliding back into backstage life, an idealized haven for her, as her best friend, Julie, is expelled from the cast of *Cotton Blossom* – the show boat on which Magnolia grows up - because she’s the offspring of a racially mixed couple married to a white man; she is abandoned by her ne’er-do-well husband, Gaylord Ravenal, star of the *Cotton Blossom* and a compulsive gambler, whose addiction destroys his life and his family; and once all her illusions of safety and security are violently torn apart, she triumphs by standing on her own feet, taking by storm the night-club and vaudeville stages and, finally, watching her daughter, Kim, becoming the next-big-thing on the Broadway stage. In creating a musical out of this novel, Hammerstein “was putting on something that the musical had never even thought of being: vast” (220).

Hammerstein’s treatment of the novel deviates considerably from Ferber’s intentions.²⁶ Ferber’s novel expresses and tries to resolve anxieties typical of the most advanced societies of monopoly capitalism and even more so of American society, the most advanced of them all. The years after the Civil War and up to the 1920s were an age of unprecedented economic and technological growth, creating hopes of unlimited

²⁶ For the differences between Ferber’s novel and Hammerstein’s treatment of it, see chapter 9, “Go, Little Boat: The All American Musical Comedy,” from Mordden’s *Make Believe* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 205-32, and chapter 2, “1927: The Ziegfeld Production,” from Miles Kreuger, *Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical* (New York: Da Capo, 1990) 18-75.

progress, prosperity and abundance, but also generating fears of instability and images of catastrophe, supported to a large extent by the boom-and-crash economic cycles of the period. Published three years before the crash of the Wall Street stock market, *Show Boat* is an accurate expression of the anxieties that extensive economic growth and rapid social change created. Life in America appears in the novel as a never-ending process of incessant modification and becoming (depicted through the constant revolutionization of the show-biz industry) obeying no teleological design, a process ruled by chance and subjecting the characters to its onward motion. The relentless rhythm of American life is captured effectively by the main symbol of the novel, the Mississippi river, that just keeps rolling along as the characters rise and fall, triumph and fail, die or are born without obvious reason. The novel ends with Magnolia's identification with the river, which symbolizes her acceptance of life as a continuous, undifferentiated process, a process awesome and sublime in its very cruelty. She survives and triumphs because she abandons her cherished illusions of safety and stability and internalizes fully the progressive ethos of her country, and so becomes one with the rhythm of American life itself.²⁷

To Ferber's view of American life as a rushing force, Hammerstein proposes (through major plot changes) a vision of America as "ever-changing yet constant" (Mordden, *Make Believe* 228). He "saw the change as affecting only the facade of the culture: the worthwhile elements hold steady. Family. Home. Self-belief." (210). Hammerstein exhibits a quintessentially evangelical moralism that

²⁷ The theory of narrative as an ideological strategy trying to contain the dilemmas and antagonisms, that the evolution of capitalist society creates, derives from Jameson's classic study, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1983) and informs this chapter in its entirety. The historical information on the ideological discourses, that inform American art and culture throughout the first half of the twentieth century, derives from Barbara Haskell, *The American Century: Art & Culture, 1900-1950* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999).

defends permanence and stability against the pressures of modernization. His strong moral sense is even more evident in his unwillingness to accept Ferber's view of human destiny as the product of historical socio-economic contingencies, subjected to accident and chance. He rather believes that there is moral intention in the universe; there is a transcendent, almost providential scheme on which the dispensation of justice depends and which, actually, determines the logic of dramatic action in his musicals. In almost every one of Hammerstein's mature works – and especially the ones with Rodgers – the characters that find happiness are the ones that deserve it; and they deserve it because of their almost religious devotion to an ideal and their ability to endure, their willingness to suffer for its realization. Hammerstein's *Magnolia* succeeds because she never loses her faith in the art of make believe, in the power of theatrical illusion itself to transform life into a paradise on earth. She remains a dreamer and for this reason in the end her dreams come true: surrounded by the performers of the show boat, the idealized community that supported her throughout her turbulent life, she reunites with Ravenal.

One of the main reasons why *Show Boat* is a milestone in the development of American musical theatre is that it presents us with the first full-scale manifestation of Hammerstein's moral philosophy and ideology, which, after the huge success of his later works, would become the moral vision of the American musical itself, or at least of its most successful and enduring works. This moral vision implies a political ideology heavily influenced by turn-of-the-twentieth-century Progressivist ideas, that formed the basis of the New Deal ideology in the 1930s, of which Hammerstein was a supporter. Progressivists proposed a synthesis of reason and faith, an alliance of hard statistics and high ideals in an attempt to produce a more humane capitalist society; a

society that is both progressive, in its faith in rationalized technique and economic individualism, and regressive, in its attempt to restore and transpose idealized small-community values of a Puritan agrarian past to the big city. Hammerstein's ideological commitment affects not only the content, but also the form of the Broadway musical. As an ideologue, Hammerstein has to say something important, to make an ideological point, to exemplify a thesis, and, for this reason, he subjects the formerly anarchic musical numbers to an instrumental logic. The numbers now become integral parts of a totality, of a narrative and ideological whole, the necessary means for the achievement of a superordinate end: the resolution of the narrative and the containment of the ideological antagonisms that generate it in the first place. Under Hammerstein's influence the musical number loses some of its autonomy and obeys a narratological and ideological necessity. In this way, it becomes semi-autonomous: the integral part of a totality but also clearly demarcated, self-enclosed and frame-like.

A characteristic example is "Ol' Man River," one of the most highly-praised numbers in the history of the Broadway musical. One could easily imagine this number in a big revue, because it is a self-contained dramatic piece, complete and closed in itself. It is sung by Joe, the African-American dock worker, the show's "untutored philosopher" (Hammerstein qtd. in Kantor and Maslon 118), who expresses a nihilistic view of life as hopeless endurance, generated by his own personal experience of racial exploitation and discrimination:

Dere's an ol'man called de Mississippi;

Dat's de ol' man dat I'd like to be!

What does he care if de world's got troubles?

What does he care if de land ain't free?

Ol' Man River

Dat Ol' Man River,

He mus' know sumpin'

But don' say nuthin',

He jes' keeps rollin',

He keeps on rollin' along.

He don' plant taters,

He don' plant cotton,

An' dem dat plants 'em

Is soon forgotten,

But Ol' Man River,

He jes' keeps rollin' along.

You an' me, we sweat an' strain,

Body all achin' an' racked wid pain –

Tote dat barge!

Lif' dat bale!

Git a little drunk,

An' you land in jail ... (Hammerstein 57-8)

On the middle section of the song, a group of other African-American barge workers join Joe and lead the number to a climax, by making it a protest song of epic proportions:

Don' look up

An' don' look down –

You don' dast make
 De white boss frown.
 Bend yo' knees
 An' bow yo' head,
 An' pull dat rope
 Until yo' dead.
 Let me go 'way from de Mississippi
 Let me go 'way from de white man boss;
 Show me dat stream called de river Jordan
 Dat's de ol' stream dat I long to cross ...
 Ah gits weary
 An' sick of tryin';
 Ah'm tired of livin'
 An' skeered of dyin',
 But Ol' Man River,
 He jes' keeps rollin' along. (58-9)

As the lyrics show, the number generates immediately its own context and easily functions as a stand-out set-piece. However, at the same time, "Ol' Man River" is an integral part of the show, and even something more: its main theme. It expresses the traumatic reality that Hammerstein's narrative strategies will try to contain. The socio-historically specific plight of an African-American man acts as the main symbol for the expression of an almost existential nihilism: the image of life as aimless suffering and endurance without relief. For this reason, "Ol' Man River" appears and is reprised at key points in the narrative. It is introduced after Magnolia and Ravenal's

first meeting and functions as Joe's ironic commentary on Magnolia's fantasies of erotic fulfillment, highlighting the gap between reality and fantasy that the heroine will realize later on in her life. It is reprised after the famous "miscegenation scene" and Julie's expulsion from the show boat troop in order to underline the realization of Joe's nihilistic vision. It is finally reprised at the end of the show, with the difference that the significance of the song has now altered. After the reunion of the show boat troop and the reconciliation between Ravenal and Magnolia, a cosmic moral design has been revealed that makes suffering and endurance worth the while. The final lines of the song that close the show - "But Ol' Man River/ He jes' keeps rolling along" - carry an affirmative tone as Ol' Man River - or life itself - is full of wisdom, which is only revealed to those who have retained their innocence and faith throughout life's tests.

A determining factor in the success of *Show Boat* as a coherent dramatic piece is surely the fact that Hammerstein wrote both the book and the lyrics of the show, and so he was able to coordinate the numbers with the book sequences and establish the appropriate relations between them. Such coordination was quite unusual back in the 1920s, mainly because book and lyric writing were two clearly distinguished jobs. The reason for this specialization and division of labor was mainly economic: with the advent of the sheet music industry, electronic sound reproduction and broadcast radio, songwriting became a lucrative business in itself. Broadway's musical stage was one of the main providers of hit songs, and so no producer expected the lyricist to exhibit dramatic skills. His/ her job was to deliver the clever and memorable lyrics that could turn a song into a hit, which could successfully stand as a built-in advertisement of the show; while the book writer had to find contrived ways to interpolate the increasingly

hit-conscious, and so more autonomous, songs into the show. As the extra-textual economic purposes, that a song was expected serve, became of paramount importance for both the producer and the lyricist, the contextual function of the song was treated with casual indifference. Hence, the proliferation of musical numbers throughout the 1920s that were at best generic and only peripherally related to a show's dramatic action and at worst had no relation whatsoever with the show in question. Moreover, as the musical number acquired a new awareness of itself as an individual commodity, its aesthetic form became more reified, i.e. more fetishized and fragmented, both in terms of music and lyrics. The melody of a number becomes now coextensive with the chorus or refrain, which is structured around an oft-repeated hook melodic phrase, while the lyrics are also organized around the repetition of a key phrase, which is often the title of the song, serving as a built-in jingle that could sell the song commercially (Knapp 78). In other words, both composers and lyricists are in search of the most effective slogan, which achieves a telegraphic simplification and condensation of both musical and verbal meaning.

This fervent search for the slogan is coterminous with the explosion of a mass-mediated popular culture, which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, achieves the mythological re-enchantment of the world through the proliferation of aestheticized ideological fragments. As a moralist, Hammerstein understands well the ideological power of the highly formalized and fragmented structure of the popular song and uses it skillfully in order to communicate his moral ideology. Sometimes he can become too preachy, but, in general, his lyrics are distinguished by his trademark combination of a subtle poetic lyricism with everyday speech patterns, which makes his songs sound unpretentious, direct, spontaneous and emotionally honest. However,

Hammerstein is not to be appreciated simply as a pop lyricist, but rather as a dramatic pop lyricist. There are far more sophisticated and witty lyricists than him (like Porter or Hart), but no one of them exhibits Hammerstein's ability to subject the popular song format to dramatic purposes. His method is both simple and ingenious: instead of writing generic pop songs to be interpolated in a fully developed dramatic text, he conceives the dramatic action in terms of pop songs. He takes advantage of the stenographic abbreviation of meaning, offered by the pop song format, in order to make his numbers the most economic, condensed as well as emotionally heightened expression of the dramatic action developed in the book sequences. The latter are used as the connecting tissue between the perfectly framed, autotelic, self-enclosed musical numbers; they are the necessary links that smoothen what would otherwise be the abrupt transitions from one number to the next. In this way, the musical and the dramatic text are no longer two separate texts running in parallel without intersecting. By contrast, the musical numbers are firmly anchored in the dramatic action and become indispensable parts of the show; while, at the same time, they preserve a certain semi-autonomy and can function as pop hits, since they follow the dictates of pop lyric writing. Thus, under Hammerstein's influence, the Broadway musical becomes a combination, succession of semi-autonomous musical numbers, which serve both contextual and extra-textual purposes and can be enjoyed both as parts of a progressively evolving narrative and as isolated fetish objects cut out from the narrative totality.

Following the above analysis, one cannot help but point out that the outward form of Hammerstein's text brings to mind the overall dramatic structure of the Brechtian theatre and that his utilization of the musical number exhibits many

similarities with Brecht's employment of the *gestus*. The *gestus* is the clear, economic, condensed and stylized expression of a social attitude conveyed through a simple gesture, a phrase or a whole musical number (we must bear in mind that Brecht made extensive use of musical sequences); and the Brechtian text in its totality is nothing but a succession of individual, semi-autonomous, frame-like, enclosed "social gesticulations in an episodic but progressive and educative narrative" (Brooker 51). Of course, the crucial difference between Brecht's utilization of the *gestus* and Hammerstein's employment of the musical number is that the Brechtian *gestus* is offered to the spectator through alienating, distancing acting and directorial techniques that prevent emotional identification with the represented dramatic action. By contrast, in Hammerstein's work the elements of the *mise-en-scène* are used in such a way as to provoke the maximum emotional identification between the stage and the auditorium. This difference occurs because these two modes of theatrical representation have opposite objectives. Brecht's political and educational theatre aims at the progressive awakening of historical awareness, which is achieved through the de-naturalization of social behavior that the individual gesticulations provide; while Hammerstein's moral drama aims at the conversion of the audience, their adherence to a set of specific middle-class values, which are naturalized and mythologized through the individual numbers and become indisputable moral absolutes. This is evident even in a number of considerable political significance and gravity like "Ol' Man River:" racial discrimination is neutralized on the political level by becoming a metaphor for existential despair, which is contained through the utopian reaffirmation of middle class values.

The outward similarities shared by the Brechtian theatre and the book musical, as re-conceived by Hammerstein, are not accidental. Both modes of theatrical representation rely on the performative dynamics of the semi-autonomous representational fragment, which “besides the value it has for the whole, should also possess its own episodic value” (Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* 6); and this endorsement of the fragment as a structural device, by so different kinds of theatre roughly in the same chronological period, cannot be a matter of historical contingency but rather of historical necessity. Actually, both modes of theatrical representation must be considered opposed but also diametrical reactions to the representational dilemmas created by the early twentieth-century society of monopoly capitalism. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the socio-economic structure of monopoly capitalism favors the fragmentation of human experience; and this fragmentation is perfectly reproduced in the representational structure of variety entertainment, which influenced considerably both the Brechtian theatre and the modern musical. Variety incorporates many snapshots of reality that never add up into a coherent whole, but can only be consumed in their isolated splendor and in an intense dramatic present, which is released from its connections to a dramatic past or its extensions to a dramatic future. As theatrical time is fragmented into ever more tiny present moments passing in rapid succession in front of the spectator’s eyes, a new mode of panoramic representation is established, which renders obsolete conventional spectatorial habits and modes of audience reception. Otto Julius Bierbaum, writing in 1900, notes: “The city dweller of today has ... variety nerves; he is rarely capable of following great dramatic connections, of tuning his emotional life

for three hours of theatre to one tone; he wants diversity – variety” (qtd. in Lehmann 62).

The panoramic mode of representation, popularized by variety entertainment on the theatrical stage, replicates a new phenomenological experience witnessed in the metropolitan areas of the Western world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: one of moving through an urban phantasmagoria at an accelerated rate. As Walter Benjamin has shown, early twentieth-century urban experience is certainly phantasmagoric, since the modern cityscape goes through a process of spectacularization and is transformed into a chaotic juxtaposition of shop-signs, street-signs, advertising images, window displays, mannequins and illuminations: image-fragments bolted together for maximum impact, which resemble the massive arrangement of diverse commodities of multiple origins thrown together in the gigantic department stores (Buck-Morss 80-95). Moreover, the advent of automatic movement in this period offers the chance of moving through this dazzling urban labyrinth at accelerated pace, as electric streetcars and automobiles, subways and elevated trains are united in an electrifying continuum, an energy band that carries the individual along. Variety’s structure around ever-changing, brief autotelic acts recreates in miniature an overwhelming kaleidoscopic world and introduces on stage a fast-moving rhythm and a galvanizing tempo, which generates a montage effect through the rapid “editing” between sketches and numbers. For Benjamin, montage is not simply a cinematic technique, which is also adopted by other forms of artistic expression, including theatre, but rather the overall organizing principle of a new urban experience, which privileges acceleration, simultaneity and, above all, fragmentation and discontinuity (74). Cinema tried to tame this fragmentation and

discontinuity through the method of organic montage, which strings together image-fragments along a syntagmatic narrative chain; and Hammerstein's editing of his self-contained musical numbers along a progressive narrative line becomes the theatrical variant of this method. By contrast, Brecht emphasizes and takes advantage of the very discontinuity inherent in montage, in order to make it one more alienating technique, which opens up a space for critical reflection.

The exploration of cinematic montage on the musical stage is what provides the twentieth-century musical with its distinctive identity and distinguishes it from nineteenth-century musical theatre genres, like opera and operetta. Such forms exhibit a more traditional dramatic structure. They respect the unities of time, place and action and conceive dramatic action in terms of moments of crisis and high conflict, explored in large, static and single dramatic units, the individual acts. Such concentration of the action in a few selected moments of tragic, comic or melodramatic crisis results in a kind of musical theatre that is more intensive than extensive, as the events that lead to dramatic collision are mostly narrated rather than represented on stage. By contrast, the modern musical is action-packed: it tries systematically to open up the proscenium in order to include more dramatic action, and so expand its scale of reference. For this reason, from the early decades of the twentieth century, it adopts the multi-scene dramatic structure, which results in the fragmentation of the action in rapidly changing scenes. In the best Broadway musicals, "[e]ach scene ends simultaneously with an exclamation point ... and an index finger that points ahead to future action" (Engel 40); and such forward thrust and propulsion contributes to a more energetic, dynamic, restless kind of theatre. The development of musical theatre in the twentieth century is coterminous with the

further fragmentation of the action in even smaller dramatic cells, the musical numbers, which gradually replace the scene as the structural unit of musical theatre. As the prose sequences are submerged and the musical numbers absorb more narrative content, a new kind of fully musicalized theatre emerges that resembles opera in its use of continuous music, but is clearly distinguished from it both in dramatic and musical terms: the sweeping rather than static action is delivered through a string of pop songs, which are often broken down to their melodic constituent parts that are constantly recycled (sometimes in shuffle mode) in order to link the melodic set-pieces. This excessively fragmented, pop-operatic musico-dramatic structure, which has been popularized, of course, by Lloyd Webber, is also the most fetishistic one that we have ever encountered on the musical stage: the cataclysmic montage of miniscule dramatic moments results in an anthology of melodic fetish objects.

Although *Show Boat* is mostly a conventional book musical with lengthy (and sometimes clumsy and redundant) book sequences, it often comes close to the pop-operatic musico-dramatic structure.²⁸ For example, in Act I, Scene I, Hammerstein achieves a rapid-fire presentation of all his basic characters and the tensions between them, by subdividing the lengthy sequence in mini-scenes structured around his musical numbers. Since most of the action is absorbed by the numbers, prose is used to the minimum and even the brief snatches of dialogue acquire a forward-moving urgency, through the use of almost continuous underscoring music, which links the

²⁸ One can understand the pop-operatic dimensions of the score, if he/ she listens to John McGlinn's recording of *Show Boat* (EMI, 1988), which is the most complete one, containing many deleted numbers and sequences.

main melodic set-pieces.²⁹ In this way, dramatic action is musicalized: it acquires a compelling musical tempo, which accelerates the transposition from one incident to the next and accentuates the overall panoramic effect of the show. With its double focus, the evolution of show-business in America and the fates of the individuals that participate in it, *Show Boat* is one of the most panoramic musicals ever produced, comparable only with such later megamusicals, such as *Evita* and *Les Misérables*; and this panoramic scale of reference affected, apart from the dramatic structure, the physical production as well. In order to capture the novel's epic sweep, Hammerstein incorporated seventeen set-changes – an extraordinary number for a book musical in the 1920s – and, although he directed the show, he gave his staging credit to Zeke Colvan, the stage manager, simply for keeping the huge production flowing (Mordden, *Make Believe* 216).

Show Boat was produced by Ziegfeld, who proved with his annual revue series, the *Follies*, that he was the master of the "kaleidoscopically nonstop" (86) visual extravagance. Ziegfeld's shows upgraded the visual potential of panoramic representation, by introducing an unprecedented visual richness, finesse and artistry in

²⁹ The pop-operatic musico-dramatic structure of the show is also achieved through Jerome Kern's method of musical composition. Kern applies widely a simplified and pop-friendly version of the Wagnerian method of the leitmotiv: the composition of melodic, harmonic or rhythmic motifs denoting particular characters, themes, situations or psychological moods, which collide, combine and react with each other in order to produce new associations. Not only do Kern's main numbers acquire the status of a motif or theme, whose meaning can be transformed in the course of the action – as we have already seen in the case of "Ol' Man River" – but also his underscoring music becomes a "vast network of thematic foreshadowings and reminiscences" (Block 33). Actually, this highly dramatic use of the underscoring manages to provide a link between the musical numbers in the same way that Hammerstein's book sequences aim at bridging the gap between them. The dramatic coherence that Kern's music achieves is the one reason why the score of *Show Boat* is considered the first great score of the Broadway musical. The other reason is that because of its subject matter, the history of show-business, the music of the show becomes a documentation of all the indigenous as well as imported musical styles that define American music: from African-American spirituals to European operetta's big ballads and from ragtime to Broadway jazz. In using all these different sounds, Kern was not afraid to experiment and mix them, producing fascinating hybrids, like "Ol' Man River," which comes half-way between the gospel and the almost operatic anthem. Such hybridizations open up the way for the musical experimentations that we saw in Rodgers's work and which can also be detected in the work of the most influential composers like Bernstein, Sondheim and Lloyd Webber.

the sweeping views that unrolled before the spectators' eyes. Responsible for these innovations was Joseph Urban, the designer of most of Ziegfeld's shows, including *Show Boat*. Urban was influential in ridding musicals of the tasteless colors that had splashed across the stage in earlier shows and in introducing a visual coherence, by carefully controlling his colors, limiting them to shades of a single color within a scene and frequently seeing to that they flowed gently from one scene into the next (Bordman, *American Musical Comedy* 132). Moreover, his pointillistic painting style introduced a more aggressively pictorial designing aesthetic, which sometimes attempted an almost surrealistic derealization of the stage; especially so, in the lavish dreamscapes he created for Ziegfeld's statuesque beauties, which were transformed, with the help of wildly imaginative costumes, into surrealistic kinetic sculptures, sexually-charged installations. By conceiving the vast panorama of *Show Boat* in such ambitious visual terms, Urban brought to the musical stage a pictorial variety and phenomenological richness, which foreshadowed the more radical staging visions that we encounter in the concept musicals of the 1970s and the contemporary megamusicals.

In fact, *Show Boat* can easily be considered a predecessor of these later forms of musical theatre, and this line of continuity usually goes unnoticed by the historians, mainly because they prefer to view this show exclusively as the progenitor of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical plays of the 1940s and 1950s. Of course, the strengthening of the dramatic links between musical and prose sequences as well as the organization of the numbers along a linear, syntagmatic axis, that we perceive in *Show Boat*, are distinguishing characteristics of the later musical plays. However, the epic subject matter and scale of reference, the kaleidoscopically unfolding landscapes,

the near-continuous musicalization of some scenes and the rapid montage effects exhibit a grandness in conception and execution, which is the identifying characteristic of our contemporary, postmodern musical stage. Moreover, in *Show Boat*, we can trace the existence of a vertical, paradigmatic axis (in addition to the linear, syntagmatic one), along which many numbers are integrated; and the predominance of a vertical, paradigmatic axis of integration is one more defining characteristic of the later concept musicals and megamusicals. As we shall see in chapter four, paradigmatically integrated musicals are organized from top to bottom around a thematic (or even stylistic) motif, rather than in a linear-successive way, prescribed by a teleologically oriented plot. In *Show Boat*, the thematic motif of the evolution of show business allows the interpolation of many numbers, which are unrelated to the primary plot line (Magnolia's life story), presenting, instead, show-business rituals and the development of mass-cultural aesthetic forms. These numbers do not obey the strict causal laws of dramatic narrative and have a significantly greater autonomy *vis-à-vis* the whole than the plot-numbers; they rather constitute a set of loosely related units, which function as equivalents in relation to their principle of selection, the thematic motif. For Lehmann, such a paradigmatic organization that privileges equivalence over causality characterizes more pictorial, postdramatic kinds of theatre (84). As we shall see in the next section, in 1947, Hammerstein will explore the dynamics of a postdramatic theatrical representation in *Allegro*, which will lead him one breath away from the experimentations of the concept musical and the megamusical.

2.3. Modernist Experimentations

In spite of all its innovations and the big success of its initial run, *Show Boat* did not have any immediate effect on the way musicals were written. Of course, its influence can be detected on some of the most ambitious musicals of the 1930s, like the Gershwins's political "spoof-eretta," *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) - the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama - in which the narrative strategies of the integrated book musical merge with the-updated-for-the-jazz-age musical stylistics of Gilbert and Sullivan; or like the big Gershwin opera, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), in which the contemporary pop modes of commercial songwriting collide with the classical mode of operatic composition. Still, *Show Boat* was not the kind of musical that affects instantly and deeply the course of musical theatre, as was, for example, *Oklahoma!* (1943), Rodgers and Hammerstein's first collaboration, which changed overnight the aesthetic form of the Broadway musical. The reason was probably an ideological one. During the depression, a more ambitious and challenging musical, such as *Show Boat*, could not attract easily the mainstream audiences. Apart from some highly idiosyncratic and radically subversive works, like Paul Green and Kurt Weill's antiwar parable *Johnny Johnson* (1936) and Marc Blitzstein's pro-union labor-opera, the agitprop musical *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), the state-of-the-art musical of the 1930s was the Cole Porter kind of show: a frivolous piece of farcical entertainment, certainly more coherent, focused and centered than its 1920s predecessors, whose main aim was to provide a brief diversion from the grim socio-economic realities.³⁰ Porter's musicals describe the glittering penthouse world of an economically privileged elite, an elite to which he himself belonged, that functions as an alien utopian universe, offering a brief escape to all those who had to cope with more

³⁰ For an overview of Broadway's musical output in the 1930s, see Mordden, *Sing for Your Supper: The Broadway Musical in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

unpleasant realities. The flavor of this world permeates all his numbers, which do not need a tight narrative structure in order to deliver their message. They rather relate to the book sequences in a peripheral and generic manner, but this does not diminish their ideological power, which lies in Porter's ability to infuse his hedonist, aestheticist, decadent vision of the world into every one of his elegant, sophisticated and seductive melodic lines or in every one of his many unexpected, self-indulgent, attention-drawing rhymes.

However, in 1943 *Oklahoma!* proved that a musical that tries to say something, to make a point by subjecting the means of musical representation to a coherently organized narrative, can be the hottest commodity Broadway could offer. Not only a runaway hit but a cultural phenomenon that took America by storm, *Oklahoma!* managed to establish immediately many of *Show Boat's* innovations as the rules of musical theatre writing and staging. Its success lies in its narrative's ability to express accurately the ideological climate of its day as well to the numbers' thorough integration into the narrative, that transforms the attendance of a musical into a powerful emotional experience. *Oklahoma!* was produced after America's entry into World War II; and, in its evocation of a frontier mythology and its celebration of an idealized Americana (from which all traces of Indian presence are conspicuously expunged), became part of the wartime propaganda, whose aim was to remind the citizens of the uniquely American values they were defending with their participation in the war. This celebration of an idealized and mythologized American past is not specific to the wartime period, but rather the culmination of an ideological project, initiated with the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose aim was to inspire a sense of cultural continuity during the Depression, an age of cultural as well as

economic crisis. *Oklahoma!* becomes an ideal expression of New Deal politics and ideologies, especially in its ability to evoke a utopian combination of technological and economic progress with a regressive affirmation of small-town community values and experience.³¹ From the initial celebration of nature as an aesthetically ideal landscape in “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’,” to the enthusiastic affirmation of urbanization and economic expansion of “Kansas City” and the final synthesis of rural experience with economic and technological growth, symbolized by the territory’s impending statehood in the celebratory title number, each and every number contributes to the representation of a utopian Americana beyond socio-economic antagonisms. The show climaxes in a delirious patriotic “high,” as the entire cast rushes to the footlights to deliver the title number, whose lines captured perfectly the patriotic sentiment of the period: “We know we belong to the land/ And the land we belong to is grand!” (Hammerstein and Rodgers 76). The reports from the show’s Boston tryout have now become legendary as “audiences screamed and leaped to their feet in a day when standing ovations were unheard of” (Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin’* 72).

With their second stage collaboration, the critics’ perennial favorite, *Carousel* (1945), Rodgers and Hammerstein aim at the same kind of overwhelming audience response in a musical play about faith and belief that combines mean-streets realism with romance and fantasy, and provides Hammerstein with the opportunity to assume the role of a preacher, inspiring his audience with his providential philosophy. The emotional climax of the show comes with the final number, the inspirational hymn-

³¹ For the ideological maneuvers of *Oklahoma!*, see Theresa J. May, “Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 7.1 (2005): 84-103.

like anthem, “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” in which the proletarian ne’er-do-well hero, Billy Bigelow, is revealed to be, after his suicidal death, the protagonist of a cosmic drama, in which he finally meets his destiny as the redeemer of the people he loved but also betrayed throughout his mortal life. However, *Carousel* is far more than a perfectly constructed musical play in the style of *Oklahoma!* It rather marks a stylistic departure for its creators, as Rodgers and Hammerstein seem to move to an uncharted area, beyond the confines of the book musical. Some musical numbers turn to musical scenes, extended musical sequences, wherein the music covers the scene in its totality and the vocal parts alternate with dialogue parts, which are underscored and become integral parts of the number as well. In other words, many book sequences are not used in order to link separate numbers together but become themselves parts of an extended number, like “The Bench Scene,” according to Sondheim “probably the singular most important moment in the revolution of contemporary musicals” (qtd. in Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin’* 87). This is the lovers’ first meeting, a twelve-minute sequence, that climaxes twice to the scene’s main melodic theme, “If I Loved You,” while in the process the vocal parts alternate with the underscored prose parts, in such a way that character exposition and development becomes an integral part of the whole sequence. As the sung lines alternate swiftly and blend harmoniously with the spoken lines, prose itself becomes musicalized and acquires a new emotional urgency and affective momentum.

Throughout *Carousel*, one discerns a tendency to fast-forward the dramatic action, to move swiftly from the one perfectly formed theatrical image – that many times reaches the pictorial perfection of the tableau – to the next. And this fast-forward tendency is not only obvious in the use of music, but also in the use of dance.

High-maestro, artistically ambitious choreography was a trend that originated in the 1930s, when Albertina Rasch, Agnes de Mille, Charles Weidman, José Limón, and, most significantly, George Balanchine with his groundbreaking “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue” ballet from *On Your Toes* (1936), created a dance vocabulary mixing elements of classical and modern dance with popular footsteps.³² In *Oklahoma!*, de Mille managed to subject dance effectively to narrative purposes, especially with the dream ballet, “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind,” a vivid nightmare that reveals the heroine’s psychology as well the dark underside of *Oklahoma!*’s sunny universe in images of rape, prostitution and murder. In *Carousel*, de Mille moves a step forward with the second act ballet, which is not employed in order to comment on a character’s psychology or illuminate the milieu through the convention of the dream, but is used in order to present a character, Billy’s daughter, Louise, for the first time and create a solid psychological and behavioral portrait of hers. What could otherwise take many pages of exposition or a handful of numbers to illustrate is now communicated with a rapid montage of small scenes that constitute a self-contained mini-narrative within the larger narrative context. Equally important in its significance is the opening of *Carousel*, which quite unconventionally starts not with an overture but with “The Carousel Waltz.” This is an eight-minute orchestral piece accompanied by pantomime, a precise “acting-in-tempo” that presents the socio-historical milieu, sets the rhapsodic mood of the evening, introduces characters and establishes relations – most importantly Julie’s instant love for Billy - in a constant flow of images that reach a powerful crescendo as Rodgers’ waltz reaches its climax and the on-stage carousel keeps turning at full speed. In this way, Rodgers and

³² For the revolution in the choreography of musicals during the 1930s, see chapter 9, “Life’s a Dance: The Choreography of the 1930s,” from Mordden’s *Sing for Your Supper* 195-215.

Hammerstein, as well as de Mille with director Rouben Mamoulian, who staged together the opening, “have not only skipped the overture *and* the opening number but the exposition as well. They have plunged into the story, right into the middle of it, in the most intense first scene any musical had ever had” (Mordden, *Rodgers and Hammerstein* 75).

The uncharted territory to which Rodgers and Hammerstein were heading with *Carousel* is revealed in full sight with their following collaboration, *Allegro* (1947), the most bizarre musical in the genre’s “golden” era. This is a modern epic, narrating against a vast canvas of socio-historical change the story of an ordinary man, Joseph Taylor, Jr., from the day of his birth until the crucial turning point in his life, the moment when he abandons a successful career and a luxurious life-style as a doctor in the big city in order to return to his hometown and devote his life to the service of the simple, ordinary people.³³ On the level of content, and especially in all its populist sentimentality and demagoguery celebrating the small-town “quixotic” hero, his sexual prudery and his blind adherence to rural social conventions, *Allegro* appears contrived, clichéd and dangerously reminiscent of Frank Capra’s populist films of the 30s and 40s, like *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941).³⁴ However, the treatment of the narrative is unconventional and seems to feed on the audience’s previous knowledge of similar narratives. Characters acquire a deliberate one-dimensionality and are presented as

³³ Apparently, this is a musical in which Hammerstein is unable to resolve the antagonism between the idealized simplicities of rural life and the forces of urbanization.

³⁴ For an analysis of Capra’s populism, see chapter 6, “The Screwball Comedy,” from Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1981) 150-85, as well as Wes D. Gehring, “Populist Comedy,” *Handbook of American Film Genres*, ed. Wes D. Gehring (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 125-43.

well-known mythical, almost archetypal figures, while the metonymic network of causal and logical connections is reduced to the minimum. The narrative structure seems to function almost as a pretext for the show's elaborate visuals, which overwhelm the audience through a new kind of cataclysmic, almost hysterically frenetic stage-montage.

This is a musical in constant motion, a musical to be played in absolute continuity. No set changes could stop the action as the stage area is completely bare apart from projections on a cyclorama to set mood and location and a limited number of props, which are zoomed in and out on treadmills. What director-choreographer de Mille tries to achieve is fully choreographed movement, the sense of a stage in continuous motion. This is delivered not only through the four extended balletic set-pieces, but mainly through a choreographed use of light-design, which in combination with a synchronized prop-choreography, constantly redefines and reshapes the playing area, achieving rapid shifts of perspective and an abrupt editing not only between the numbers but also within the same number as well. The same sense of a continuously shifting perspective and constant, abrupt, discontinuous movement is also achieved by the use of a purely meta-theatrical technique: the introduction of a speaking and singing chorus that not only narrativizes and fast-forwards the action, but also frequently comments on it, acting like a camera lens zooming in and out of particular plot details in order to provide obsessive framings within the flow of events. In this way, narrative becomes deliberately fragmented, serial, dispersive and elliptical, a dysnarrative. It loses its accumulative, homogeneous, identifiable and unified character that derives from the primacy of a syntagmatic structure, linking the musical numbers with the book sequences and subordinating montage to this linkage. Now,

the breaks, the cuts take on an absolute value and subordinate all association.

Consequently, the book sequences become more and more redundant and for this reason they are trimmed, condensed within the space of a musical number or totally subverted by becoming snapshots, silent tableaux “linking” two extended musical sequences and establishing, instead of a rational association, a dreamlike connection. At the same time, the numbers take on an autonomous, material quality, and so become all-too visible, pure optical and sound situations, which are no longer induced by or extend to dramatic action and passion.³⁵

Actually, the exploration and celebration of the power of the image seems to be *Allegro's* *raison d'être*. The disjunctive cataclysmic montage aims at producing a perceptual shock to the audience that outstrips their motor capacities on all sides and leaves them in a state of motor helplessness, which makes them all the more capable of seeing and hearing. Vision is no longer a presupposition added to dramatic action, a preliminary which presents itself as a condition, but rather occupies all the room and overwhelms the action (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 128). For this reason, every number is transformed into a rich, dense and self-contained visual composition of such an absorbent, devouring power that makes the whole musical appear as an anthology of moments of extreme, almost indigestible, visual plenitude. The same plenitude characterizes *Allegro's* “soundtrack” as well. The musical explores a rich sonority as it shifts, often within the same sequence/ number, from voice-off and voice-over to chant and full-length choral parts or from song to complete silence and then to

³⁵ My analysis of discontinuous montage in *Allegro* is informed by Gilles Deleuze's theorization of modernist montage in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: The Athlone Press, 1989). As we have already seen, Brechtian theatre emphasizes the discontinuity inherent in montage, albeit in a controlled manner that does not threaten the progressive movement of an educative narrative. The new kind of cataclysmic montage, described in relation to *Allegro*, does not only threaten to pulverize the narrative structure but also opposes any kind of critical thought, whose awakening was the very aim of Brechtian discontinuity.

outbursts of instrumental music. With *Allegro*, Rodgers and Hammerstein discover a new kind of meaning that the musical number can communicate, a non-representational or textual “meaning,” which, as Barthes points out, “cannot be described ... because ... it does not copy anything ... does not represent anything;” it rather foregrounds the materiality and texture of the image, “what, in the image, is purely image” (*Image, Music, Text* 61). The pleasure that this purely audio-visual meaning provides is far beyond the traditional, “intellectual” one deriving from the desire to know; it is rather a kind of “shock, disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 19). The aesthetic reception of the musical becomes now a far more corporeal experience, beyond emotional identification, whereby a certain powerlessness at the heart of conscious thought is revealed as the immediate gratification of the liberated sense-organs reigns supreme.

With *Allegro*, Rodgers and Hammerstein redefine the Broadway musical as an overwhelming and immersive experience. Their aim was not to create a conventional dramatic narrative, with exposition, ascending action, climax and resolution, but document in a sweeping manner the life of an ordinary individual, passing by rapidly, flashing before the spectators’ eyes. This is the reason why the performance was characterized by cataclysmic motion: it had to move swiftly from the big events in the hero’s life (ethical dilemmas, deaths in the family, emotional deadends) to the most quotidian rituals of everyday life and from a panoramic view of the surrounding and ever-changing social environment to the most intimate, personal moments. Rodgers and Hammerstein knew that *Allegro* would be “a piece that would look and move like no other” (Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin’* 215); and for this reason, instead of hiring a conventional director, they chose a choreographer, de Mille, to direct the show and

integrate all the aspects of musical staging into a unified synaesthetic theatrical experience, a unique piece of hyper-kinetic spatial art. The uniqueness of the show generated heated anticipation, record-breaking advance sales and a media hype that resembles the one that only contemporary megamusicals create. However, once it opened, the response was lukewarm. Although *Allegro* ran for 315 performances, enough for most good-sized musicals of its time to recoup their investment, it lost money, because it was the biggest production Broadway had seen since the Depression, with a cast of seventy-eight, an orchestra of thirty-five and a small army of forty stagehands, struggling to keep up with the restless tempo of the show (Rodgers and Hammerstein 102). Moreover, the critics were widely divided, as the reviews ranged from "perfection" to "shocking disappointment" (qtd. in Rodgers and Hammerstein 99). After it closed, *Allegro* was quickly forgotten and, nowadays, is mostly remembered by musical theatre historians as a bizarre, weird theatrical experiment.

Modernist is probably a more appropriate word. A modernist touch definitely permeates *Allegro*, as the whole staging concept betrays the influence of the German director Erwin Piscator: platforms, treadmills, pendulum stages, loudspeakers, multimedia effects and cataclysmic stage editing.³⁶ Piscator's epic theatre was one of the many modernist variations on the Wagnerian ideal of total theatre, the great synaesthetic artwork which achieves the integration of all arts and the immersion of the audience in the theatrical performance (Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre*

³⁶ From 1939 to 1951, Piscator was living and working in New York. He was the head of the Dramatic Workshop of the New School and some of his students became later prominent figures of the American theatre, among them Tennessee Williams. For Piscator's American period and his influence on Broadway see chapter 8, "New York and the Dramatic Workshop (1939-1951)," in John Willet's *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator: Half a Century of Politics in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1986) 152-67.

149-51). From Max Reinhardt, Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig to Piscator, Vsevolod Meyerhold, the Bauhaus and Antonin Artaud, modernist theatrical experimentation offered many different methods for synthesizing the different arts in one symphonic and intensely synaesthetic artwork. What all these different versions of total theatrical performance have in common is that they open up the path to a postdramatic kind of theatre that privileges the texture, materiality and sensual impact of a dynamic aural and visual stage imagery, and so liberate theatre from the logocentric domination of the dramatic text. For Lehmann, such “a theatre beyond drama” (37) refuses to impose “a logical ... structure to the confusing chaos and plenitude of Being” (40), because it undermines the cause-and-effect systematization and instrumentalization offered by a coherent narrative, which abstracts from theatrical experience only what can be used as a means to an ideological or psychological end. In other words, the modernist experimentations with postdramatic, synaesthetic, total theatrical experiences subvert the teleologically oriented middle-class temporality, which sacrifices the present moment of enjoyment for the accomplishment of a future goal. The present is now released from its connections with the past and its extensions to the future, and so the theatrical experience is spatialized, as the spectator is immersed in an a-temporal and seemingly eternal dramatic present.

From a Marxist point of view, this systematic dislocation of narrative temporality and the concomitant spatialization of theatrical experience, which are observed throughout the period of monopoly capitalism, cannot be accidental. They are definitely related to the phenomenon of reification, which, as we have seen, produces a seemingly random pluralism of many overlapping fragmented experiences

in the present, as well as to the gradual rise of space as “an existential and cultural dominant” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 365). During monopoly capitalism emerges for the first time the experience of inhabiting an impossible-to-seize and overwhelming but, yet, consistent world, a self-enclosed but, still, infinite total space. This total, totalizing or even totalitarian space is the modern, national and international Orwellian system of corporate organization, bureaucratic systematization and economic control: an impenetrable nexus of interlocking monopolies, with its projections in government and in the military and judicial systems; and its extensions all-over the globe, in the form of imperial rivalry and competition of state-trusts in a gradually globalized market (*Marxism and Form* 36). This phantom structure permeates, unifies and determines the disconnected, limited lived experiences of the individual, but its coordinates are not immediately accessible or even conceptualizable for most people. Moreover, these totalizing coordinates of monopoly capitalism become part of the everyday experience of the individual, because the capitalist system, in this period, refashions urban experience in its own image and transforms urban space into its own peculiar decor (Debord 121). Urban planning conceives the twentieth century metropolis on a vast scale, and so extends the nineteenth century city both horizontally and vertically along seemingly infinite lines, creating an abstract geometrical structure, which defies any immediate visual interpretation.

Marxist cultural critics, like Benjamin, have pointed out that these new phenomena of immersion in the present, perceptual disorientation and spatialization of the experience have a traumatic impact on a psychic level and undermine the middle-class ego, which used to be an agent of synthesis and unity, systematizing the

external data and controlling the internal instincts with a view to the future. The new phenomenological experiences of monopoly capitalism challenge and undermine such attempts at cognitive, perceptual and affective mastery, signaling, thus, the death of the traditional middle-class ego. For Benjamin, one more catalyst in the overthrow of the middle-class ego is the opening up of an affective realm of pure visibility and pure sensibility, through the invasion of technology (electricity and automatic movement) in everyday life. Not only does technological innovation penetrate human life, but, through “the replacement of human perception with those substitutes for and mechanical extensions of perception which are machines” (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 76), it overwhelms the senses, as Benjamin’s graphic account of the new phenomenon of “traffic in a big city” shows:

To move through the latter involves a whole series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, impulses crisscross the pedestrian like charges in a battery. Baudelaire describes the man who plunges into the crowd as a reservoir of electrical energy. Thereupon he calls him, thus singling out the experience of shock, “a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness.” (Benjamin qtd. in *Marxism and Form* 75)

This new perceptual experience finds its ideal artistic expression in the technologically mediated image, which “can capture images which escape natural vision” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 214) and so “introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (230). This is the reason why film techniques have such a direct impact on other art forms. As Benjamin shows in his classic essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” modernist and avant-garde experimentations (including the theatrical ones) attempt, instead of a

representation of the external world, “the joint presentation of reality and apparatus” (243, n.20) in order to emulate the penetration of reality by the technological apparatuses. This practice leads to a textual modernist aesthetic, which liberates artistic form from representational ends in an effort to make it function as a material entity able to provoke physical reactions in the process of aesthetic reception. In the days of monopoly capitalism such formal experimentation that opens up a non-referential, anti-representational realm of pure visibility and pure sensibility acquires a socially revolutionary and negative character, because it expresses in all its excess everything that is experienced as traumatic and pathological in this era. Indeed, the aesthetic reception of such practices is often theorized in psychopathological terms, as a fusion between the body and the world reclaimed through the almost autistic withdrawal into fantasy and hallucination.³⁷

For this reason, during monopoly capitalism, the above experimentations appear as too indulgent, anti-social and dissonant for the commercial mainstream aesthetics, which remains firmly representational, perpetuating a traditional form of narrative realism, albeit of a highly standardized and reified kind. For example, although film is the techno-aesthetic medium that fully embodies the phenomenological excess of the period, Hollywood tamed its affective potential. The commercial film production of the era systematically avoids the exploration of the medium’s perceptual dynamics and concentrates instead on narrative realism that demands the “subjection of style to narrative,” “the systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie’s narrative” (Ray 32-4). The popularity of narrative realism during monopoly capitalism proves that the dominant ideology of

³⁷ For example, Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, employs Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to theorize textual reception as comparable to psychotic delirium.

the subject is still the one bequeathed from the liberal stage of capitalism. The individual is still conceived as an autonomous social agent trying to unify and synthesize spatially and temporally his/ her socio-historical experience within its specific national boundaries and along a narrative line that leads from a past to a future.³⁸ For this reason, the full colonization and commodification of the non-representational domain of affective intensity can only flourish in a new kind of society, the late capitalist, postmodernist one, in which the once-considered-as- psychopathological psycho-perceptual experiences of monopoly capitalism can constitute ideologically official modes of subject formation, and so radically alter the constitution of the subject and its relation to the social. Obviously, in this stage the subject is able “to accommodate a far greater sense of psychic dispersal, fragmentation, drops in ‘niveau,’ fantasy and projective dimensions, hallucinogenic sensations and temporal discontinuities” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 124-5) than in the previous moment of capitalist evolution, and so the opening up of a non-representational realm instead of being subversive and anti-social proves to be a new and official way of relating to the world.

³⁸ The rise and perfection of narrative realism is closely related to the first stage of rationalization that capitalism imposes on the middle-class societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The sense of linear, progressive time open to the future, the cause-and-effect systematization of the fictional world as well the autonomy of the omniscient writing and reading subject, that is able to command panoramic historical vistas of social evolution, are by-products of the liberation from a feudal, mythical, cyclical world of tradition. The second stage of rationalization corresponding to monopoly capitalism subverts radically the previous tentative autonomy provided to the individual, through the thorough systematization and fragmentation of the social. Even the form of realism that survives in this period is a reified one as classical realism’s hard-won distance between the writing subject and the ideology that informs him/ her as a social subject cannot be attained anymore. For more on the relation between capitalism, realism and modernism, see Jameson’s “Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism” in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Vol. 2: The Syntax of History* (London: Routledge, 1988) 115-32 as well as chapter 3, “Realism and Desire: Balzac and the Problem of the Subject,” and chapter 5, “Romance and Reification: Plot Construction and Ideological Closure in Joseph Conrad,” from *The Political Unconscious*, 151-84 and 206-80 respectively.

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the musical fully absorbs this new mode of artistic production and reception, and *Allegro* is the first musical that anticipates this absorption, creating, thus, a direct link between the Rodgers and Hammerstein era, the countercultural musicals of the 1960s, the concept musicals of the 1970s, Lloyd Webber's megamusicals and the corporate blockbusters of the new millennium. These are musicals which are not simply written but visually conceived, achieving integration not on a linear, temporal, syntagmatic level but a vertical, spatial, paradigmatic one. The musical numbers are not so much parts of a narrative totality as of a total visual composition, more like an abstract painting turning the spectator's attention "no longer ... to a meaning of the work that might be grasped by a reading of its constituent elements, but to the principle of construction" (Bürger 81). However, back in 1947, this aesthetic was far beyond its age, and this is the reason why *Allegro* was a resounding and embarrassing flop. Nevertheless, one of its innovations became an indispensable part of the musical theatre staging during the genre's "golden" era and beyond. *Allegro* was the first musical to be both choreographed and directed by a choreographer, and most notably a woman, de Mille, and so made possible the rise of the choreographer-director. After de Mille, Jerome Robbins, Michael Kidd, Bob Fosse, Gower Champion, and more recently, Michael Bennett, Tommy Tune and Susan Stroman, established choreography as one of the most essential elements of musical theatre and accelerated the rhythm of the Broadway musical by framing the whole of dramatic action with almost continuous movement. Such a practice tends to stretch the traditional book musical to its limits, and the prototypical example here is *West Side Story* (1957), a musical that brings the Rodgers and Hammerstein era to its conclusion, while pointing, at the same time, to

the future. An update of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* set against racially motivated gang warfare, *West Side Story* draws on the familiarity of the story in order to replace many traditional book sequences with song and dance sequences of unprecedented fluidity and length. Swiftly alternating between wall-to-wall choreography and choreographed movement, choreographer-director Robbins many times gives the impression that his subject matter is less the star-crossed romance than the creation of a new corporeal vocabulary for an ultra-chic gang-machismo of epic proportions that theatricalizes urban violence in a direct and impressionistically poetic manner.

Before closing our analysis of the Rodgers and Hammerstein era, a brief reference to the future of Rodgers and Hammerstein after *Allegro* seems appropriate. This question gets us back to where we started from, in 1949 and *South Pacific*: a huge hit that brought many other hits, two of them giant ones, *The King and I* (1951) and *The Sound of Music* (1959). After the failure of *Allegro*, Rodgers and Hammerstein strike back with a solid and conventional musical play that grants them a commercial and critical triumph. In this sense, *South Pacific* is a key text in the evolution of the Broadway musical. It marks a stylistic retreat for its creators and establishes the well-made book musical as the aesthetic musical norm of Broadway for many years to come.

CHAPTER THREE

Counterculture and the Birth of the Megamusical: From *Hair* to

Evita

3.1. Rock/ Pop Opera

In February 1971, the unknown young composer Andrew Lloyd Webber scored his first commercial triumph, not in England, his own country, but in America; and not on Broadway's musical stages, but in the country's pop-music charts. His over-ambitious collaboration with lyricist Tim Rice, the double-album for the yet-to-be-produced rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, topped the Billboard album charts; and this was just the beginning. After selling millions of records, an immensely successful concert version of the album toured all over America, a controversial, provocative and aesthetically progressive, avant-garde theatrical production created a sensation on Broadway and a highly ambitious film version was produced. In the meantime, the album had become a global phenomenon, and so theatrical productions were staged all over the world, including Lloyd Webber's homeland, in which the London production ran for over eight years and established a record for a West End musical of 3358 performances, soon to be surpassed by other Lloyd Webber shows.

Jesus Christ Superstar must be understood as a product of the countercultural climate of the period. It is an account of the Holy Week, the last seven days of the life of Jesus, that places the Son of God in a context full of overtones of the culture of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Both as a record and as a Broadway show, *Jesus Christ Superstar* disturbed, offended, shocked, even outraged many conservative Christian groups, provoking militant reactions, similar to the ones provoked in our days by Dan Brown's infamous novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). One of the many reasons for these reactions was that Lloyd Webber and Rice's work used the medium of rock music in order to portray musically the Holy Passion.

An African-American slang term for sex, rock 'n' roll is a hybrid musical form, combining the previously segregated genres of rhythm and blues and country. It took America by storm in the 1950s and became the soundtrack of all the rebellious baby-boomers. The more hard-edged rock music of the 1960s, characterized by a heavy drum style and aggressive, riff-based guitar playing was a far more visceral, almost frenetic, kind of music, inviting its audience to release control and abandon themselves to its relentless, pulsating rhythms. Moreover, the 1960s rock was closely associated with the drug culture of the period, as psychedelic drugs, like marijuana, peyote, LSD and many other mind-altering substances, were used invariably in every rock concert in order to provoke the magical derealization of the world and enable the attainment of higher levels of consciousness or deeper levels of subconsciousness. The *Jesus Christ Superstar* album was not the first effort to use rock music in a religious context. The so-called Jesus Freaks of the period employed rock music in order to celebrate, in a rather ecstatic manner, their life-changing relationship with the "prince of peace" and the "source of all love." The Jesus Freaks were the major

Christian element within the hippie counterculture: they were tie-dyed John the Baptists, who would have worn "Jesus is my homeboy" T-shirts un-ironically, "dropping Jesus" instead of dropping acid and awaiting the Second Coming.³⁹ By creating their own brand of holy quasi-psychedelic rock, the Jesus Freaks were the first to shock the conservative Christians by using "the devil's music," which was supposedly leading America's youth to occultism, drugs and perverted sex, in order to express the gospel. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was, in its turn, the first mass cultural project that capitalized on this new trendy combination of religion and rock, and so became much more than a big commercial success, a cultural phenomenon.

If rock is the one word that characterizes *Jesus Christ Superstar*, opera is the second. Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's album was not the first to be labeled as rock opera; *Tommy* (1969), by the British rock band the Who, holds this privilege. A term like rock opera may sound today somewhat pretentious, but back in the late 1960s and early 1970s it was acceptable, because rock music was treated by both musicians and critics as an artistically ambitious genre. The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) proved that a popular album is not necessarily an assembly of potential future hits, but can be a collection of songs, united by a thematic or stylistic concept; while the Who's rock opera stressed the stronger narrative line that can connect the individual tracks. Moreover, opera as a genre seemed to be relevant, at least on a metaphoric level, to the culture of the late 1960s. Opera has always been a heroic genre, employed in the baroque period in order to immortalize the heroism of a declining aristocracy and in the romantic period to express the heroic dimension of the individual psyche, set against the necessities and the constraints of a rationalistic,

³⁹ See Rachel Khong, "Holy Rollers Rock: They're on a Mission from God," *The Yale Herald* 15 October 2004, 25 November 2006 <<http://www.yaleherald.com/article.php?Article=3601>>.

barren, materialist world.⁴⁰ In other words, opera seems relevant as a genre in periods when the individual conceives himself/ herself in heroic, mythic terms, and the 1960s was such a period: a period of cultural and political revolution, militant or pacifist activism and excessive utopianism. Accordingly, the two celebrated rock operas of the period are tales of individual heroism. *Tommy* tells the story of a traumatized deaf, dumb and blind boy, who develops, due to his handicap, a deeper and more liberated affective relation with his surroundings. Once he becomes sensually aware, he shares his alternative vision of experiencing reality with the world and becomes a spiritual leader, a messianic figure, who is finally crushed by the commodified world and crucified by his followers. *Jesus Christ Superstar* gives us the real thing in the person of Jesus, who is connected, through Rice's anachronisms and colloquialisms, to the present reality and acts metaphorically on many levels: he can be read as the ultimate hippie rebel, an inspirational and deified modern guru or, as we shall see, a contemporary rock rebel, in the style of John Lennon and Jim Morrison.

In spite of their similarities, there is a great musical difference between *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. As far as the former is concerned, the term opera must not be taken literally as the rock strophic songs bear no stylistic relation to classical musical idioms. The term is rather used metaphorically to connote the more high-brow cultural intentions of the project and to add a heroic dimension to the main character. Although *Jesus Christ Superstar* repeats *Tommy*'s format, a cycle of strophic songs with the addition of some multisectional structures forming an episodic narrative, Lloyd Webber's mode of composition makes many references to opera and

⁴⁰ For a discussion of opera as a heroic genre and a descendant of the epic tradition as well as for the different ideological appropriations of opera in the course of its history, see Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1984) 145-51.

classical music. Actually, throughout his career, Lloyd Webber opens up a continuous dialogue with opera and classical music, which has obliged many critics to apply the term pop opera to his subsequent musicals, the ones that abandon the rock stylistics, as well as to their various imitations by other composers.

It would be a mistake, of course, to consider Lloyd Webber a classical composer. In spite of his classical thematic borrowings or the references and allusions to classical composers, Lloyd Webber's "stylistic origins are more strongly in commercial pop" (Snelson 55).⁴¹ Apart from some occasional forays into more classical modes of composition, as in his *Requiem* (1985), pop stylistics inform the majority of his compositions, especially the ones for the musical theatre.⁴² By requiring Lloyd Webber to construct contained, catchy works in strophic style, the format of the pop song has provoked a conciseness and a directness that has served his entire output (21). As a mode of composition, whose power lies in the cumulative effect that the repetition of a simple melodic phrase creates, pop demands one thing

⁴¹ For more detailed and musicologically specific descriptions of Lloyd Webber's compositions, see John Snelson's excellent musicological analysis, *Andrew Lloyd Webber* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2004).

⁴² Heather Laing describes the pop musical structure as one which works through a system of chord progressions and modulations leading away from, and back to the tonic key, along relatively formulaic lines. This gives the song a strong balance and symmetry, which is usually further emphasised by the rhyming pattern of the lyrics. The structure is relatively simple, remarkably compact and very coherent, with a solid sense of tonal direction which makes it unlikely that anything unpredictable will happen ... In structural terms ... that melody incorporates a sense of control and coherence... The sense of coherence which this song form incorporates is manifested in almost every aspect of its construction, aside from being ensured by tonality and a balanced structure. The technique of repetition, for example, which is basic to the structure, is also prevalent at other levels the composition ... repetition in popular music is used as a method of construction from the chordal riff through to the phrase and the melodic line ... In order to avoid monotony and maintain a sense of movement, however, variations such as sequential repetition can be used, which gives a sense of change while maintaining enough strong similarity of pattern to ensure overall coherence, recognisability and an almost instant sense of familiarity for the listener.

Laing describes the AABA popular ballad form, which is one the most usual modes of melodic repetition in the classic Broadway and Hollywood musical. Similar modes of repetition inform the more contemporary post-50s pop music. See Heather Laing, "Emotion by Numbers: Music, Song and the Musical," *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter and Portland: Intellect, 2000) 9-10.

from a composer: to come up with a strong, assertive hook; and this proved to be exactly Lloyd Webber's area of expertise. Throughout his career, he has exhibited an almost uncanny "ability to create a strong and simple hook: an instantly memorable phrase that effectively brands the song ... The whole effect is neat, direct, and easy to remember. More important, it is hard to forget" (57).

Of course, such an ability for immediately accessible melodic phrases was not foreign to Broadway's composers. The most popular ones, like Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, exhibited the same knack for the catchy melody, that defining hook that makes a song instantly humable. What distinguishes Lloyd Webber from these composers is a preference for broad phrased, stirring, almost anthemic ballads with distinctively large melodic leaps, wide vocal range, sweeping scales and lush harmonic resolutions. These ballads have become Lloyd Webber's trademark, they are the so-called Big Tunes everyone expects from his shows; the big melodies that repeatedly crash into the orchestral texture, less for dramatic emphasis, as many critics have complained, than for selling albums and singles (Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse* 71). Always starting low in the register but never failing to achieve their potential melodic heights, the Big Tunes invariably contain towards the finale an upward key change for dramatic effect, providing also the opportunity for high belting notes. They are also orchestrated in the same luxurious, extravagant and lush way they are composed, often including rich and prominent string textures. The vocal pyrotechnics and acrobatics, these ballads often demand, as well as the stage histrionics they command, make them sound operatic; and for this reason, Lloyd Webber's Big Tunes are sometimes called pop arias, since

the aria was opera's analogous unit for sustained and extravagant emotional exposition and vocal deliverance.

Recently, Monty Python's blockbusting mega-farce, *Spamalot* (2005), a hilarious mockery of medieval epics as well as of contemporary Broadway conventions, included a show-stopping number called "The Song That Goes Like This," which is a direct parody of Lloyd Webber's Big Tunes. This number summarizes all the criticisms that the composer's pop operatic style has provoked over the years but also recreates step-by-step a Big Tune's construction. The song is a very accurate pastiche of Lloyd Webber, as it is based on a lyrical, romantic, broad-phrased melodic line, repeated *ad nauseam* with slight variations but many modulations. The staging of the number alludes to the most iconic scene from a Lloyd Webber musical – probably from any musical in general – the lake scene from *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986): the two characters, "the dashing handsome" Sir Dennis Galahad (Idle 14) and the seductive Lady of the Lake, sing passionately to each other, while they sail across a lake on a "magnificent boat" (12). While they sing, a chandelier descends to make even more obvious the allusions to *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The number starts with Sir Dennis singing the main melody:

Once in every show
 There comes a song like this
 It starts off soft and low
 And ends up with a kiss
 Oh where is the song that goes like this?
 Where is it? Where? Where? (12)

The Lady, repeating the same melody, replies:

A sentimental song
That casts a magic spell
They all will hum along
We'll overact like hell
Oh this is the song that goes like this. (12)

Filled with enthusiasm, they move straight to the bridge:

Dennis: Now we can go straight
Into the middle eighth
A bridge that is too far for me
Lady: I'll sing it in your face
While we both embrace
Both: And then we change the key! (12)

As the song modulates higher, the main melody forcefully returns, but both Sir

Dennis and the Lady realize that the key is too high for them:

Dennis: Now we're into E
That's awfully high for me
Lady: But everyone can see
We should have stayed in D
Both: For this is our song that goes lie this. (12)

As the main melody modulates even higher, they are both exhausted:

Lady: I can't believe there's more
Dennis: It's far too long I'm sure
Lady: That's the trouble with this song

It goes on and on and on

Both: For this is our song that is too long. (13)

With the final modulation and the entrance of a backing chorus ecstatically accompanying them, they are determined to end this torture:

Lady: We'll be singing this till dawn

Dennis: You'll wish that you weren't born

Lady: Let's stop this damn refrain

Before we go insane

Both: The song always ends like this! (13)

And quite predictably, the Lady's final, long-sustained "high note breaks all the glass on the chandelier" (13).

The modern Broadway musical was certainly not accustomed to Lloyd Webber's bombastic style. The last time that such overt lyricism, these explosive melodic outbursts, the thunderous orchestral blasts and tour-de-force solos and duets were in vogue on Broadway was in the 1920s. In the heydays of Gershwin jazz, extremely successful romantic operettas, like Sigmund Romberg's *The Student Prince in Heidelberg* (1924), *The Desert Song* (1926) and *The New Moon* (1928) or Rudolf Friml's *Rose-Marie* (1924), *The Vagabond King* (1925) and *The Three Musketeers* (1928), offered a more retro, exotic and opulent form of escapism.⁴³ Finally, the more urban sound of jazz prevailed over the florid ballads, the dizzying waltzes and the valiant marches and affected greatly the sound of Broadway in the following decades:

⁴³ See William A. Everett, "Romance, Nostalgia and Nevermore: American and British Operetta in the 1920s," *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 47-62.

The curvilinear lines of operetta . . . gave way to far more angular melodic lines. The classical harmonies were interspersed with fresh, narrow, “bluesy” modulations, while the more gently flowing tempos of older schools were replaced by more staccato, excited tempos, as well as by the distinctive languor of pure blues. (Bordman, *American Musical Comedy* 123)

This does not mean, of course, that the emotional ballads were ever out of fashion; on the contrary, many of the “golden” era’s greatest hits belonged to the ballad form. However, they sounded different. In the same way that Rodgers, as we have already seen, americanized the waltz, many composers, like Berlin or Porter, added a contemporary urban feel to the ballad, underplaying the blatant emotionalism and adding an element of rhythmical urgency or making it more intimate, delicate, sophisticated. The more explosive anthems return in the Rodgers and Hammerstein character-driven musical plays, but in a very controlled way, in order to delineate larger than life feelings or add a heroic dimension to a character.⁴⁴ They never dominate the whole play.

Such anthems do not dominate Lloyd Webber’s early musicals either. The composer gives in to the emotional excess, for which he has been criticized and satirized, after *The Phantom of the Opera*. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, many melodies employ shorter (but equally catchy) melodic phrases that fit better the rhythmic

⁴⁴ We have already seen, in the previous chapter, how Rodgers creates a pop operatic feeling in *South Pacific*’s “Some Enchanted Evening” in order to denote Emile’s European otherness and grandeur or how he (and director Logan) combines operetta’s romanticism with sexual passion in Cable’s big solo, “Younger than Springtime.” The same pop operatic feeling can be found in *Carousel*’s anthem of religious faith “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” in *The King and I*’s anthem of female endurance and marital devotion “Something Wonderful” and in *The Sound of Music*’s inspirational anthem “Climb Every Mountain.” We must note here that Lloyd Webber is a big admirer of Rodgers’ music and ever since he was kid he wanted to write his own “Some Enchanted Evening.” See Snelson 38.

urgency of rock, while the rock orchestral accompaniment creates an interesting contrast with the more lyrical and broad phrased melodies and counterbalances their overt emotionalism. Even the only big pop ballad, that stands deliberately outside of the rock context, Mary Magdalene's expression of her erotic passion for Jesus, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," is more restrained and not overproduced. The main melody is gently and subtly orchestrated: it is accompanied by a prominent acoustic guitar that adds a folk quality to the tune and communicates a placid and plaintive feeling. Actually, seven bars from this melody derive from the slow and lyrical second movement of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor; and this thematic borrowing draws attention to one of Lloyd Webber's favorite techniques: the reworking of classical melodies into a pop context. Such thematic appropriations have provoked severe criticisms – "derivative" is a word often used to describe his music – but, also, have become an indispensable factor of his success. Vague thematic reminiscences create in his shows this feeling of security and familiarity: hearing a melody for the first time and still feeling that you've heard it all before. However, Lloyd Webber always expands on his classical references and transforms them into something unexpected and new. In this particular case, through change of meter (from 6/8 to 4/4) and significant melodic extension, Mendelssohn's "pure sustained melody" becomes "an expressive and dramatic vocal line" (Snelson 173). Especially in the middle section, we arrive at familiar Lloyd Webber territory as an "increasing intensity" is created through shorter melodic phrases and rising pitch (172). This intensity finally explodes in the instrumental reprise of the bridge, as the "full sweep of a string section" (Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 205) unexpectedly dominates the piece. The song does not end, however, in an emotional overdrive, but rather concludes in the same

calm way it began, but “the strong emotional undercurrents from the middle section” add a new affective depth to Mary’s deliberately cool emotional surface (Snelson 172).

Crucial to this number’s effectiveness are also Rice’s lyrics:

I don’t know how to take this

I don’t see why he moves me

He’s a man he’s just a man

And I’ve had so many men before

In very many ways

He’s just one more ...

Don’t you think it’s rather funny

I should be in this position

I’m the one who’s always been

So calm so cool, no lover’s fool

Running every show

He scares me so ...

Yet if he said he loved me

I’d be lost I’d be frightened

I couldn’t cope just couldn’t cope

I’d turn my head I’d back away

I wouldn’t want to know

He scares me so

I want him so

I love him so. (Rice, *Jesus Christ Superstar* 8)

Throughout *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Rice retains a radical ambivalence about Jesus' divine nature. He may be the Son of God, but he can also be an ordinary man, mythologized, idealized and deified by his followers. In Mary's number, Rice exploits this ambivalence to the maximum. Is Mary a woman, who falls in love for the first time, and so unconsciously mythologizes and deifies her object of desire, or is she a woman in ecstatic communion with the Son of God? By raising this question, Rice, quite wittingly and shockingly (not to say blasphemously), blurs sexual and religious ecstasy, divine adoration and erotic infatuation. Do the Son of God and the idealized object of desire function in the same manner? Are they both sublime objects onto which the same kind of libidinal energy is projected?⁴⁵ Moreover, Rice's lyrics transform Mary into a sexually liberated woman of the early 1970s, "a woman of experience who has been around but never really fallen in love before" (Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 206). In other words, she is liberated from the stereotypical depiction of the holy whore and becomes a contemporary, relevant figure, a character, with which the sexually liberated generation of the 1960s could easily identify.

In general, Lloyd Webber's collaboration with Rice was a very successful one, not only in commercial, but also creative terms:

Rice's contemporary edge and wry humor complemented the broad romanticism of Lloyd Webber's tendencies: the warmth of Rice's work could be brought out by Lloyd Webber, while the more pointed and direct of Lloyd Webber's work was sharpened by Rice. It was only after they ceased working together that Lloyd Webber's more expansive and

⁴⁵ For psychoanalysis, the answer is certainly yes. This libidinal energy is the Lacanian *jouissance*, the primordial excessive density of being, the original place of the subject from which the subject is always displaced. For the ways in which ideology produces sublime objects by placing them against a backdrop of *jouissance*, see Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

indulgent musical style was allowed to develop and even dominate his music. (Snelson 8-9)

Lloyd Webber's edge as a composer is obvious in *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the way he combines his broad-phrased melodic lyricism with the terse, blues-inflected accompanying riffs of hard rock; in the way he marries a symphonic orchestra, "big enough for Mahler" (Mordden, *One More Kiss* 15), with synthesizers and electric guitars in order to create innovative sounds, like rock cello in the instrumental break of "Heaven on Their Minds."⁴⁶ Equally interesting is the combination of rock with "the astringent modernism" (Snelson 75) of such composers as Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. The influence of this modernist sound is obvious in the occasional "use of irregular meters (particularly 5/4 and 7/8), accented chords which aggressively emphasize or disturb the sense of meter, the angular melodic lines frequently involving prominent tritones, as well as the juxtaposition of solid textural blocks" (69). Combined with a rough hard-rock accompaniment, this modernist sound provides a melodic and rhythmic acidity, which is dramatically effective in the more cruel and violent moments, as the "Trial Before Pilate (Including the 39 Lashes)," "a driving terror of a scene" (Mordden, *One More Kiss* 18-9). Finally, influences from the avant-garde musical scene of the period, can be traced in the "Crucifixion:"

a sound montage initially made up of three elements: lines spoken by Christ; sustained voices overlapping and shifting to create slowly changing clusters, as in Ligeti's *Lux aeterna* (1966); and free jazz on drums and

⁴⁶ For more on the use of rock in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, see Snelson 64-9. We must note here that Lloyd Webber did all the orchestrations himself and, throughout his career, he has continued to orchestrate all of his works, mostly in collaboration with David Cullen. Very few Broadway composers were able or interested in orchestrating their melodies. Lloyd Webber is definitely an exception to the rule.

piano. Later, sliding high string clusters are added, as in early Xenakis and Penderecki. (Snelson 70)

Musical theater critics of the period traced further influences and references: *Carmina Burana*, Grieg's Piano Concerto, Hindu ragas, Honegger, Copland, silent-movie piano scoring and Erich Wolfgang Korngold's Warner Bros. main title.⁴⁷ The *New York Times* theatre critic, Clive Barnes wrote that "[t]he music itself is extraordinarily eclectic. It runs so many gamuts it almost becomes a musical cartel" (qtd. in Snelson 190). Lloyd Webber's excessive eclecticism, to the point that his aesthetic, in some of his musicals, seems to be one of musical collage, has been frequently attacked by the critics. Nevertheless, his 1970s works exhibit a kind of stylistic consistency in the type of influences that form his musical discourse: commercial pop and rock along with twentieth-century classics and semi-classics. Still, some odd, ill-matched, for many critics, elements that spoil the whole mix can be easily traced. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, "King Herod's Song," a Dixieland jazz vaudeville two-step, accompanied by the signature honky-tonk piano, is the obvious example. However, the number is dramatically effective in delineating Herod, although in one-dimensional, cartoonish manner, as ridiculously superficial. Even more importantly, this number is the only moment of comic relief in the second act, when the whole world collapses into unbearable barbarism, cruelty and horror. Predictably, "King Herod's Song" never failed to be a showstopper on stage, as its uplifting, punchy melody is accompanied by the most hilarious and smartass of Rice's lyrics:

⁴⁷ See Ethan Mordden, *One More Kiss: The Broadway Musical in the 1970s* (New York: Palgrave, 2003) 17.

So you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ
 Prove to me that you're divine – change my water into wine
 That's all you need to and I'll I know it's all true
 C'mon King of the Jews
 Jesus you just won't believe the hit you've made round here
 You are all we talk about, the wonder of the year
 Oh what a pity if it's all a lie
 Still I'm sure that you can rock the cynics if you try
 So you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ
 Prove to me that you're no fool - walk across my swimming pool
 If you do that for me, then I'll let you go free
 C'mon King of the Jews. (Rice, *Jesus Christ Superstar* 14)

This is a number that attests to Lloyd Webber's showmanship. First and above all, Lloyd Webber is a showman (as well as businessman) with a very good knowledge of what might work for an audience at the specific dramatic moment. Of course, this was familiar territory for Broadway, from its vaudeville days to the Rodgers and Hammerstein era. Why do, then, Lloyd Webber's aesthetic choices, many of them quite predictable, provoke such intense critical reactions? One reason is that in the 1970s, especially with the advent of the more esoteric and idiosyncratic works of Stephen Sondheim, the Broadway musical had become more artistically conscious. However, more personal and idiosyncratic artistic visions may produce exemplary artifacts but do not guarantee commercial success. Both artistic self-consciousness as well as the obsessive repetition of outworn formulas by the more commercially oriented producers, directors and song writers, led the Broadway

musical into deep economic crisis in the 1970s and early 1980s. For a while, it seemed that Lloyd Webber “was almost single-handedly revitalizing Broadway musicals” (Gottfried, *More Broadway Musicals* 13). In other words, this foreigner taught them how to do their job. In response, the New York critics idolized Sondheim as the savior of the Broadway musical and the only possible link with the “golden” age. But the truth is, as Mordden points out, that Lloyd Webber’s pop operatic aesthetics “is where the big-emotion shows like *Show Boat* and *South Pacific* went to when the musical got sophisticated” (2004: 90) - or rather too sophisticated, too cynical, too esoteric.⁴⁸

Of course, part of Lloyd Webber’s critical massacre on Broadway was provoked by the composer himself through statements like the following: “I never thought there was any difference between opera and musicals that are through-written. Music theatre is music theatre. It either works for an audience or it doesn’t” (qtd. in Snelson 197). Coming from a composer with such a good knowledge of classical music, opera, operetta, mainstream pop, rock and the Broadway musical, such a statement seems disingenuous, to say the least: Lloyd Webber surely knows that continuous or near-continuous musicalization does not make a musical play an opera. His insistence on calling his musicals operas could perhaps go unnoticed in the early 1970s or be accepted by rock music critics as part of the progressive rock-album aesthetics of the period. However, once he became an immensely successful musical theatre composer, his operatic pretensions started to provoke vitriolic critical reactions not only on Broadway but also in the West End. One of the worst came from Bernard

⁴⁸ To read such an insightful and unbiased evaluation of Lloyd Webber from an historian like Mordden, who idolizes both Sondheim and the “golden” age of the Broadway musical, is really surprising.

Levin, who reviewed *Evita* as “one of the most disagreeable evenings I have ever spent in my life, in or out of the theatre,” and drew particular attention to the

corruption at the heart of this odious artefact, symbolized by the fact that it calls itself an opera, and had been accepted as such by people who have never set foot in an opera-house, merely because the clichés between the songs ... are sung instead of spoken, and the score includes, among the appropriate “slow tango feel” and similar expressions, such markings as “*poco a poco diminuendo*.” (qtd. in Snelson 29)

Lloyd Webber’s insistence on deliberately blurring generic lines with his statements (probably out of a desire to assume a classical composer’s more prestigious cultural status) has definitely made him an easy critical target. Critics get great pleasure in pointing out on what counts Lloyd Webber’s works do not qualify as operas. One of their usual complaints is the composer’s rather blunt use of motifs, which are not modified or developed musically in a progressive manner and in accordance with the evolution of the dramatic action, but are rather insistently, even obsessively, repeated and restated, defying any sense of dramatic coherence. As Snelson points out, “[t]hose expecting something of the weight and ever-shifting fluidity of Wagnerian leitmotifs will be disappointed,” since Lloyd Webber treats his themes more like “discrete blocks of sound to be reassembled in different patterns – like the bricks of a Lego kit” (88). Moreover, many critics strongly object to the use of such terms as pop aria, because the insistent repetition of a hook phrase, with predictable and straightforward melodic and harmonic direction and standard rhythmic pattern, cannot be compared with an operatic aria’s employment of the classical mode of composition, which explores and exhausts the intrinsic properties of

the musical discourse itself. As the equivalent of the dramatic soliloquy, an aria, especially in the nineteenth century, obliges an operatic composer to use melodic variation, harmonic and rhythmic experimentation and orchestral coloring in the same way that the poet/ dramatist uses words in order to capture and communicate subjective emotional depth. By contrast, a strophic song can only denote but not explore a character. Finally, by absorbing the evolutions in classical instrumental music, opera gradually exhibited symphonic aspirations. Thus, it progressively subverted the baroque period's recitative/ aria opposition, bequeathed by the dialogue/ soliloquy opposition in verse drama, and moved towards a more ambitious score of intermingling musical passages immersed in a continuous and ever-evolving complex musical fabric. Obviously, the takeout hit song has no place in such a score.

Predictably, many music critics were shocked and/ or appalled in February 24, 1985, when Lloyd Webber presented his *Requiem* at Saint Thomas Episcopal Church on Fifty-third Street and Fifth Avenue in New York. For them, "this 'pop' tunesmith" exceeded any level of decency by "consider[ing] himself able to write in a form so successfully managed by Mozart, Brahms, Verdi, and Fauré" (Citron 327). "It aspires to the pure fragrance of churchly incense, but it ends up reeking of cheap perfume," wrote the *Los Angeles Times* critic, Martin Bernheimer (qtd. in Citron 327). Bernard Holland, doyen music critic of the *New York Times*, was more "favorable:" "It promised much ... but fell back too often on massive claps of thunder and other coups de théâtre, most of which startled rather than moved" (qtd. in Citron 327). Stephen Citron gives us the most balanced assessment of Lloyd Webber's extended piece of liturgical music, which also summarizes, in the most objective manner, all the criticisms that the composer's operatic/ classical pretensions provoke:

Academic training is precisely what is lacking here, for in spite of Lloyd-Webber's having created interesting, sometimes ravishing themes, the larger forms ... lack development. Some development is necessary for every extended piece, whether it be augmentation (stretching the pitches out) or diminution (cramping them together), retrograde motion (playing the tones backward) or crab inversion (upside down *and* backward). It is boring to listen to the same statements repeated in the same way or simply gussied up with different orchestration. Where is the lovely craft of music, the tossing about of motives or even bits of motives? Where are subtle modulations that move us gradually from key to key? In this work what you hear first is all you get. Perhaps for compensation Lloyd-Webber works up to some tremendously dissonant theatrical climaxes and then stops abruptly, but the effect is merely astonishing, not musical. (326)

Of course, no one ever expected of musicals to exhibit the musical complexity of a classical piece. The well-made Broadway musicals have always used the technique of popular song to delineate their characters in broad strokes and have employed a commercialized, streamlined version of the Wagnerian leitmotiv, in the same ways it is used by Hollywood cinema. Lloyd Webber does more or less the same thing (only with much more music), but by labeling his musicals operas he implies that he does something more. If one wanted to categorize his output, based exclusively on the mode of composition and his musical aesthetics, he/ she would conclude that they are modernized operettas, quite similar to the 1920s romantic operettas. They exhibit the same flair for the grand gesture, the big emotion, the big tune, bearing a resemblance to grand opera in their emotional indulgence and

extravagance and the great amount of sung music they employ, but being composed in a popular rather than classical manner. Does this mean that his works constitute a throwback to an older mode of musical theatre, side-stepping the evolutions in musical theatre structure, described in the previous chapter? The answer is definitely no. One should not see Lloyd Webber only as a pop songwriter, but also as a dramatic composer. Only in this way can his significant contribution in the evolution of the modern musical be evaluated.

3.2. Musical Montage and Conceptual Staging

One of the well-known characteristics of Lloyd Webber's personality is that he likes to have absolute control in every aspect of his musicals, from the moment of their conception to their staging. More than any other composer in the history of musicals, he wants "to assume a more 'executive' role by defining, dictating, and altering any aspect of his shows to bring them in line with his own personal vision" (Snelson 39). To this end, he founded in 1978 his own production company, The Really Useful Company, a move that made him the producer of his own shows and initiated his world-wide business empire. From now on, he could hire the best possible creative team for the realization of his vision, including the lyricist, as the founding of his production company coincides chronologically with the termination of his partnership with Rice. Lloyd Webber's status as a producer/ composer, without any stable lyricist as collaborator, makes him the first composer in musical theatre history that dominates totally the creative process.

Lloyd Webber's working method is the following: once he comes up with an idea for a show and decides to realize it on stage, he arranges meetings with the

lyricist and director he has chosen for the specific project. The aim of these meetings is to come up with a general outline of the whole piece that indicates the succession of the main musical parts, the building blocks of the score. This outline becomes the basis for the formation of a complete musical score that the composer hands to his collaborators; and, since most of his musicals use continuous vocal music, this score is actually a complete dramatic text without the lyrics. In Lloyd Webber's musicals, music always comes first, the composition of the score takes "precedence over any specific moment as articulated through a particular phrase in the lyrics" (Snelson 45). In its development, the original score may change shape through the input the lyricists provide, but, often, it is the lyrics that have to undergo several changes, until they please the composer's vision. Once the score is fixed, the director is certainly not allowed to mess with it, as many star directors were allowed to do with musical scores on Broadway. Lloyd Webber's own words, describing his collaboration with director Trevor Nunn in *Aspects of Love* (1989), are revealing:

The composer must dictate the evening because you are, in the end, the dramatist. It's marvelous if you've got a director like Trevor Nunn to argue with at a later stage, but Trevor has changed practically nothing; he's accepted completely the idea of a musical structure you don't tamper with.
(qtd. in Snelson 207)

For Lloyd Webber "structure is everything" (qtd. in Snelson 26), and what is crucial to examine is the kind of structure he presents us with in his musicals. *Aspects of Love* is a very good example to start with, because it represents the composer's ideal of a fully musicalized theatre in its most elaborate and extravagant form. Lloyd Webber's adaptation of David Garnett's little novella into an epic saga of soap-

operatic passion, illicit sex and betrayal, includes sixteen main numbers, which are fully developed strophic songs, many of them in the composer's familiar and favorite bombastic, pop-operatic mode ("Love Changes Everything," "Seeing Is Believing," "There Is More to Love," "Anything but Lonely"). These are the building blocks of the score and the show, reserved for the presentation of each character's philosophy on love and sex, the celebration of moments of sexual ecstasy and the declarations of life-long devotion (only to be contradicted minutes later). Fragments of these melodies are recycled continuously throughout the score for the musicalization of almost every line of dialogue.⁴⁹ In addition to these melodies, there are numerous smaller motifs, melodic hooks that never materialize into full song-format, but are also recycled and serve the same purpose. As Snelson points out, the aim of this "patchwork of motives" is to "create an emotional atmosphere," "to convey the flow of the emotional subtext" rather than communicate any particular meaning (202).

Critics were once again puzzled:

We hear "Love Changes Everything" – a repetitive insistent tune – endlessly. At first I tried to clock its recurrences: After the initial hearing at 8:08 it reappeared at 8:25, then at 8:37. But 8:20 we had heard the second take-home tune, "Seeing Is Believing," which was reprised by 8:30. I wish the "C" Train came this often. (qtd. in Citron 364)

For Citron, "[w]hat Lloyd-Webber seems to misunderstand in his through-sung musicals is ... what recitative is. It is not sections of a song. He must not saturate us with these melodies coming over and over" (362). It is true that Lloyd Webber has

⁴⁹ This is not the traditional technique of repetition known as reprise (repetition of musical parts, which obeys a dramatic logic), but is rather reminiscent of what musicologists call *contrafactum*: "This term refers to a piece of vocal music whose text has been replaced by an entirely new one, often totally unrelated to the original" (Citron 360).

little appreciation of recitative, the musically enhanced, and rather awkward, intoned speech, used for character and narrative exposition in opera. He may use it sporadically, just to add an operatic touch in works, but it never becomes one of his main structural devices. However, this seems to be a very conscious rejection of recitative rather than a misunderstanding of its use. The opposition between recitative and aria or ensemble parts in opera, in other words, the opposition between musicalized speech and proper vocal music, exists in order to distinguish the prosaic, the ordinary, the mundane from the emotional, the extraordinary, the extravagant. In Lloyd Webber's musicals the prosaic, the ordinary, the mundane is an absent category. His musicals proceed "from orgasm to orgasm," they "guarantee ... crescendo after crescendo ... Lloyd Webber treats his customers as if their enjoyment meant more to him than anything" (qtd. in Citron 189-91). For this reason, there is no moment in his musicals that does not deserve his big melodies, either in full or fragmented form. This "up-front," "blatant presentation of the musical material" manages to be sweeping and disarming; it is "exactly what it purports to be" (Snelson 122). Moreover, it serves the composer's dramatic purposes very well.

Lloyd Webber's "patchwork" motivic technique proves very useful in establishing the tempo of the evening: "The effect of these running motives is to put the action into a time frame, active and forward-moving" (203). By weaving together in a very intricate manner his hooks, he constructs a flying-carpet of a score, restless, unstoppable and kaleidoscopic. The music seems to run through the action almost like a camera; and if we take into consideration that the dramatic action is broken down into minute scenes – sequences, or even shots, would be the most appropriate terms here – then we may talk about a cinematic experience. It is not surprising, then, that

Steven Spielberg advised Lloyd Webber “to forget about Broadway and take the show straight to film” (Walsh 257). He was probably right as Nunn had to incorporate thirty-nine set changes (averagely one set change every three and a half minutes) in order to keep up with the restless pace of the musical/ dramatic text. A cinematically conceived stage design, what is known as set choreography, has now become standard in Lloyd Webber’s musicals, but even this kind of cinematic stage design seems to be too slow for the composer. Thus, in his latest musical, *The Woman in White* (2004), an adaptation of Wilkie Collins’ Victorian page-turner, he combines digital film technology with theatre, by employing almost entirely computer generated backdrops swirling round the stage and offering in fast-forward motion an anthology of Victorian gothic iconography: mansions, mental asylums, graveyards and London’s most Dickensian streets alternate with dizzying speed (quite predictably, nausea was the usual complaint by the critics).

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, this marriage of theatre and cinema is something familiar in the history of twentieth-century musical theatre. The Broadway musical had, quite early in its evolution, absorbed the technique of montage both in its dramatic structure and its staging and this exploration of cinematic editing on the musical stage is what provides the contemporary musical with its distinctive identity and distinguishes it from previous modes of musical theatre, like opera and operetta. In fact, the rise of the director as a powerful creative force in musical theatre is coterminous with the revolutionization of stage editing. In the 1930s, George Abbot, a director with an acute sense of stage editing, made speed and tight structure the rules of musical staging. “No scene could be too brief for him;” and his devotion to sweeping action and movement “led to the constant scene changes

that so affected the look and rhythm of musicals during his heyday” (Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* 87). With his cinematic rhythm and editing, “Abbot enlarged the physical scope of musicals” and established “the energetic, glossy, smooth flow of show making we identify with musicals” (87). Moreover, the 1930s musicals introduced the artistically ambitious choreography that gradually enabled the rise of the choreographer-director in the 1940s with Agnes de Mille. The tradition of the choreographer-director, which gained prominence in the 1950s and dominated the stage in the 1960s and 1970s, raised stage montage to another level.

Gower Champion, for example, “liked scripts to zip from one number to the next. He liked songs to be staged, not just sung. And he liked vocals not to cap a scene on a blackout but to take us from one scene to the next, the view changing as we watch” (Mordden, *Open a New Window* 4). As for Michael Bennett, one of the most cinematic of musical theatre directors, he liked his musicals “to move like lightning” (*The Happiest Corpse* 106). He “knew that a well-paced musical navigates through book scenes to get to songs - but, also, that a brilliantly paced musical navigates through movement” (106). This does not necessarily mean excessive use of dance, but making the show itself dancing, transforming it into a piece of “kinetic art.” “entrances, exits, crowds changing shape, the sudden appearance of new design elements and the way they vanish, the narration of lighting” (106-7). Such techniques lead necessarily to rapid expositions and to a general submersion of the prose as well as its frequent incorporation within the numbers, which now become extended sequences alternating between song, snatches of dialogue, choreographed movement and proper choreography. Thus, the opposition between prose and musical numbers gradually disappears and the musical becomes a total audio-visual experience,

offering a new kind of affective plenitude through the exploration of color, texture, rhythm and movement. This is also the point when the musical becomes a truly orgasmic theatrical form, emphasizing the dramatic present and the phenomenological presence of each dramatic moment, vibrating with audio-visual intensities. By constructing an overall pattern of sound, color and movement and achieving constant and rapid shifts of perspective even within each individual number, the musical gradually aims at the cataclysmic montage we find in video.

What Lloyd Webber tried to achieve in the area of musical composition is what the choreographer-directors achieved in the area of musical staging. Far from being a relapse to an older form of musical theatre, like opera or operetta, his fully musicalized theatre has both absorbed and advanced the Broadway musical's revolutionization of stage editing. What has been criticized as patchwork motivic technique is actually an intricate musical montage, weaving and dissolving into each other his musical fragments, his ear-catching refrains, in order to create a continuous sense of movement as well as a euphoric sense of perpetual emotional high. His desire to eliminate prose is actually a desire to eliminate the prosaic: by unraveling in rapid succession a collection of brief but big aural images, that correspond to equally brief but big dramatic moments, he presents us with his ideal of a musical theatre, in which every individual moment realizes its full affective potential. In *Aspects of Love*, the extreme fragmentation of the score, the break-up of the main melodies into their constituent parts and their restless recycling is a means of framing every episode – as well as every seemingly insignificant moment in each episode - in this saga of love, sex and betrayal, and so revealing and highlighting its full emotional significance: the musical opens in 1961 with Alex, at the railway station at Pau, accompanied by

Giulietta, the woman he finally ends up with, wondering how love has changed his life; flashback in 1947, as a younger Alex watches Rose, the love of his life, playing Hilda in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* in a small theatre in Montpellier; cut to a nervous, shy Alex meeting Rose backstage; cut to Alex and Rose flirting in a small café in Montpellier and deciding to leave for Alex's villa in the Pyrenees; cut to Alex waiting for Rose at the railway station, afraid she may not appear; cut to Alex and Rose in the train compartment celebrating their love and changing their lives forever – and all these in less than twenty minutes!⁵⁰ Such restless cinematic action demands a cinematic staging, and this is the reason why in Lloyd Webber's musicals computer-generated set changes are employed in order to create an ever-changing and shape-shifting stage area that not only revolves, but also splits, rises or sinks from sight in order to keep up with the momentum of the dramatic action and the musical score.

In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, both the source on which the musical was based, the Gospels, and the format in which it was first presented, the rock album format, served Lloyd Webber very well in developing his cinematic compositional techniques, albeit in an embryonic and rather primitive form. The Gospels give us “a series of vignettes, a collection of self-contained episodes built one on top of another;”⁵¹ and this fragmented, episodic structure is augmented by the rock album format, which presents us with a series of individual songs, of an average duration of three to five minutes. Although some longer and very interesting multisectional structures, like “The Last Supper,” are included, in general, each song is devoted to the representation of a

⁵⁰ For a close analysis of the musical structure in these scenes, see Snelson 200-7.

⁵¹ See Mark Goodacre, “Do You Think You're What They Say You Are?: Reflections on *Jesus Christ Superstar*,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 3.2. (1999) 25 November 2006 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/jesuscss2.htm>>.

different episode from the Gospels or to the presentation of a character's attitude towards Jesus. This structure is very compact and concise and creates immediately a musical montage, which is, nevertheless, too abrupt. What is missing is the more intricate and delicate musical editing of later shows, in which big aural images merge and gracefully dissolve into each other creating a delirious, total musical flow. Still, the album format proved very helpful in challenging Lloyd Webber to perfect his song-writing ability. The melodic directness, expansiveness and richness could only be described, without exaggeration, as spectacular. It almost seems that he is trying to create the absolute blockbuster album. Every single song, apart from the more dissonant and dramatic parts, is conceived as a mega-hit – and we must bear in mind that this is a double album. His extreme melodic confidence (or rather cockiness?) becomes really irritating, when in “The Last Supper” he throws off a brief melodic hook, “Jaded Mandarin,” a very catchy rock refrain, as a linking passage and never develops it or mentions it again.

These melodies combined with Rice's culturally relevant and attention-grabbing lyrics led to the album's phenomenal success as a record. By May 1971, the album “grossed \$ 35 million” (Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 244) and was well on the way to becoming “the biggest-selling British album in history” (240). The show business newspaper, *Variety*, “king of entertainment publications,” described the phenomenon “as the ‘biggest all-media parlay in show business history’” (225). Plans for a Broadway stage version and a Hollywood film version were on their way, when unauthorized, pirate concert versions of the album spread throughout the States. Thus, even before the opening of a Broadway production, an official, touring rock-concert version of the record was set up, in order to beat the competition, and became “a

mammoth success” (247). Rice describes the concert presentation as “simple in the extreme. There was no set, no formal costumes (although Jesus wore a kaftan and most of the cast’s everyday hippie-look matched the story satisfactorily), and precious little acting or direction” (246). For the lyricist, *Jesus Christ Superstar* “is seen at its best in a rock setting, preferably a stadium, with the full paraphernalia of a rock event, from noise to joints to bewildering lightning and over-the-top effects, much of which was in its infancy in 1971” (246). After all, the whole *Superstar* project started as a phenomenally successful rock album, so the rock arenas seem to be its natural habitat. Could this quintessentially rock phenomenon achieve a cultural crossover and conquer the theatrical stage as well?

The direction of the 1971 Broadway production was assigned to Tom O’ Horgan.⁵² This seemed to be a wise choice, since he was the man responsible for the hippie invasion on Broadway with *Hair* (1968), the prototypical countercultural musical. Subtitled “The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical,” *Hair* was the “show that gave expression to hippie values, voice to hippie feelings, and stage life to hippie activities” (Horn 1). The musical was conceived by co-lyricist Gerome Ragni in a workshop of the Open Theatre, the experimental group responsible, among other performances, for Megan Terry’s provocative performance art piece, *Viet Rock* (1966), with which *Hair* shares many similarities. It was first presented in an Off-Broadway venue, Joseph Papp’s Public Theatre,⁵³ before moving for a brief engagement at the discotheque Cheetah and finally landing on Broadway’s Biltmore Theatre for five years and 1,750 performances. More a ritualistic presentation of the hippie lifestyle

⁵² It was originally assigned to Frank Corsaro, who was eventually replaced by O’ Horgan.

⁵³ The Off-Broadway and aesthetically more conservative production was directed by Gerald Freedman. O’ Horgan directed the Broadway version.

than a conventional musical play, *Hair* has a vague storyline revolving around Claude, a young hippie, who gets drafted and is finally killed in the Vietnam war, and his emotional, moral and political vacillation over the issue of the draft. The show opens with two members of the “tribe” cutting a strand of Claude’s long hair and offering it ceremoniously to the fire, “an act that symbolically foreshadows his sacrifice to the establishment” (67), and closes with a cropped-haired Claude dressed in army clothes lying dead across the stage. In the meantime, the tribe’s main philosophy and attitudes are presented in a series of numbers: celebration of any kind of sexual deviation in “Sodomy,” rhapsodic affirmation of drug-use in “Hashish” and “Walking in Space,” sardonic castigation of racial stereotyping in “Colored Spade,” demand for “world-peace now” in “I Believe in Love,” cultivation of a mystical relation to the world in “Hare Krishna” and “Good Morning Starshine,” and anticipation of a new humanistic and hedonistic epoch of harmony, sensual plenitude and understanding in “Aquarius,” a song that became the signature anthem of the 1960s. The Broadway establishment was shocked by *Hair*. It was shocked by the show’s violent assault on middle class morality and propriety (especially by the display of full frontal male and female nudity in the infamous Be-In sequence). It was shocked by the unorthodox for Broadway standards score, which included the pop/rock sound that was popular at the time on U.S. radio. It was also shocked by O’Horgan’s direction.

Heralded by *Cue* magazine as the “high priest of off-Broadway” (qtd. in Horn 40), O’Horgan was highly acclaimed for his direction of many productions at Cafe LaMama. He was also a man on a mission: “[h]e was convinced that Broadway and its audiences needed to be revitalized by a powerful dose of experimental

theatrics” (Horn 40). As he explains in the Biltmore souvenir program, “I took this assignment because I feel *Hair* is an assault on the theatrical dead area: Broadway. It’s almost an effort to give Broadway mouth-to-mouth resuscitation” (qtd. in Horn 40). O’Horgan’s directorial vocabulary was postdramatic and heavily influenced by the theories of the French theatre director, Antonin Artaud, whose writings on the nature of theatrical representation were a powerful source of inspiration for the New York avant-garde scene of the late 1960s. Influenced by Balinese trance drama, Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” was aspiring to be a living nightmare, a “contagious delirium ... embodied in hallucinatory images that were communicated through physical action” (Innes, “Modernism in Drama” 144-5). Its aim was to lead to a cultural, spiritual and emotional rejuvenation through the release of all the “cruel” unconscious instincts, which inform the symbolic material of primordial myths, but are repressed by the veneer of a hypocritical civilization and its superficial aesthetic products. In order to “shake the organism to its foundations and leave an ineffaceable scar” (Artaud 77), his paroxysmic kind of theatre is totally “unafraid of going as far as necessary in the exploration of our nervous sensibility” (87). It “spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators” (86) and “physically envelop[s] ... and immers[s] [them] in a constant bath of light, images, movements, and noises” (125). With Artaud, theatre becomes a total experience, eliminating the barriers not only between stage and auditorium, but also between reality and representation, art and life.

The Artaudean influence was written all over the directorial approach to *Hair*’s staging. The tribal, ritualistic atmosphere that informs the piece as a whole is a direct reference to Artaud’s endeavor to rediscover theatre’s holy roots. To facilitate

his audience's more direct, physical participation in the ritual, O' Horgan shattered the illusion of fourth-wall reality and extended the performance area throughout the theatre, establishing a "dangerous" proximity between performers and spectators: "The tribe entered back and forth through the audience, running and tumbling in the aisles, stepping on the backs of seats between the patrons in the orchestra, leaping on and off the stage, singing in the aisles, and swinging over the audience's heads on ropes" (Horn 51). To achieve the magical derealization of reality, to which a truly Artaudian *mise en scène* aspires, he reconceived the whole show in more surrealist cinematic terms, employing a discontinuous editing between the numbers that created the sense of a dreamlike connection, "wherein sequences intertwined, overlapped, and flashed backward and forward" (82). Light design abandoned any attempt at realism and was totally liberated in order to enhance the dreamlike (or rather drug-like) atmosphere:

Color, shade, and intensity were based on the tempo and temper of the music and the emotions that occurred within the framework of the script. The LSD stroboscopic sequence was a psychedelic light show, timed to over 108 lighting cues. Prior to computerized boards, it required three technicians frantically working the levers with their hands, elbows, knees, and even feet. (62)

Moreover, sound amplification broke the appropriate decibel level and tore the theatre apart, creating a rock concert atmosphere and communicating directly the aggressive, pulsating rock rhythms of the score. Finally, equally unorthodox was O' Horgan's approach to character portrayal and acting: "[a]ctors were asked not to pretend to be characters in the play so much as to present the essence of their roles while not losing

sight of their personal identities” (53). O’ Horgan wanted his young cast – most of them hippies – to communicate directly, through their entire physical and emotional being, their anger and dreams to the mostly young audience. His tactic led to the emotional overdrive of the finale, when Claude’s death becomes an opportunity for a manic, violent, desperate celebration of life, as cast and audience cry in unison “Let the Sunshine In.”

On the eve of the opening of *Jesus Christ Superstar* on Broadway, O’ Horgan told the press:

Traditional theatre pretends that something real is happening on stage ...

We’re saying there’s a ritual to be performed and we’re doing it. It’s easy to do traditional theatre and the reaction you get is in the same proportion.

This is meant to involve the audience with the magical passage of ideas and feelings on stage. I don’t think anyone will come out feeling neutral about this. (qtd. in Richmond 29)

And nobody did. The critics were divided. Most of them hated the show, while some of them raved about it: “A shattering theatrical experience, unlike any other I can recall,” wrote Douglas Watt in *The New York Daily News* (qtd. in Walsh 76). Many elements from O’ Horgan’s well-known, by now, directorial vocabulary were repeated: hallucinatory *mise en scène*, painterly light design, heavy amplification and use of physical, exploratory, improvisatory experience as the basis of character portrayal.⁵⁴ There was still the quintessentially 1960s intention to provoke and shock both the senses and sensibilities through overt sexual perversion, decadence, vulgarity

⁵⁴ During the rehearsals “[i]n order to get the cast to ‘bond with Jesus,’ he poured honey all over Jeff Fenholt [the actor playing Jesus] and encouraged other cast members to lick it off” (Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 253).

and blasphemy. What was new this time was a disturbing marriage of O' Horgan's rather sensationalist interpretation of Artaudean cruelty with epic grandeur, theatrical gigantism and extravagant opulence. The performance could be best described as a combination of Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epics, Radio City spectaculars, Folies Bergère and the "shock rock"/ "transvestite rock"/ "psychiatry rock" shows of Alice Cooper.

In the opening of the show, Jesus appears on stage in the most phallic of ways, rising from the depths like a glittering crocus out of a silver chalice and, in the end of the show, he departs crucified on a Daliesque golden triangle that is slowly projected towards the audience. In the meantime, the high priests enter suspended from a framework of dinosaur bones, Roman soldiers appear in armors obviously designed to facilitate instant sodomy, merchants sell what appear to be mummified babies, a vast plastic box of stars hovers above Jesus in "Gethsemane," King Herod steals the show as a grotesque drag queen, Judas, swinging from a hangman's noose, leaves the stage by being pulled forty feet up into the wings and Pilate spreads terror by inflicting the thirty-nine lashes wearing a disgusting mask with a great protruding tongue. For the title number, Judas is brought back from the dead in silver jockey shorts on a trapeze, while Jesus rises twenty feet above the stage floor on an elevator hidden by his \$20,000 golden robe, which cascades in gleaming folds beneath him and slowly covers the entire playing area. On top of it all, O' Horgan's original idea about the crucifixion was to present a vinyl-clad, hip Christ crucified on the handle bars of a Harley-Davidson!⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For a detailed presentation of O' Horgan's production, see Bill Bender and Timothy Foote, "The Gold Rush to Golgotha," *Time* 25 November 2006 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,877335-1,00.html>>. Also see, Stephen Citron, *Sondheim & Lloyd-Webber: The New Musical* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 188-92 and Mordden's *One More Kiss: The Broadway Musical in the 1970s* 16-7.

O' Horgan demanded "total creative control over all aspects of the production, including casting, sets, lighting, and costumes" (Walsh 75). Moreover, the Broadway production "would have to carry the following credit: 'CONCEIVED FOR THE STAGE AND DIRECTED BY TOM O' HORGAN,' which was to be used whenever the authors were credited and in the same size type as the authors' credit" (75). His demand was reasonable. O' Horgan's direction was an authorship: he took a rock album, a circle of songs suggesting an episodic narrative, an abstract musical text with no stage directions, and transformed it into a coherent thematic and visual statement. His extreme visual approach was thematically and ideologically consistent. If Rice was ambivalent about the divinity of Jesus, O' Horgan was not. His universe lacked spiritual depth; it was post-metaphysical and nihilistic. He portrayed Jesus as a contemporary mass idol, a phenomenal hit, a mass media showstopper, glorified, deified and crucified by people desperate but unable to transcend their superficial material existence. Beneath the suffocating Las Vegas glitz and kitsch, there was nothing to be found, no secret, no hidden, absolute truth; only ugliness, grotesqueness, vulgarity and brutality. What was really disturbing and shocking was not the obvious blasphemy and the self-conscious aesthetic cacophony, but the nonchalant affirmation and celebration of nihilism. The whole tone was not solemn and moody but rather joyous and exuberant: a manic affirmation of spiritual and aesthetic decadence; a ritualistic celebration of superficiality and gloss to the point that it becomes abject, disgusting, gross. In this way, the Broadway production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* is the opposite of *Hair*. If *Hair* castigates contemporary society anticipating a utopian future, predicting "the dawning of the Age of Aquarius," *Jesus Christ Superstar* sarcastically welcomes the end of utopia itself.

Lloyd Webber hated everything about the show and could do nothing about it, because back in those days he was not yet a star and, even more importantly, not yet the producer of his own musicals. His impotence made him almost hysterical: “the production was the worst disaster of all time, and he would fight it to the death; if it came to London he would personally denounce it in the press” (Walsh 78).

Thankfully, O’ Horgan’s production did not come to London, so the backstage drama was avoided. The West End stripped-down version, which opened in 1972, was directed by Jim Sharman and was less provocative and more “dignified.” It avoided O’ Horgan’s stylistic cacophony, audio-visual excess and deliberate blasphemy in order to offer a more balanced presentation of a contemporary Jesus in a minimalist stage environment. Moreover, it proved immensely successful with tourist audiences and played for eight years at the Palace Theatre (as opposed to the less than two years of the Broadway production). Contrary to Lloyd Webber, Rice has always been more ambivalent about O’ Horgan’s staging. In his autobiography, he writes:

Looking back, I feel that Tom O’ Horgan’s *Superstar* might have got rather a bad deal. Every time I recall an aspect of his extravaganza these days, it seems strange that I had reservations about it at the time – but I did. I guess I was almost as resistant to innovation as the Broadway regulars.

Impossible to bring about, but I would love to see an exact replica of his production today, with all the technical advances in sound and sets available. It was beyond doubt ahead of its time, both in its conceit and its actual staging. (*Oh, What a Circus* 266)

Even more significantly, Rice goes on to recognize O' Horgan's contribution to the development of contemporary musicals, in contrast to most musical theatre historians, who prefer to forget all about him:

Though O' Horgan never again directed a show that made any great impact, through *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* alone he is entitled to be considered an important figure of the twentieth-century musical. These two shows were nothing if not mould-breakers and began the process of dragging Broadway into a new area of music. (266)

Not only a new area of music, but also a new area of staging. O' Horgan was one of the first concept-musical directors, a new breed of musical-theatre-director-as-*auteur* that gains prominence in the 1970s. Concept musicals are the ones which are not simply written or conventionally staged but are visually conceived, i.e. they are structured around a visually unique and often thematically explanatory staging plan (Mordden, *Rodgers and Hammerstein* 95). Concept musicals are largely associated with more abstract, unrealistic, non-representational staging, as the director has to liberate himself/ herself from the confines of realistic representation in order to explore the visual dynamics of the stage.⁵⁶ This kind of musical recognizes the authorship of the director and many times presupposes that the director works closely with the composer, the lyricist and the book writer in the composition of the piece. Frequently, the idea for a show may come from the director himself/ herself, who chooses/ hires the collaborators that would bring his/ her own concept into life. Although the concept-musical director is often a choreographer-director (like Bennett), this is not exclusively the case. O' Horgan, for example, was not a

⁵⁶ The first concept musical is largely considered to be Rodgers and Hammerstein's ambitious flop *Allegro* (1947), which was analyzed in the previous chapter.

choreographer. He did not, also, work with Lloyd Webber and Rice in the composition of the piece. However, as we have seen, he conceived the album visually as the intersection of a post-hippie, decadent rock show, a glamorous revue and a Hollywood epic; and his visual interpretation was consistent with an ideological one: an oncoming dystopia was expressed in a combination of epic grandeur with glitzy decadence, which permeates every aspect of his staging. A similar conceptual method informed his directorial approach to *Hair* as well. His conception of the show as a hippie ritual transformed *Hair* into a unique theatrical experience and made O' Horgan one of the first concept-musical directors.

Moreover, O' Horgan seems to have understood in depth the unique demands that a Lloyd Webber score poses and, especially, the composer's "orgasmic" method of composition, his musical montage, his obsessive focus on the individual dramatic moment. To Lloyd Webber's restless parade of potential mega-hits, the director proposes a restless parade of stunning visuals. Every musical number is conceived as a unique stage picture, which is, nevertheless, illustrative of the overall staging and thematic concept. O' Horgan's avant-gardist dislike of fourth wall realism enables him to explore the visual dynamics of the stage and enhance the visual potential of his stage pictures, by employing stage design in an abstract and architectural manner and light design in a painterly way. Moreover, his Artaudean aspirations serve very well Lloyd Webber's musical montage, since Artaud was one of the most cinematic theatre directors. He had worked in cinema and "[i]n 1928 ... declared that his theatrical ideas could only be realized through cinema" (Innes, "Modernism in Drama" 144). The Artaudean theatre is a hyper-kinetic one, aiming towards a total flow of images, a cataclysmic visual montage, that serves very well Lloyd Webber's musical montage,

which, in later musicals, tends to emulate rapid video rather than cinematic editing. Actually, the conceptual mode of directing proves to be ideal for Lloyd Webber's musicals and the genre of megamusical in general; and it is often more suitable than the aesthetic of cinematic realism, that some of Lloyd Webber's later musicals, like *Aspects of Love*, exhibit. Abstract and imagistic staging, continuous movement and everchanging flows of light are going to be the necessary ingredients for the gradually more and more sophisticated visuals one expects from the megamusicals of the next decades. Of course, this kind of staging presupposes the creative liberty of the director, which is not freely granted by such a controlling, dictatorial, one might say, composer and producer as Lloyd Webber. His best and most successful shows will be those in which he releases control and puts his trust in the talents of an imaginative director.

One of these directors is Harold Prince, probably the most conceptual of all musical-theatre directors. Prince is not a choreographer-director. Actually, he did not start his career as director but as a producer, and a very successful one. His impressive catalogue included such instant classics as *West Side Story* (1957) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). He achieved his first triumph as a director in 1966 with *Cabaret*, one of the most influential musicals in the history of the genre. Prince has always been "a politically minded director" (Jones 241), and so he saw *Cabaret's* depiction of the spiritual decline of Weimar Germany and the rise of Nazism as a political parable, commenting on contemporary American reality. Prince believed that his country exhibited the same potential with Nazi Germany for fascism and racism. Such potential was manifested evidently in the "often brutal and violent opposition to civil rights activists," especially in the South, where "white supremacist groups, aided or

ignored by state and local authorities, roadblocked civil rights efforts in education, public access, and voting rights” (241). In one of his early approaches to *Cabaret*, he went so far in drawing the parallels with contemporary America that he thought of ending the show “with film of the march on Selma and the Little Rock riots” (Prince qtd. in Jones 242). Finally, he chose a more subtle, less sensational but also more effective approach than this. What the audience saw in the beginning of the show was themselves grotesquely reflected and amplified in a huge trapezoid mirror. The mirror returned in the end, reflecting them once again and underlying the main message: what you saw during the musical can and will happen in America. What Prince wanted to stress with *Cabaret* was “the importance of maintaining social and political awareness” (Jones 244). The characters, and especially Sally Bowles, the eternal wannabe with questionable talent, are so absorbed in their petty ambitions, their egotism and are so protected by their cherished illusions that they fail to notice History menacing beside them. When they do, it is too late. In a climactic moment in the play, Cliff screams to Sally: “Sally – wake up! The party in Berlin is *over!* It was lots of fun, but it’s over. And what is Berlin doing *now?* Vomiting in the street” (Masteroff 100).

The problem that Prince had to face in the staging of *Cabaret* was how to present on stage the complex intersection between the personal and the political, the individual microcosm and the social macrocosm. He solved the problem when he came up with the basic visual concept for the musical: the stage of the Kit Kat Klub, the cabaret of the title. This was an area in limbo, occupied by the androgynous, funny, grotesque, sleazy, devilish Master of Ceremonies. He was not a character in the show’s narrative but rather the audience’s representative on stage, a sardonic

commentator of the events represented in the show's narrative. He addressed the audience directly, as the MC in an authentic Berlin cabaret did, in order to alienate the hidden social significance of the characters' actions, strip them of their emotional content and make them the object of critique and ridicule. Moreover, his numbers were sequenced "in an ascending curve energetically and descending curve morally" (Prince qtd. in Ilson 140) in order to present the changes in the German psyche, from the inflation-gutted pre-Nazi Berlin to the rise of National Socialism. Many critics, especially as Prince became more and more respected for his directing work, compared his directorial techniques to those of Brecht (144). In *Cabaret* a general Brechtian atmosphere can be detected in the alienating significance of the MC's numbers, the references to the Berlin cabaret scene, which also influenced Brecht in the formation of his theatrical theories, the score, that alludes to Kurt Weill, Brecht's close early collaborator, and the presence of Lotte Lenya, Weill's widow, in the cast. However, the effect that Prince achieves in *Cabaret* is more reminiscent of Sergei Eisenstein than Brecht. The MC's numbers, which interrupt the linear progression of events in order to place them in a historical context, is the theatrical equivalent of Eisenstein's dialectical montage: a type of editing that manages to include the sociohistorical panorama within individual drama. The historical perspective is not presented directly through the *gestus* of the character's actions but through a parallel editing between their actions and the sociohistorical commentary on them.

Cabaret was a strange and bizarre show by Broadway's standards. Still, it balanced very carefully the traditional Broadway razzle-dazzle and the political awareness of the 1960s, convention and innovation, emotional identification and

alienation, and so proved Prince's credentials both as a showman and an *auteur*. The artistic and commercial success of *Cabaret* gave Prince immediate recognition as a director and initiated a string of radical shows throughout the 1970s that changed forever what is considered to be the direction of a Broadway musical: *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976) and *Sweeney Todd* (1979) – all of them collaborations with Sondheim. Self-reflective, dark and increasingly idiosyncratic and solipsistic, most of these musicals were not big commercial successes, but proved influential for a whole generation of directors. However, Prince was also a producer, and although he admired the idealistic Sondheim, he also welcomed the chance to apply his rich directorial vocabulary to the work of a more extroverted and commercially-oriented composer like Lloyd Webber. Thus, he was interested in directing *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but missed his chance because his message was passed on a little too late to the composer. Lloyd Webber also wanted to work with Prince. His name offered Broadway prestige, while his talent promised ground-breaking staging. Both men got their chance to work together in the staging of the next Lloyd Webber-Rice project, *Evita*.⁵⁷

3.3. Counterculture and the Culture of Narcissism: From Jesus to Madonna

Like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Evita* was first released as a double album in 1976. This time England and Europe succumbed first. The album's first single, "Don't Cry for Me Argentina," topped the British charts and became a massive hit all over

⁵⁷ In 1975, between *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*, Lloyd Webber opened in London a conventional musical comedy *Jeeves*, with book and lyrics by Alan Ayckbourn. The show was an embarrassing critical and commercial failure and closed after a few performances, without moving, of course, to Broadway. New York audiences saw a reworked version of the show, which was retitled *By Jeeves*, in 2001.

Europe. Apart from the identical promotional strategies employed, *Evita* shares many structural similarities with *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a work. For one thing, they both tell the story of a charismatic yet controversial individual, adored and deified by the masses, who died at the age of thirty-three. Musically, both works are more or less structured along the same lines. Like its predecessor, *Evita* mixes contemporary pop and rock with the astringent sound of early modernist classics and the catchiness of the hit parade with the epic grandeur of the symphonic orchestra. In “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina,” it also finds its big-belt ballad, which at the same time exhibits classical influences: the melodic approach of its verse structure and the accompaniment are based on J. S. Bach’s Prelude in C major as well as Gounod’s adaptation as a setting of the Ave Maria.⁵⁸ What is new to the score this time is the distinctive use of Latin rhythms, which communicate directly the local color and flavor of the story, but do not dominate the overall sound. Moreover, *Evita* is also written in an episodic, fragmented form, raising the cinematic montage to its basic structural narrative device. Prince accurately described the work as a documentary revue, a collection of incidents and highlights (Ilson 266), as every number presents a different key incident of Eva Peron’s life story. However, in spite of its similarities to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Evita* is both musically and dramatically a more mature work.

As far as its music is concerned, it presents us with a more unified score than *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a score that exhibits a greater stylistic integrity. What unifies it is a more penetrating use of dissonance and melodic angularity (especially in the use of tritones), which undermines the sentimental lyricism and hints, as *The Sunday Times* drama critic, John Peter, notes, at something “sinister” and “inhuman” at the

⁵⁸ For a musicological analysis of the song’s musical structure see Snelson 174-5.

heart of this work (qtd. in Walsh 105). Moreover, it is obvious that this time both Lloyd Webber and Rice write with the theatre on their mind. One of the usual criticisms that *Evita* received when it opened on Broadway is that Prince worked miracles with mediocre and ordinary material. The truth is that most of Prince's directorial choices are suggested in the original album. For example, the sense of continuous, restless movement that made *Evita* on stage an overwhelming experience is already part of the score. Lloyd Webber and Rice employ rapid editing not only between the numbers but within many individual numbers, like "Goodnight and Thank You," which uses the economy and conciseness of the pop song format in order to cover many years of Eva's life. It presents the heroine whoring her way to the top, becoming a major radio star and "aiming to hitch her wagon to even higher things- the military political leadership" (Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 357). As Rice points out, "[i]t took Evita quite a few years to make her mark in the big city, but we rushed through this in three and a half minutes" (357). Many other numbers have the exact same effect: "A New Argentina" portrays the Perons manipulating the unions and gradually taking over the country, while the "Rainbow Tour" presents Eva's efforts to seduce Spain, Italy and France.

Lloyd Webber and Rice's sweeping, panoramic method certainly does not enable the understanding of the central heroine. Eva remains a mystery throughout the musical. Apart from her driving ambition and her insatiable narcissism, no other character trait, no other motivation is provided that could help the audience penetrate the psyche of a woman that provoked massive adoration and hatred in equal doses. However, *Evita* does not intend to be a character piece. As Prince sensed from the beginning, this is documentary drama; and as a documentary drama it definitely

delivers. What we get are all the scenes of Eva's massive apotheosis by her *descamisados* (the shirtless people) as well as the hysterical mourning that followed her death, the contempt and the hatred the aristocracy and the military blocks exhibited towards her, her communicative power and her ability to manipulate thousands of people, the process of her sanctification by the children, her transformation into a Dior-clad, Hollywood-like glam icon and her aestheticization of politics that made her a populist crypto-fascist. What is underplayed is her campaigning for women's right to vote and for the legalization of divorce and the opening up of a thousand new schools, medical centers, clinics, homes for the aged and shelters for the homeless, that earned her the title "the Lady of Hope." Nevertheless, Lloyd Webber and Rice never attempted to provide a balanced assessment of Peronist politics. Their point of view was openly an anti-Peronist one. Rice was clear from the start: "I know she's a bitch," he said to Lloyd Webber, "but let's make her a wonderful bitch" (qtd. in Richmond 49). Hence, they conceived Eva as a *femme fatale* of epic proportions, a seductive but lethal woman who devours a whole nation and leads it to spiritual and economic bankruptcy in order to satisfy her megalomaniac ambition.

Prince was impressed by the epic scope of the work: "You fellows deal in size and I admire that" (Prince qtd. in Rice 386), wrote the experienced director to the young composer and lyricist. Moreover, he was immediately attracted to the project because its central theme, the aestheticization of politics and its relation to fascism, seemed relevant to his own age. For him, the musical is "less about Eva Peron than about the media – what people see on a screen or hear on the radio – We're living in a horribly media-oriented era;" thus, he saw *Evita* as a parable warning about "the

perniciousness, the dangers, of media hype, of what packaging and selling can do and how you can sell the public anything if the bands make the right noises and the banners are the right colors and everything's set up well" (Prince qtd. in Ilson 266). However, Prince demanded certain changes, which were crucial but not drastic, and both Lloyd Webber and Rice were happy to oblige. Most of them concerned the role of Che. Che, "a nickname in Argentina roughly equivalent to the English 'mate'" (Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 319), was an Everyman in the album, less a character than an omnipresent ironic commentator, who functioned as Eva's nemesis, trying to strip her of her sentimentality and expose her populism and fascism. Although nowhere in the album is Che billed as Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Rice admits that the Argentinean-born revolutionary was the inspiration for the part. He may have never met Eva but it is probable "that his subsequent career was at least in part influenced by his early life under, and a distaste for, the Peron regime" (319). Prince proposed that on stage Che must be clearly identified with Guevara, complete with beard, beret and fatigues. Moreover, he insisted that his role must be further extended to match the alienating role of the MC in *Cabaret*. He wanted to explore to the maximum the "communist-fascist tension" (Gottfried 58) that these two Argentinean symbols created on stage and structure the whole musical as a war between these two titans.

Prince's directorial concept was clear from the first hearing of the album: "I think the style of the piece should be abrasive – simple – raw is probably a better word. Contemporary Brecht. Bold" (qtd. in Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 388). Instead of Brecht, he finally used the political theatre of Erwin Piscator as his main point of reference and his visual staging plan. After all, for a musical, that he himself

described as a documentary review, Piscator's documentary drama seemed a very appropriate directorial influence. The difference between Piscator and Brecht is a subtle one. In Piscator's words, "Brecht reveals significant details of social life, while I attempt rather to give a view of political affairs in their totality" (qtd. in Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre* 200). Prince wanted to achieve Piscator's "global extension of his stage" (*Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre* 200) in order to provide a panoramic view of history and the representation of an epoch in its totality. The stark and austere tone of the evening was provided by an enormous mobile movie screen on a largely empty stage, constantly modifying the playing area as it sometimes dominated the forestage and sometimes hovered at the back. The aim of the movie screen was to communicate the epic feeling, by augmenting and amplifying the events represented on stage, and also provide historical evidence that strengthened Che's arguments and connected the Peron regime with Hitler's and Mussolini's fascism. Moreover, the film clips strengthened the cinematic effect of the score and often created instantly an Eisensteinian dialectical montage within the individual numbers. A sense of rapid editing was also created through simultaneous and contrasting actions, mainly achieved through the use of abstract, constructivist sets, moving bridges and platforms. The acting was extremely stylized, aiming at robbing the characters of their individuality and transforming them into vividly contrasting symbols – Eva's fascism vs. Che's communism. The use of sound design was ingenious as Eva's voice echoing through the microphones in the political rallies and the roaring responses were hugely amplified, creating the impression of massed thousands and communicating instantly and physically the power of the Perons'

demagoguery (Gottfried, *More Broadway Musicals* 86). In general, Prince succeeded in making “a relatively spare production seem immense” (86).

Prince was praised by the critics for the array of memorable stage pictures he created: each number a different picture, passing before the eye in rapid succession, offering a visual plentitude that could not be easily absorbed and digested. In “Goodnight and Thank You,” the heroine’s “sexually propelled rise to the top, was a revolving door of lovers, with Evita emerging after each encounter in ever more resplendent *deshabille*” (Walsh 105). In “The Art of the Possible,” Peron’s military ascendancy was portrayed as a deadly game of musical chairs: the five members of the G.O.U., the right-wing grouping of officers within the army, that seized power in Argentina in 1943, were moving slowly back and forth in rocking chairs; every time the music stopped, the officers rose and one chair was removed, until, in the end, there was only one chair left, occupied by Peron (Citron 231). For “A New Argentina,” the rousing first act finale, Eva and Peron were seen in their bedroom – a bed on an empty stage – conspiring like snakes to take over their country, with Eva, like Lady Macbeth, encouraging her feeble lover and future husband. Their plans instantly materialized as the empty stage was suddenly filled with dropping banners and with the representatives of the labor unions and the *descamisados* storming in, holding flaming torches and waving flags, while “the political opposition [was] beaten with clubs by jack-booted storm troopers” (233). At the premiere, “members of the audience rose to their feet to applaud the theatricality of the scene, while others remained seated, clearly shaken by the suggestive depiction of Hitler’s Nuremberg rallies presided over by a posturing Peron and a beaming Evita” (233). For the big opening of the second act, Peron’s presidential inauguration, where Eva is

apotheosized, after she delivers her over-emotional oration, “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina,” in the balcony of the Casa Rosada, Prince dressed Eva in a Dior-inspired white evening gown, filled her with diamonds and bathed her in light. This was a big diva entrance, for Kurt Ganzl, “an entrance outshining every leading lady entrance ever made” (qtd. in Rice 415), and one of the most iconic moments in the history of musicals: the infamous, and much parodied, gestures of hands symmetrically aloft is one of the first things everyone remembers, when they think of Eva Peron.

Evita opened first in London in 1978 and moved to New York in 1979. It was an instant smash in both cities. Its success changed the fortunes of all the major participants. With their second big hit, Lloyd Webber and Rice were recognized as major forces in the musical theatre, that could not be easily neglected. Prince was hailed as the most important director in the history of the Broadway musical – for some enthusiastic critics, the Robert Wilson and Peter Stein of musicals. The unknown actresses that played the part on West End and Broadway, Elaine Paige and Patti LuPone respectively, became big stars overnight. In London, where the search for the actress to play Evita became a media frenzy, reminiscent of the search for Scarlett O’ Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, the papers yelled: “DON’T CRY FOR ELAINE. SHE’S AN INSTANT SUPERSTAR” (qtd. in Rice, *Oh, What a Circus* 418); while, in New York, LuPone was hailed as the Ethel Merman of her era. Even Eva Peron benefited from the musical, as she enjoyed a second career after her death, by becoming a world-famous popular icon. Even more importantly, both Lloyd Webber and Prince remained very satisfied by their collaboration. Thus, in the 1980s, they would collaborate once more in order to stage the biggest success in the history

of show-biz, in any medium, the almost \$4 billion grossing, *The Phantom of the Opera*.

In spite of their differences, both O' Horgan's staging of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Prince's staging of *Evita* display an edginess and boldness, which in part derive from the subject matter of those musicals. Actually, both musicals are variations on one basic problematic: the emergence of a new narcissistic culture. *Jesus Christ Superstar* approaches the issue through allusions to the rock stardom of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Given the musical's distinctively rock flavor and the selection of a rock performer for the role of Jesus in the original album, Ian Gillan from Deep Purple, the image of Jesus that one constructs after listening to the album comes very close to that of a 1960s rock star. Such an impression is created not only by Gillan's characteristic hard rock, wild vocal gymnastics, but also by Rice's lyrics. Using deliberately modern streetwise slang, anachronisms and colloquialisms, Rice's lyrics place Jesus in a contemporary media universe, which is obsessed with "Jesusmania" (Rice, *Jesus Christ Superstar* 6) – an allusion to Beatlemania - and driven by a stardom hysteria of metaphysical proportions. In Rice's universe, Jesus is a "hit" (14), he is "cool," "His glamour increases" day by day, "he's top of the poll" (6) and the indisputable "wonder of the year" (14). The crowd scenes are also very effective in communicating the manic, almost devouring, adoration of the masses, which reminds us of the massive apotheosis of "rock gods" in concerts, where fans merge with their idols in a state of delirious ecstasy.

In the cultural context of the late 1960s, the characterization "rock god" is not an exaggeration. John Lennon, who was rumored for a while to be a possible contender for the part of Jesus, had already provoked the outrage of conservative

religious groups, not to mention death threats and the public burning of Beatles records, by asserting that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. This was an era in which rock stars had surpassed in popularity Hollywood celebrities and had become superstars. The word “superstar,” which figures prominently in the title of Lloyd Webber and Rice’s rock opera, was a contemporary term, coined by the notorious pop-artist-cum-celebrity-icon Andy Warhol. It was widely used in order to communicate the unprecedented amount of adoration rock stars provoked and enjoyed. This manic adoration led to a deification, affecting even the way in which rock stars perceived themselves. The characteristic example here is Jim Morrison, the lead singer of The Doors. Morrison chose to live mythically, by viewing his art as a purification ritual and himself as a neo-Romantic hero-poet of Promethean proportions. He invited his audience to “Break on through to the other side,” to go through disorder and chaos so that “the doors of their perception” will be cleansed and they will be able to envision the infinite, the beyond.⁵⁹ The combination of Morrison’s Dionysian acid rock with his poetic, Joycean lyrics - as well as the associated drug use- transformed a Doors’ concert into a ritual, an initiation to a mystery: the worship of the new God, the “Lizard King,” as the star was called by his fans, who delivers his people from the limited way in which they experience reality.

This kind of pop messianism was a common phenomenon in the 1960s. This was an age when radical politics went hand-in-hand with a radical utopianism, overlaid with many metaphysical overtones. People were trying to transcend their material existence and the illusory values of their social being, by revolting against

⁵⁹ Morrison was inspired to name his band The Doors from a line from William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.” For an account of Morrison’s art, see Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 49-57.

the very limitations of the human condition itself and exploring their divinity. One of the key texts, that provided a theoretical foundation for the age's utopianism, was Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Marcuse located the divine origins of the human being in what Freud describes as primary narcissism. This is a primordial state of extreme omnipotence, in which the future ego experiences no differentiation, no division between itself and the world of objects, and exists in a condition of fusional perfection and merging with the surrounding environment. In this state, the pleasure principle reigns supreme as no distinction exists between fantasy and reality and wishes can be automatically fulfilled in an intense, hallucinatory manner.⁶⁰ Based on Freud's theorization of primary narcissism, Marcuse visualized a new psychic organization of the modern subject and a new utopian society, partially realized in many of the practices of the 1960s counterculture. Thus, Marcuse's radical utopianism can be detected in the existential affirmation of the present and the phenomenological immersion in the presence of things through the use of psychedelic drugs; in the Jesus Freaks' immediate and ecstatic communication with the Son of God; in the interest for magical and mystical systems, which, as Freud has shown, belong to the most archaic level of human mentality in the course of anthropological development, the animistic one— a level that corresponds to the narcissistic stage of human mentality in the

⁶⁰ See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) and, particularly, Chapter 8, "The Images of Orpheus and Narcissus" 159-71. See also Joel Whitebook's analysis of Marcuse's thesis in *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge: The MIT P, 1995) 24-41. Apart from Marcuse and Whitebook, the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism presented in this chapter is also informed by Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1980), Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *The Ego Ideal: A Psychoanalytic Essay on the Malady of the Ideal*, trans. Paul Barrows (London: Free Association Books, 1985) and Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) and especially Chapter 6 "The Social-Historical Institution: Individuals and Things" 273-339.

course of individual psychic development;⁶¹ in the ritual connotations of rock music in this period and the tribal characteristics of the rock concert, in which the participants lose their individuality and identify with the totality of the group, conferring on themselves “an omnipotent ego, a colossal body” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 85); and finally in the proliferation of rock gods, the most powerful symbols of the era, these contemporary messiahs, comparable only to Jesus Christ himself, who signal the dawning of a new brave narcissistic age.

In contrast with the other famous rock opera of the period, *Tommy*, which celebrates the narcissistic withdrawal from reality as the path to the deification of the individual, *Jesus Christ Superstar* tries to hold a critical stance towards it. This is achieved mainly through the figure of Judas, who anticipates the role of Che as ironic commentator and alienating force in *Evita*. Judas is literally a rebel without a cause, disoriented and perplexed, definitely a nonconformist but also a rationalist, unable to accept what he perceives as Jesus’ megalomania and the irrationalism of his followers. So he becomes an outcast and a pariah, standing outside the circle of Jesus’ adoring “groupies” and attacking Jesus for his aspirations to God-like status. His passionate attack is actually a warning of the dangers that the megalomaniac affirmation of a grandiose self poses, especially if it takes metaphysical proportions and is proposed as part of revolutionary politics. Instead of dropping out of society and escaping into transcendental self-glorifying chimeras, Judas proposes a concentration on practical everyday political problems and active intervention. In this way, the Jesus-Judas opposition in the musical addresses a major problematic of the 1960s: whether revolutionary politics are compatible with a radical utopianism that

⁶¹ See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) and especially Chapter 3, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts” 87-115.

affirms a self-gratification of metaphysical proportions. This problematic makes *Jesus Christ Superstar* one of the first mass cultural texts that put the ideologies of the 1960s in a critical context.

Historically, Judas' reservations proved very accurate because the rock messiahs of the 1960s delivered their followers into a new narcissistic age, which was not, of course, "the Age of Aquarius," but the postmodern, fully commodified, late capitalist society that exploded in the late 1970s. This is a highly aestheticized, mediatized, hyperreal society that blurs the line between fantasy and reality, as it is saturated with media images to the point that "the field of vision is reduced to a flat surface, and 'reality' itself is perceived as a visual hallucination" (Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 133). The distinction between art and life becomes an obsolete one, as the "cyberblitz" of technological "special effects" invades the everyday environs and transforms humdrum experiences into a never-ending ecstatic process. This highly aestheticized society promotes a new "ideology of aesthetic self-creation," which encourages the subject/ performer to construct his/ her Self "as an aesthetic oeuvre" ("Cyberspace" 112-3): to disseminate into a wealth of shifting, competing and mutually exclusive identities/ masks/ roles/ subject-positions (especially through the avid "creative" consumption of the products that the lifestyle and fashion industries promote). The new ideology is actually a glorification of "solipsistic self-immersion" (107) and produces a narcissistic subject, that exists in a dyadic relation of continuous fascination and mesmerization with his/ her mirror image(s). This is a truly omnipotent subject that can be whatever he/ she perceives, or rather fantasizes, himself/ herself to be, by indulging in experimental self-fashioning and assuming any kind of fantasy identity, however at odds with his/ her social make-up. What the

postmodern narcissist fears the most is “any kind of binding commitment” (*Looking Awry* 102), especially an ideological one, that demands the over-identification with a social role, and so delimits the plurality of subject positions. In 1979, Christopher Lasch officially labeled this emerging late capitalist, postmodern culture as *The Culture of Narcissism*; a culture, that is both the absolute antithesis of 1960s political engagement and the dystopian realization of its radical utopian longings.

In its celebration of spiritual emptiness and its suffocating high-kitsch aesthetic, O’ Horgan’s staging of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a sardonic welcome to this postmodern dystopia. His directorial approach was a parody and burlesque of utopianism itself, and, for this reason, it must be considered unfaithful to the original text. Despite its criticism of the ideologies of the 1960s, Rice’s text is ultimately radically ambivalent towards them. The battle between Jesus and Judas remains unresolved and open until the end and the listener/ spectator is asked to cast his/ her vote. Judas may perceive Jesus as a solipsistic narcissist, totally absorbed in his own megalomania; but, on the other hand, Jesus is a heroic, sacrificial figure, a believer, ideologically committed to a higher cause, who views his own death as the fulfillment of his mission. He remains until the end a powerful symbol of the 1960s, and his passionate commitment to his cause, a higher force that he is unable to resist, makes him look not only tragic but also sublime, almost divine. What he lacks in order to become a postmodern narcissist is the lack of commitment itself; or, in other words, the glittering nihilism of *Evita*. As represented by Rice, *Evita* is a truly postmodern narcissist. She believes in nothing apart from her own self-glorification. She excels in nothing apart from the theatrical reenactment of a performative ideal of femininity – “a cross between a fantasy of the bedroom and a saint” (Rice, *Evita* 9). She has no

interiority, no depth. She is the realization of her own fantasy, the living embodiment of her own ideal ego. She conceives the whole political and media world of Argentina as a huge stage, where she performs her glorified self-perception, seducing and manipulating the thousands in order to get immediate recognition and fulfill her insatiable narcissistic demands. Although Che exposes her as an immoral and amoral poseur, she outwits him with her cynical pragmatism and outshines him with her glittering nihilism.

In the belated 1996 movie version of the musical, the role of Evita was played by Madonna. This was a very fortunate coincidence, because Madonna is the ideal and most complex narcissistic figure that postmodern popular culture has yet produced. The indisputable “erotic diva of self-creation” (Robinson 346), Madonna places her persona in continuous change, always susceptible to plurality and heterogeneity. She embodies in a fascinating way the postmodern fragmentation and dissemination of subjectivity, by enacting diverse mythological images of femininity without being reduced to any one of them: insouciant boy-toy, pin-up, ingénue, technogirl, vamp, neo-punk rebel, mysterious *femme fatale*, sophisticated *grande-dame*, porno-queen, SM dominatrix, Earth Mother. From video to film, from front cover photos to live concerts, from provocative public statements to highly publicized scenes of her so-called “private” life, she exploits the possibilities offered by mass-media culture for the reproduction and proliferation of her glorified self-images. In this way, she constructs an imaginary theatrical space where all representational mediums intersect and upon which she performs a drag show of her own invention that alienates the very performativity and theatricality of gender. Although this practice definitely has a political significance, at the same time she remains a true

narcissist by firmly refusing to be labeled a feminist artist. Instead she cultivates an oscillation between glorification and parody, the political and the apolitical, critique and enactment, revolution and containment, which invites both problematic and unproblematic readings of her deliberately ambivalent and self-contradictory media texts.⁶²

For Madonna, *Evita* was much more than a simple role; it was her big chance to get on her side the large mainstream audience she lost by transforming in 1992 into her devilish alter-ego, the dominatrix Dita Parlo, decadent queen of the shady bondage clubs of New York. However, the ego-maniacal, self-absorbed narcissist of the musical did not seem the appropriate vehicle to reinstate her popularity. So she started her own “dialogue” with the role. Her audition for the part was the video for “Take a Bow,” the second single release from *Bedtime Stories* (1994), in which she employed a distinctively Latin period setting in order to portray a woman both abused and adored. From 1995 to 1996, she released a compilation of her greatest ballad hits, preparing the audience for her vocal style in *Evita*, and collaborated with photographer Steven Meisel for the promotional campaign of Versace’s new collection, in which she was photographed as a super-glamorous retro-diva. In all these projects, she cultivated a very romanticized and victimized female period persona. Moreover, in numerous interviews as well as her diary entries during the filming of *Evita* (published in *Vanity Fair*), she drew many parallels between herself and Eva Peron, emphasizing their similar underprivileged origins, their idolization by marginalized social groups and their ability to manipulate their sexual objectification

⁶² For an analysis of Madonna’s complex relation to feminism as well as for a more detailed presentation of her “impersonation” of *Evita*, see Vagelis Siropoulos, “‘Oh Father, I Have Sinned’: The Heret(h)ics of Sexual Discourse (from Kristeva to Madonna),” MA diss., Aristotle U of Thessaloniki, 1999.

in order to transgress the rules of patriarchy, inspiring, in this way, a mixture of love and loathing. With all these strategies, Madonna established a sympathetic, melodramatic portrayal of Eva, which was also reprised in her film performance, and made Evita her double, feeding, actually, on her own sentimentalized portrayal and, finally, usurping for herself all the sympathy she brought to the character.

Madonna's fragile, romanticized version of the character has nothing in common with the arrogant super-bitch of the stage musical. In her portrayal, she was greatly helped by director Alan Parker, who declared from the start of the project that he aimed at a more balanced representation of Evita.⁶³ Thus, with slight but strategic alterations in the original score and lyrics and changes of tone and emphasis, especially as far as the acting is concerned, we get a totally different Evita. This is a naïve teenager with big dreams, victimized in the Big City, who turns her objectified body into a dynamic weapon, makes an erotic spectacle out of herself and manipulates the male-dominated worlds of show-business and politics. From victimized girl-next-door to pin-up sexual fantasy and then to female saint (Santa Evita), Madonna portrays a woman who discovers how to exploit the sexual norms of a patriarchal system and is gradually fascinated, seduced, taken by her own powers. Eva is no longer a fascinating threat, but a struggling woman, earthy and humanized; and the announcement of her cancer emphasizes even more her vulnerability, as she rapidly fades away, unable to sustain the burden of her own myth, the fabulous artwork she suffered in order to create. In the final scenes, that capture vividly her corporeal decay, Eva appears as a woman entrapped in her own myth, realizing that

⁶³ See Alan Parker, *The Making of Evita* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1996) 11-23.

she had transformed her whole life into a constant performance and all she was left with was the dim memory of a spectacle she could no longer perform.

This melodramatic, sentimental portrayal of a narcissist was exactly what Prince wanted to avoid in his staging of *Evita*. As we have already seen, for him the musical was not so much a musicalized biographical documentary as an allegory on the threats posed by a new, fully mediatized, hyperreal culture of seductive, glossy surfaces – a culture of narcissism. For Prince, *Evita* becomes the symbol of this new world; and as he slightly reworked and tightened the show for its transfer onto Broadway, the heroine clearly symbolized something vicious, sinister, inhuman, evil, almost satanic – qualities, which were already present in Rice's lyrics and Lloyd Webber's crashing dissonances. Moreover, for Broadway he strengthened even more the role of Che, transforming him from a laid-back sardonic Brechtian commentator into the driving force of the musical. Filled with anger and disgust for everything *Evita* stands for, he becomes the symbol of righteous revolution: a symbol of the late 1960s radically opposed to a symbol of the late 1970s. However, despite Prince's alienating devices, one has the sense that *Eva* has won in the end. The show so fascinated and captivated the imagination of audiences, that *Evita* became something akin to a popular icon in the late 1970s. One can accuse Prince of glamorizing her on stage, and so made her a powerful source of identification. Still, although *Eva* is definitely a glowing presence on stage, her superficiality is fully exposed: both in its glory and horrifying emptiness. Moreover, the fact that *Evita* managed to become a pop icon in the late 1970s, in the same way that Che Guevara was in the late 1960s, is not Prince's fault. It rather proves that something had radically changed in the cultural climate.

We are now in a position to understand better the reason why both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* had such a great impact in their time. It was not only Lloyd Webber's melodic gifts or Rice's culturally relevant, clever lyrics. These may be the ingredients of a hit, but not of a mass cultural phenomenon. Both musicals created powerful symbols of their era: *Jesus*, the symbol of a declining revolutionary era, and *Evita*, the symbol of an emerging radically conformist, narcissistic one. Although they exhibit many structural similarities, these two musicals are also fundamentally different. They reflect and document significant changes in culture, changes that affect significantly the development of the musical as a genre. In order to understand generic development, we should first comprehend the historical reasons that led to this cultural shift and Jameson's theorization of the 1960s is very helpful in this respect. He advises us to move beyond the romantic conception of the 1960s as a moment when everything seemed possible, a moment of unlimited freedom and possibility; we must rather view both its opportunities and failures as inextricably intertwined and marked by the objective constraints and openings of a determinate historical situation (*The Ideologies of Theory, Vol. 2* 178). This historical situation is the transition from one infrastructural or systemic change of capital to another, the transition from monopoly to late capitalism (208).

Late capitalism is the moment when capital is at last able to complete its mission, which, as Marx predicted as early as the nineteenth century, is the creation of a global market. Armed with all the advances in communications technology, capital is now able to transcend national boundaries and dissolve the national markets or the combined state-trusts of its monopoly phase. The internationalization of capital, its fusion and centralization in multi-national companies and the creation of a global

consumer culture effect tremendous changes on an ideological and psychological level: the traditional middle-class ideology and subjectivity lose their hegemony, as the ethnic and sexual differentiations, imposed by middle class ideology, and the centrality and fixity of the middle-class ego become an obstacle to the unbridled commodification of everyday life (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* 143). Thus, the 1960s is a moment of historical necessity, the subversion of the middle class on a political, psychological as well as representational level: the moment of liberation of the new ethnic and sexual subjects of history, which were repressed during monopoly capitalism; and the moment of canonization of alternative representational strategies as well as of the alternative psychic structures they imply. It is this freeing and release of social, psychological and representational forces that enabled for a while daring utopian visions on a political and psychological level. This same process of liberation also enabled daring mass-cultural artifacts, offering a perfect synthesis of progressive form and political content. In the following decades, these liberated forces will be contained by the economic infrastructure and the utopian visions will find rather dystopian realizations. Accordingly, the progressive aesthetic form will be disjoined from its political content, lose its oppositional, countercultural character and become available for more decorative uses.

In the domain of musical theatre, this will be evident with the megamusicals of the gilded 1980s: these unashamedly apolitical shows, whose stylistic origins lie in the politically conscious, countercultural shows of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For this reason, *Evita*, just like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, is not yet a megamusical in its finished form. In spite of the operatic subject matter, the melodic grandness and the epic-sized staging, this musical is still embedded in a climate of social critique. After

all, its heroine, the symbol of the dawning narcissistic age, is represented as evil; a fact that, apart from contributing to Eva's mystery, gives the show a certain political gravitas. The megamusical will explode all over the globe a few years later, in 1981, with Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, the show that starts a new chapter in the history of musicals. With *Cats* you just knew "you were in the future;" *Evita*'s "mystery was gone, but the amazement was just starting" (Warhol qtd. in Cagle 63).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ I am paraphrasing Warhol expressing his amazement, when he realized the explosion of a postmodern pop culture.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blockbuster Aesthetics and the British Invasion: From *Cats* to *Les Misérables*

4.1. “On Her Majesty’s Secret Service:” The British Conquer the Globe

Cats had humble origins. It started as a song cycle based on T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939), a collection of poems for children. Lloyd Webber first encountered these poems as a child and when, years later, he picked up a copy of Eliot’s collection at an airport bookshop, during all the to-ing and fro-ing to America that accompanied *Jesus Christ Superstar*, he realized that they could be excellent material for a small song cycle (Walsh 116).⁶⁵ He sensed that the poems lent themselves easily to musicalization, as Eliot’s style in this collection was reminiscent of a popular lyricist. The poet used repeated catch phrases, strong hooks, steady rhythm and outrageous, attention-grabbing, witty rhymes, which are the ingredients of every well-crafted popular lyric. In 1980, Lloyd Webber presented his musical settings for the poems during his annual Sydmonton arts festival, taking place at his Hampshire home, and the reception was very positive. Among those invited was Valerie Eliot, the poet’s widow, who rhapsodized about Lloyd Webber’s musical treatment of her husband’s poems. Her enthusiasm proved crucial to the evolution of the project, as she granted Lloyd Webber access to Eliot’s correspondence during the composition of the poems as well as to various unpublished poems and unfinished

⁶⁵ Most of the biographical details concerning Lloyd Webber derive from Michael Walsh’s *Andrew Lloyd Webber: His Life and Works* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), which is the best biography of the composer available as well as one of the first and most balanced critical evaluations of his creative output.

fragments. As we shall see, without this additional material the transformation of *Cats* – or *Practical Cats*, as it was originally titled - from a song cycle to a full-scale musical would have been impossible.

Musically *Cats* is very different from *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*. It is more reminiscent of the musical stylistics of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, a product of the first major collaboration of Lloyd Webber and Rice.⁶⁶ *Joseph...* had equally humble origins with *Cats*. Based on the Old Testament's well-known, inspirational story of Jacob's son, who is sold into a life of slavery by his jealous brothers but finally triumphs in Egypt due to his faith in God, *Joseph...* originated as a fifteen-minute pop oratorio. It was first presented in 1968 at Colet Court, a preparatory school for St Paul's, and was a light-hearted, exuberant retelling of the biblical story in contemporary pop musical terms. From this presentation to the 1969 album recording, and then to the 1973 West End opening, the 1982 Broadway opening and the 1991 mega-revival, this small piece, originally intended for a children's choir and their parents, gradually evolved into a full-scale musical and finally into a lavish megamusical. As the show was extended for its various stage incarnations, new songs were added, all of them straight-forward pastiches of recognizable musical styles, transforming *Joseph...* into "a mini-kaleidoscope of pop genres" (Snelson 63): from rock 'n' roll to vaudeville two-step and calypso and from

⁶⁶ *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* constitute the golden Lloyd Webber-Rice triplet. Before *Joseph* (between 1965 and 1966), they had written the music and lyrics for *The Likes of Us*, a musical based on the life of Dr. Thomas Barnardo and his pioneering work in the care of underprivileged children in Victorian England. *The Likes of Us* was not performed on stage until 2005, when Lloyd Webber and Rice finally presented their first collaboration in the composer's Sydmonton arts festival. A live CD recording of this performance was also released in 2005. Between *Joseph...* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Lloyd Webber and Rice had written another musical, *Come Back Richard Your Country Needs You*, based on the story of Richard the Lionheart. This musical was never staged professionally. It only received an amateur performance at the City of London School in 1969. No recording of the show has ever been released, apart from the title song, which was released as the A side of a single in 1969.

country and western to French chanson and disco. The parade of all these disparate musical styles creates a cartoon effect that, nevertheless, serves effectively and augments the insouciance, irreverence and exuberance of the whole piece.

In *Cats*, Lloyd Webber follows a similar approach based on pastiche that does justice to his source material. Eliot's poems present us with a parade of cat characterizations, which establish the similarities of various cat types with recognizable human types, creating, thus, a universe of anthropomorphic felines. The use of pastiche in the musicalization of the poems creates some sort of quickly grasped musical characterization for each cat type, a musical image that communicates directly to the audience each character's defining features. However, the pastiches of *Cats* are not as straightforward and pointed as those of *Joseph*. A direct pastiche like Pharaoh's Elvis number in *Joseph*, which points very specifically to a certain style, song and performer, could not work in *Cats*, as it would superimpose a musical image on Eliot's verses and not allow them to speak for themselves. *Cats*' numbers are "more the free workings within a range of chosen styles than direct copies of a specific performer or number" (Snelson 162), providing immediately recognizable musical settings that function as the broad outlines of each character's presentation. Thus, the Old Gumbie Cat's midnight transformation into an energetic housekeeper is conceived as an exhilarating tap dance; the Rum Tum Tugger's anarchic nature is conveyed through the pulsating rhythms of an energetic rock number, vaguely alluding to Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones; the allure and danger of Macavity, the villainous Mystery Cat, is captured in a sensual bluesy number; the emotional recollections of Gus, the Theatre Cat, of glorious days in the theatre under Victoria's reign are communicated through a sentimental old music hall

ballad; and the grace and grandeur of Old Deuteronomy, the wise patriarch of cats, is delivered through a serene lullaby that gradually builds into a dramatic anthem.

Cats' score is charming, polymorphous and restless, but also undistinguished and unmemorable and certainly does not exhibit the scope and ambition of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*. Once the show went into its rehearsal period, it was obvious that it also lacked a big, defining theme, a hook melody that could stand above the rest and characterize the whole show. The director, Trevor Nunn, asked Lloyd Webber for such a big number and the composer came up with an over-emotional, extravagant tune. When Lloyd Webber played the song in front of the cast, "Nunn solemnly intoned to all and sundry: 'What is the date? The hour? Remember, because you have just heard a smash hit by Lloyd Webber'" (Walsh 120). The song was, of course, "Memory," and it has become not just a smash hit but a global hit of immense proportions. One of the most successful songs ever to come from a musical, "Memory" has generated more than six hundred cover versions, one of them a hit for Barbra Streisand, it has become the staple of a million elevators and hotel lounges all over the world and, to the despair of cocktail pianists everywhere, the most requested tune of the 1980s (123). More importantly, it became a turning point in Lloyd Webber's career as a composer. Although his previous big ballads, like "I Don't Know How to Love Him" from *Jesus Christ Superstar* and "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" from *Evita*, were huge hits, it was the unprecedented success of "Memory" that defined the Lloyd Webber pop-operatic sound, made the blockbuster Big Tune the essential ingredient of his later shows and determined what the audience expected to hear in his musicals.

The melody of "Memory" is an elaboration of a descending scale and, as it has

been noted many times, bears many similarities to Ravel's *Bolero*. However, whereas Ravel's melodic phrasing is "long and seamless ... flowing over the bar lines" (Snelson 173), Lloyd Webber's is based on the repetition and slight variation of a hook phrase. Actually, the song "is constructed from two distinct musical ideas: the first repeats a single note (emphasized by the words 'Midnight ... pavement ... memory' in the first stanza), while the second is a turnlike figure used to decorate the approach to and strengthen the effect of the repeated notes" (173-4). Moreover, while "Ravel privileges melody over its static harmonic pedal, 'Memory' is fundamentally an assertion of the movement of the harmony" (174). For Michael Walsh, it is exactly the song's harmonic progression that makes "Memory" so irresistible, a standard romantic-era chord structure- I-VI-IV-III-II-VI-V-I – which is also responsible for the song's distinctive Puccinian flair (Walsh 124). The most effective moment in this ballad comes with the climactic modulation from B-flat major to D-flat major, Lloyd Webber's favourite key, which leads to an emotional overdrive, captured and communicated verbally by the equally extravagantly melodramatic lyrics: "Touch me/ It's so easy to leave me/ All alone with the memory/ Of my days in the sun" (Eliot et al. 11). This combination of pop conciseness, restraint and compactness with the Puccinian harmonic extravagance and the sinuous Ravel-influenced melody makes "Memory" the very definition of the pop aria.

For "Memory" original lyrics had to be written, since the character of Grizabella, who sings the song, was not part of Eliot's published collection. Lloyd Webber and his team found an unpublished fragment referring to Grizabella in the additional material that Eliot's widow gave them. This fragment had not developed into a full poem because Eliot found it too sombre, gloomy and inappropriate for

children:

She haunted many a low resort
 Near the grimy road of Tottenham Court.
 She flitted about the no-man's land
 From "The Rising Sun" to the "Friends at Hand."
 And the postman sighed as he scratched his head
 You'd really have thought she'd ought to be dead.
 And who would ever suppose that that
 Was Grizabella, the Glamour Cat? (Eliot et al. 6)

For Eliot, Tottenham Court Road indicated a hooker's area, so Grizabella is actually the Magdalene of cats, lost forever in the decadent urban underworld.⁶⁷ She used to be a glamorous creature that has now become unrecognizable; a shadow of her glorious past, as it is indicated by her name, which combines the Italian word for a beautiful woman, "bella," with the adjective "grizzled," connoting the corporeal decay that comes with the passing of time and the ageing process. The lyrics of "Memory" would have to elaborate on the above themes and Nunn, who wrote them, wisely drew inspiration from Eliot's poems of the "Prufrock" period, and, more specifically, from "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." He created one more typically modernist persona, isolated, melancholic and unable to fulfil her desires in the present, which is filled with hopelessness, meaninglessness and despair. For this reason, she escapes into fantasizing, daydreaming and the remembrance of an idealized past, which comes to life in a stream-of-consciousness manner. These modernist themes of withdrawal from reality, emotional paralysis and suicidal longing gain accessibility for a wider

⁶⁷ For a more detailed analysis of Eliot's fragment by Nunn see the special features in the DVD, *Cats, Ultimate Edition*, dir. David Mallet (Universal Home Entertainment, 2001).

audience through the strong melodramatic element that Nunn adds to his lyric. In this way, sentimental excess blends with existential despair and pop straightforwardness with modernist obscurity, creating a pop-modernist lyrical hybrid that adds emotional depth to Lloyd Webber's pop-classical melody.

Grizabella's existential melodrama is the climax of *Cats* and the emotional centrepiece of the whole evening. Her plight wins her back the sympathy of the tribe, and Old Deuteronomy, their leader, decides that Grizabella will be the one that will ascend to the Heaviside Layer, the paradise of cats, and be given the opportunity for a new life. Nunn found the reference to the Heaviside Layer in one more unpublished fragment, provided by Valerie Eliot. This concept of a cat limbo, cat nirvana and cat heaven gave him the idea of the annual ritual, in which all cats gather in order to decide which one will be reincarnated, that became the narrative structure that holds the musical together. This tenuous plot frame could sustain the succession of self-contained cat characterizations as a part of the ritual: every cat should exhibit the reason why it deserves to be given another chance in life. It is in this frame that Grizabella's plight acquires emotional gravitas: she is a pariah, ostracized from the tribe, which treats her as a polluting element, who is finally offered forgiveness, after her heartbreaking (and showstopping) expression of her emotional despair. These crucial interventions by Nunn, which were based on his careful research in Eliot's unpublished material, gave *Cats* dramatic shape and transformed Lloyd Webber's musicalizations of Eliot's verses into a piece of musical theatre in its own right.

At first, the selection of Nunn as the director of *Cats* seemed an unlikely one. He was the artistic director of the culturally prestigious RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company), a highly respected director counting many groundbreaking productions in

his CV, but with no experience whatsoever outside the subsidized theatre. In 1980, he scored an international triumph with *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, the eight-and-a-half-hours stage adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel, which was hailed as one of the most important theatrical events of the twentieth century. This marathon of a play was actually a directorial *tour de force*. From realism to impressionism, from the medieval pageant to Victorian melodrama and from Brecht to the Living Theatre, Nunn's production created a polymorphous and idiosyncratic theatrical vocabulary, which celebrated the very power of the *mise-en-scène*.⁶⁸ Most of the methods and techniques developed in *Nicholas Nickleby* were used in one of Nunn's many future triumphs on the musical stage, *Les Misérables* (1985), which can easily be defined as the musical version of *Nicholas Nickleby*. Many of these methods can be detected in *Cats* as well, the most characteristic of which is the way he worked with his ensemble cast. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, his forty-three actors had to embody one hundred and fifty-seven parts, which were the expressions of the complex socio-economic relations of early Victorian society as depicted by Dickens. Through extensive research and improvisation, the actors had to devise the corporeal language, to find the most condensed and economic *gestures* for such sociological abstractions as class antagonism (aristocracy vs. bourgeoisie vs. proletariat), moral fervour, heroic utopianism, youthful idealism. At the same time, these *gestures* had to express vividly the quintessentially Dickensian gaze, through which the socio-economic totality is viewed in the novel, to reflect the distinctive Dickensian sentimentality, polarization and melodramatic excess. The outcome of this process was the creation of an immediate and eloquent gestural vocabulary, composing intricate stage pictures and

⁶⁸ For a detailed presentation of the production see Richard Corliss, "A Dickens of a Show," *Time* 5 October 1981, 23 April 2007 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,921080,00.html>>.

tableaux and achieving an exhaustive representation of Dickensian Victoriana in all its overdetermined complexity.

For *Cats*, Nunn had to achieve a similar goal, to depict exhaustively a whole universe on stage. The difference this time was that the universe to be depicted did not exist; or it existed only in Eliot's imagination as the intersection between the human and the feline. To create this world *ex nihilo*, Nunn worked once again with his cast through extensive improvisation and in close collaboration with his choreographer, Gillian Lynne, who also served as his associate director. Lynne's contribution was decisive not only for the extended dance set-pieces, but also because it was obvious from the very beginning that *Cats* would be a piece of physical theatre: a corporeal spectacle, in which characters are reduced to their bodily attitudes and their essence is communicated basically through movement. Working closely with her cast, Lynne combined feline movement with ballet, modern dance, jazz and acrobatics in order to achieve the anthropomorphic illusion and convey through bodily movement the varied characteristics attributed to cats: mysterious, seductive, playful and dangerous. As the various dancing styles gracefully merged and dissolved into each other, an inventive corporeal *écriture* was created in the rehearsal room, producing ever-changing stylizations of a restless body in constant motion. What stopped *Cats* from becoming an indulgent exhibition of choreographic skill is the way in which Nunn subjected constant movement to dramatic purposes. The various stylistic combinations of dance movements served the creation of characters and the establishment of relations between them, including also the minor chorus members. Many of these characters were created improvisationally by the performers themselves and the attributes and relations of the minor ones probably pass unnoticed

by audiences that attend the show for the first time. But this attention to detail is what creates the impression of a whole new world, an uncharted, mysterious universe with its unique laws, unfolding for the first time on stage, that makes *Cats* a fascinating experience for many spectators around the world.

To create this new world, Nunn knew that he needed an environmental image, a visual concept that would transform the theatrical space into a cat's universe. To this end, he recruited John Napier, the stage designer of most of his productions at the RSC. Quite appropriately (and playfully) for a production based on Eliot's poems, Napier came up with the idea of a waste land: an urban rubbish dump, where all the detritus of human civilization are gathered, that serves as the cats' playground. Such a design could provide new and exciting places in which cats could be discovered throughout the performance and it could be constantly modified through the introduction of new stage elements that would interact with the anthropomorphic feline's restless movement. The touch of brilliance in this concept lay in the possibilities it offered for the manipulation of the audience's perspective. Everything on stage would be designed according to a cat's scale, so that ordinary objects would take on a magical life, as they would suddenly be four, five or six times bigger than in everyday life. The idea that everything would be scaled differently revealed for the first time how spectacular *Cats* could really be. Everything could literally be larger-than-life, from a wrecked car to an old gas stove or a boot that is thrown at the caterwauling cats in the middle of the night. At the same time, many possibilities for special effects were opened up, since the human world had to be reconceived in order to become as extraordinary as it would probably appear to be from a cat's point of view. Most memorably, for Grizabella's final apotheosis and ascent to the Heaviside

Layer, a levitating truck tire was almost transformed into a spaceship, as it gracefully took off from the stage and floated up to a vast starry sky. In New York's Winter Garden Theatre, the luminous staircase that appears in order to lead the heroine to heaven, emerged majestically from the ceiling, as the technical coordinators had to open up a hole in the theatre's roof in order to build a shed to house the whole mechanism and then rebuild and reinforce the roof (Walsh 126).

Napier's designs made evident that *Cats* would be something more than a conventional musical; it would be a mega-event, less a theatrical performance than an oversized, overblown happening. The audience should not be allowed to be mere observers of a performance; they had to be drawn into the production and have the feeling that they are thrown in a totally new universe. This could be achieved by making the theatre an all-encompassing environment, in which these curious singing and dancing anthropomorphic felines, with their punk-like haircuts, new wave make ups and their characteristically 1980s trendy leg-warmers and arm-warmers, would climb down the walls, crawl along the floor, clamber out of dustbins and leap up, down and across the aisles and into the startled audience (Richmond 76). Thus, in New York, the set design was extended to the entire auditorium, so that the Winter Garden Theatre could become an oversized junkyard; while in London, Napier took advantage of the New London Theatre's huge revolve that covered the stage, the orchestra pit and a part of the seating and set the audience into motion: as the set moved so did the audience, as sections of seating were transported around the auditorium (75). In this way, spectators and spectacle were unified; and this unification was further strengthened by the use of light and sound design.

Cats' abandonment of realism and verisimilitude in favour of fantasy enabled

a groundbreaking and most powerful use of automated lighting. David Hersey's sumptuous colour palette could now capture the changing dynamics, moods and rhythms of the score, even within the same number, creating ever-changing ethereal optical landscapes, that multiplied the affective potential of the musical landscapes. At the same time, light was also used in a more architectural manner, reconfiguring the playing area and providing rapidly shifting locations for the performers, who could now move through constantly modified lit spaces. In this way, the light changes constituted an intricate lighting plot and choreography, which interacted dynamically with the musical score and the on-stage movement in order to provide rapid shifts of perspective that approximated the quick video editing. Sound was employed in an equally groundbreaking manner in order to match the sweeping stage images and make the ride that *Cats* provided as dynamic aurally as it was visually. As Walsh points out, no one can deny that what Lloyd Webber does have, in spades, is a grasp of contemporary musical technology: he is familiar with synthesizers, body mikes and bass amplifiers, and he can run a sound-mixing board with the best of them; he knows exactly the kind of sound quality he wants and exactly how to get it (Walsh 126). Collaborating with Abe Jacob in London and with Martin Levan in New York, Lloyd Webber made *Cats* not only the best-sounding musical of its age, with a studio-quality sound, but also mixed the show in such a way as to achieve a dynamic sound framing. He created two distinct soundscapes for the show, alternating according to the dramatic moment: an acoustic, traditionally theatrical, and sometimes intimate one, and a more cinematic, heavily synthesized and amplified one, with an in-your-face, kick-in-the-chest quality. In this way, the audience could feel the very presence of the aural images and be enveloped in them in the same way they were enveloped, or even

overwhelmed, by the cascading visual images.

All the above elements make *Cats* an ambitious example of total theatre, integrating seamlessly music, movement, high conceptual design, startling visuals and special effects. For producer Cameron Mackintosh, who co-produced the show with Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Company, *Cats* was something more: a new form of musical that could revolutionize the economics of theatre. Mackintosh was a key figure in *Cats*' success story. He encouraged Lloyd Webber that his musicalization of Eliot's poems could turn into a musical and, more importantly, he suggested that Nunn could be, against all odds, the appropriate director for this curious show. In this respect, Mackintosh can be considered responsible for bringing the highly skilled and imaginative team from the RSC into the realm of musical theatre, on which it left a permanent mark with many blockbuster musicals. Mackintosh, who would be dubbed in the future by the American magazine *Theatre Week* "The Czar of Theatrical Producers" (Richmond 74), was far more than the man that gathers the money to be invested in a show; he was a man passionate about musical theatre, a man with a vision and a man on a mission. Being like Lloyd Webber an Englishman, he was outside the Broadway establishment, so he could adopt a critical stance towards the current state of musical theatre without prejudice; and for him the Great White Way "was a great white vacuum, waiting to be filled:" "Although it was nice to revel in glorious reminiscence of the great days of Rodgers and Hammerstein, those days were gone for good, and there was no use trying to recapture them... Here it was, 1980, and no ... Broadway composer had yet admitted that Elvis or the Beatles ever existed" (Walsh 118).

For Mackintosh, "Lloyd Webber represented the future of the musical

theatre” (118). With his two big hits, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*, he had already exhibited his fluency with contemporary musical styles, his uncanny knack for the smash hit melody, his predilection for big aural images, inviting equally big visual ones, and his ability to write musicals in a through-composed mode calling for a more imagistic kind of staging. With *Cats*, the formula moved one crucial step forward and crystallized. Whereas his two previous hits were socially and politically aware shows with a considerable amount of controversy, *Cats* seemed to move beyond socio-political reality, even beyond the referential domain itself, and, in a self-indulgent way, celebrate an artistically progressive and financially expensive aesthetic form, almost totally devoid of content. Moreover, this peculiar artifact seemed able to achieve a generational crossover. It had an obvious appeal to children of any age, but it could also prove exciting for adult audiences. For Frank Rich, the then recently-appointed chief drama critic of *The New York Times*, who was soon to be dubbed “the butcher of Broadway” and become Lloyd Webber’s nemesis, “the reason why people will hunger to see ‘Cats’ is ... [that] it believes in pure theatrical magic, and on that faith it unquestionably delivers.”⁶⁹ The power of this theatrical magic would prove capable of crossing not only generational gaps, but also cultural ones, as this musical exhibited an international appeal that no other musical ever exhibited before. *Cats* was a highly exportable product, and the reasons are obvious: it does not have a unique cultural identity or a culturally-specific narrative – or any traditional narrative at all; it is a sampling of many different elements and styles, constituting not so much a musical play as a unique experience, a thrill-ride, the theatrical equivalent of

⁶⁹ See Frank Rich, Rev. of *Cats*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *New York Times* 8 October 1982, 20 April 2008 <http://theater2.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?_r=1&res=9D03E5DA163BF93BA35753C1A964948260&scp=1&sq=Cats,%20Frank%20Rich&st=nyt>.

Disneyland.

Realizing that every aspect of the staging constituted an authorship that contributed to the uniqueness of the whole experience, Mackintosh introduced a new way of licensing foreign productions. *Cats* would be sold as a whole, so that replicas of the original production would appear all over the globe, preserving both the identity of the show as well as its high quality staging standards. The uniformity and standardization in the global staging of the show called for an equally uniform and standardized form of marketing. The same minimalist black poster with the yellow cat's eyes, promising everything but revealing nothing, would appear all over the world. This was not traditional poster art but logo design, that could be reproduced on every piece of merchandizing, not only original cast album covers and glossy souvenir brochures, but also t-shirts, watches, key rings, coffee mugs. The show was a trendy cultural phenomenon, cutting edge, aesthetically and technologically progressive, so the acquisition of items bearing the distinctive *Cats* logo would make somebody look fashionable and "cool." Thus, the official licensing of merchandize became an integral part of the musical theatre industry, multiplying the potential revenue of a show. Obviously, Mackintosh realized that he had hit upon a new form of musical theatre, tailor-made for an emerging, unashamedly commodified global culture, and so he treated *Cats* as a commodity with universal appeal, a trademark, and marketed it as aggressively as Coca-Cola (Walsh 126).

Cats ushered in a new era of musical theatre, when the musical would become a global multi-million-dollar gamble, with Lloyd Webber, Nunn, Napier and Mackintosh being among the key players. Throughout the 1980s, a considerable number of big-budgeted blockbuster shows would originate from London and then

spread all around the world, with Broadway being, of course, one of the first necessary stops. This is how the so-called British invasion on Broadway began; although, as Snelson points out, this was not so much a sudden assault as a steady flow of high-profile productions succeeding each other on Broadway with severely diminished local opposition (Snelson 42). The unprecedented success of these shows produced the “geographical reversal of the situation in the West End in the years immediately after World War II, when the term ‘American invasion’ had been used” in order to describe the flow of the Rodgers-and-Hammerstein type of musicals (42). Being at the centre of this new phenomenon, Lloyd Webber would come to represent a new “approach to musical theater and to its commercial exploitation” (42). Moreover, he would become one of the most influential men on Broadway, “not just through the long runs of the works, but through the financial implications of his success for both employment opportunities and the generation of revenue” (189). Even more infuriatingly, he would prove that the term “Broadway musical” was no longer a viable one, as musical theatre could now be considered an international art form “with expressions of national identity becoming more a localized coloring than an essential element of the musical’s identity” (189).

Cats arrived in New York in 1982, cocksure of its indisputable triumph after its sensational 1981 London opening. Every event surrounding its arrival shocked the sensibilities of the Broadway establishment: Lloyd Webber’s greed during the negotiations, which was considered remarkable even by Broadway standards; the painting of Winter Garden Theatre’s façade black, as well as the opening of the hole in its roof to facilitate Grizabella’s glorious ascent; the presence of the same logo everywhere in New York, from Broadway’s biggest billboard, which was painted

black and dotted only with the pair of yellow eyes, to television, with the voice-over: “Isn’t curiosity killing you;” the advertisement-bearing airplanes, covering the New York metropolitan area; the feature stories in every major magazine and the teaser ads in every major newspaper; the sky-rocketing ticket prices and the record-breaking advance sales in the box office (Walsh 126). However, the buying public was fascinated by this unprecedented hype surrounding a musical; and from the moment one hundred pairs of illuminated cats’ eyes blinked and winked in Winter Garden Theatre’s darkened auditorium to signal the opening of the show, they were enthralled and could not stop applauding (Richmond 78). Whether the Broadway establishment liked it or not this was a seminal Broadway opening, comparable only to *Oklahoma!*’s almost forty years ago.

4.2. The Postmodern Hyperspace

In a piece called “O That Anthropomorphical Rag,” T. E. Kalem wrote in *Time* magazine about *Cats*: “It is a triumph of motion over emotion, of EQ (energy quotient) over IQ” (qtd. in Walsh 127). According to Snelson, it is this “energy in live performance” that held the whole show together: “a force that communicated itself to the audience and provided a vicarious thrill in its constant motion” (32). *Cats* is all about motion and energy: it achieves a rapid-fire presentation by bombarding the ear and the eye “with shifting stimuli and changing pace” (32). To use a neo-empiricist language, *Cats* affirms the autonomy of affect, by generating delocalized, inassimilable, free-floating intensities, which escape consciousness and refuse to be subjected to narrative function or be inserted into meaningful sequence (Massumi 25). These affective intensities must not be conceived as conventional emotional response

to stage action, “which depends on consciously positioning oneself in a line of narrative continuity” (25). The musical number is not conceived anymore as an affective punctuation in an evolving narrative, but rather as the instigator of continuous neuro-physiological stimulation, whereby the spectator’s “body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived” (29). This orgy of sensory (re)presentations may be initially disorienting for audiences, even shocking, because it aims at outstripping their motor capacities and provoking a state of motor helplessness and powerlessness. At the same time, it is exactly this intentionally provoked inability to synthesize the bombarding synaesthetic experiences into meaningful sequences, the powerlessness to think the whole, the narrative totality, that creates a feeling of euphoria, aliveness, vitality. In *Cats*, the audience is not invited to identify emotionally with characters or think; they are primarily invited to hear and see: to re-educate their liberated sense organs and learn to indulge in purely aural and optical situations; to feel the sound in their guts and be absorbed by the visuals.

As we have already seen, *Cats* is a feast for both the eyes and the ears. Colours and sounds intensify, take on a fundamental value and discover a new autonomy and communicative power. Both the aural and visual components of the image acquire a tactile, almost corporeal dimension and generate affective landscapes resonating and vibrating with euphoric intensities. The spectators are not anymore onlookers, observers of the action, but they are rather swallowed up in it, devoured by the spectacle itself. This sense of “bewildering immersion” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 43) transforms theatrical space into hyperspace and gives rise to the megamusical. The term hyperspace derives from Jameson and is used in order to describe a space

that transcends the perceptual equipment of the individual human body, by generating a feeling of infinite sensory extension and unlimited affective potential.⁷⁰ A hyperspace aspires to be a total world closed in itself, a dreamlike, hallucinatory, magical universe of affective plenitude, that embodies the utopian prospect of “expand[ing] our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions” (39). *Cats* is considered the quintessential megamusical, because it reconceived, like no other show before, theatrical space as an immense affective encompasser, that transforms the viewing experience into a hyper-charged thrill-ride and the spectator into an explorer of new and challenging aural and visual sensations. Its unprecedented success paved the way for even bolder hyperspatial configurations, made the set designer a proper environment builder and raised light and sound design into the status of art in their own right. It also paved the way for the constant revolutionization of stage technology.

The application of cutting-edge technology has become necessary for the, now familiar, computer-motorized set changes that constitute a unique choreography of imperial grandeur and awe-inducing monumentality: massive architectural kinetic structures, that sometimes extend to and encircle the auditorium, claim their own performative autonomy and enforce their phenomenological presence, as they move gracefully in and out, float airily up and down, forward and back, outlining the cosmic movement of a world in perpetual evolution, change and becoming. Moreover, technological innovation has become the key for the thorough exploration of the (non)representational dynamics of a progressively rich and complex audio-visual image. As far as the audio component of the image is concerned, the application of

⁷⁰ The origins of the postmodern hyperspace can be traced in modernist culture and, more specifically, in the process of spectacularization and mediatization of everyday life, as described by Benjamin.

automated live consoles, integrated loudspeaker design, MIDI control of processing, hard-disk multi-track playback, digital surround design, level control systems and delay imaging is crucial not only for conventional amplification or for controlling the quality of sound in a live environment; but also for enabling sound to achieve its own framing and generate its own affective landscapes that interact dynamically with the visuals. In the case of the visual component of the image, the use of high-speed and high-intensity light fixtures, color scrollers, digital light curtains, wash luminaires and spot luminaires, dimmers and color mixers enables lighting to acquire a sculptural dimension and expand the totality of space, to potentialize space infinitely, by creating what Deleuze calls “any-spaces-whatever:” disconnected and delocalized spaces, which are the exact opposite of “real milieux of geographical and social actualization” (Deleuze, *Cinema I* 123); indefinite, atmospheric, hallucinatory, ethereal and highly absorbent visual and virtual spatial abstractions with strong affective tenor (108-11).

The cultivation of a high-tech aestheticism and formalism seems to be the trademark of the contemporary megamusical to the point that stage design can approximate the complexity of a science project. This is obvious in Lloyd Webber’s latest musical *The Woman in White* (2004), which uses, instead of conventional set design, computer generated images, 3D animations of high resolution, projected onto movable, rotating, continuously modified curved screens. Three companies, Mesmer, Digital Antics and XL Video, had to work together in order to provide the customized software and playback system, especially designed for the production, which had to overcome the geometrical challenges inherent in the project: coordinating and synchronizing the projections with the moving screens, dealing with the shape of the

screen and soft-edge blending.⁷¹ This interdependence of stage aesthetics and technology has produced a techno-aesthetic that has altered radically the infrastructure of musical theatre, including its economics. New productions have to keep up with the constant evolutions in stage technology in order to respond to the growing audio-visual sophistication of their audiences; and this race with technology raises the production costs to such astronomical heights, not only for ambitious projects like *The Woman in White*, but even for a simple musical comedy, that the capitalization of a musical today is possible only by big corporations.

Musical theatre was not the first field in the entertainment industry to realize this synergy between progressive aesthetics and advanced technology. Cinema first achieved this combination in the mid-1970s with a new breed of movies: the blockbusters or event-movies, franchise films, tent-pole pictures, which constitute today the culturally dominant and most lucrative form of film-making. Blockbusters cannot be considered a new genre since, as we have seen in the last thirty years, almost every kind of movie can turn into a blockbuster (with the proviso that it contains action sequences);⁷² it is rather a new method of conceiving, filming and marketing movies. After all, the term “blockbuster” is a purely economic one, originally used to designate the unprecedented commercial success of a movie that makes it something akin to a cultural event, a cultural phenomenon. However, today films do not have to become cultural events, but can be easily conceived as such,

⁷¹ For a detailed analysis of the show’s infrastructure see “Woman in White Set Mesmerizes XL Video,” *Live Design* 28 October 2004, 23 April 2006 <http://livedesignonline.com/projects/woman_in_white>.

⁷² For example: comic book adaptations (*Spiderman*, *X-Men*, *Batman*), horror movies (*Jaws*), children’s movies (the *Harry Potter* series), fantasy (*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy), spy movies (*Mission Impossible*), historical epics (*Gladiator*), disaster movies (*Twister*), science fiction (*Terminator*), comedy (*Men in Black*), even melodrama (*E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*).

thanks to \$100 million promotional budgets (added to the \$150 million, which is the average production cost of a blockbuster movie); and promotional tie-ins with fast-food restaurants, soft drinks, merchandizing manufacturers and other non-filmic products. Part of the promotional hype always concentrates on the new technologies involved in the production process, which promise to make a particular movie something more than a must-see film, a must-live experience; and on this promise the most successful blockbusters surely deliver. Especially with the advent of computer-generated imagery and digital sound, high-budgeted, state-of-the-art technological extravaganzas can achieve a sensory intensity hitherto unimaginable and able to transform the viewing room into an affective hyperspace in its own right. Not content with simply being objects of aesthetic contemplation, our high-tech blockbusters achieve something more athletic, more visceral, something capable of punching through the screen, through the fourth wall, and, in the most successful instances, raising public alarms outside the cinema (Shone 5).

The first blockbuster movie is usually considered to be Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), about which a not-so-favourable critic wrote: "You feel like a rat being given shock treatment" (qtd. in Shone 35). However, it was George Lucas who revealed the aesthetic, technological as well as commercial potential of the blockbuster in 1977 with his space epic *Star Wars*, which turned into a space saga, spawning two sequels, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), and three prequels, *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). One of the first things that strike the viewer in Lucas' universe is the bold expansiveness, vastness and visual richness in the design. A huge cosmos is unfolding, making each film a journey into the uncharted places of the

wildest imagination. The screen is filled with vast asteroid fields, moon-sized battle stations, sun-parched desert sands, twin suns and detonating moons, gigantic galactic senates, nightmarish monstrous forests, art deco cities in the sky and golden underwater cities, glowing like art nouveau chandeliers. The other element that strikes the viewer in these films is the maximum velocity with which the journey in Lucas' universe is executed or else the director's (in)famous "speed-freak instincts" (Shone 47). His movies are "consumed with motion blur and escape velocity, forward thrust and back blast," communicating "that feeling you get when you're driving so fast and well that you feel you've merged with your car, no longer really conscious of the decisions that you're making, but thinking through the car's fenders and chassis" (54). In order to achieve this effect in the 1970s, when the film technology was not sufficiently advanced, Lucas formed his own special effects company, ILM (Industrial Light & Magic), whose primary task was to develop the system for "motion control:" "a computer-guided camera that rotated, swiveled, tracked, and dollyed in exactly repeatable sequences, making it possible to layer up action sequences in which everything – foreground, background, the camera – was moving at the same time" (47). This is the technology that truly "liberate[d] the camera, allowing the dizzying rushes of speed for which *Star Wars* became famous" (47).

Lucas is the prototypical and most extreme example of a blockbuster *auteur*, for whom technological innovation is synonymous with ambitious *mise-en-scène*. Despite the technological marvels he achieved during the filming of the first *Star Wars* movie, he was continuously complaining that he achieved only 30% of what he originally intended, because of the compromises he had to make due to the lack of sufficiently advanced technology. Gradually, he lost interest in directing, and after the

completion of the two sequels, which he only executively produced, he chose to concentrate on the technological aspects of movie-making. In 1984, he started up the company Pixar in order to develop the digital tools that would, within a decade, revolutionize the industry: digital sound editing, digital film editing, digital optical printing, digital compositing and computer animation (137). After he judged that the necessary technology had been developed, he returned to direction with the three *Star Wars* prequels, in which he achieved the creation of dense, thickly textured, totally digitalized environments, that make the original movies look like low-budget, experimental, art-house films.

Blockbuster movies like Lucas' that stress the affective potential of the audio-visual image, by radicalizing the optical and acoustic potential of the cinematic medium itself, unavoidably introduce a different relation to narrative. As character development and narrative arcs are reduced to telegraphic shorthand, Jameson is right to talk about an "enfeeblement of narrative time" in contemporary blockbusters (*The Cultural Turn* 129): "the former story has become little more than a pretext on which to suspend a perpetual present of thrills" (156). It seems that the blockbuster film imposes a vertical kind of reading that disrupts the linear, syntagmatic, logico-temporal unfolding of the narrative, by directing the audience's attention to the temporal present and phenomenological presence of the image. This disruption is most obvious in the action sequences, like *Star Wars*' space battles, where we literally plunge into a temporal hole. Known as set-pieces, these sequences emerge as extended, disconnected temporal fragments, extracted from the narrative continuum and demanding a peculiar aesthetic semi-autonomy from the rest of the picture: they are the widely advertised attractions of the show, often pre-designed and even with

their complex technological details publicized before the actual script of the movie is ready. Each of these sequences is an exercise in sensory assault through cataclysmic montage: the extremely brief and imperceptible shots are so rapidly edited that one “can no longer say ‘I see, I hear,’ but I FEEL, ‘totally physiological sensation’” (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 158). Instead of perceiving something in particular, one rather has a “*perception of one’s own vitality*, one’s sense of aliveness” (Massumi 36), as the body’s radical openness to the world and its ability to be polymorphously aroused, stimulated and affected are manifested and affirmed.

When they first arrived, the blockbuster films generated a new enthusiasm about movies, broke all previous box-office records and rejuvenated the movie industry. *Cats* and Lloyd Webber’s and Mackintosh’s subsequent megamusicals achieved exactly the same things in the realm of theatre. In fact, Lloyd Webber and Mackintosh can easily be considered the Spielberg and Lucas of theatre. Like their cinematic predecessors, they reconceived their medium as a primarily imagistic one, with unprecedented visceral impact and unlimited affective potential. Disregarding the warnings of many Broadway purists about the catastrophic consequences that technology might have on musicals, they welcomed its use for the exploration of the non-representational dynamics of the theatrical image. They undermined the role of narrative – in *Cats* to the point of its virtual extinction – and concentrated instead on the present and the phenomenological presence of the image, bringing to the musical number something of the dynamism, intensity and hyper-kinetic excitement of the cinematic action set-piece. In the megamusical, the musical number claims a hitherto unimaginable aesthetic and performative autonomy. Frequently, every number is conceived as a showstopper: it is staged both aurally and visually in such a way as to

achieve the maximum sensory impact. Such a structure transforms the musical into an anthology of perfect moments, small, autotelic performance pieces, closed in themselves and able to bring the house down with their visceral audio-visual force.

Lloyd Webber proved to be such an ideal composer for this kind of musical that if he did not already exist he should have been invented. As we have already seen, he knows very well how to stage aurally a tune and deliver it in the most powerful way to his audience. This is the reason why he insists on co-orchestrating his scores and supervising the sound design; for him, a song is not just a tune, but an aural experience. Moreover, what we have identified as his orgasmic mode of composition (as well as of orchestration), a mode that tends to exhaust the affective potential of every musical moment, is ideal for a form of musical theatre that disregards development and concentrates on the present. His tendency to rely on the method of pastiche also proves pertinent to the new form. The effectiveness of pastiche depends on the audience's familiarity with a specific musical genre. This familiarity can reactivate automatically affective contexts associated with the genre and, thus, an immediate response, which can be magnified through audio-visual stimulation.

Still, all the above merits of Lloyd Webber as an aural *auteur* would be insignificant without his signature invention: the Big Tune, which is nothing but a method of conceiving a song as a small blockbuster in its own right. The Big Tune fulfils to the extreme what Adorno defined as the goal of popular music, the delight in the moment, the isolated moment of enjoyment (Adorno 32). Lloyd Webber is the indisputable master in achieving a "sensually rich and full sonority" (52) in the musical present, in building up affective intensity. In his most memorable big ballads,

he starts with the first tender statement of an extravagant, lush, over-melodic hook phrase low in the register, moves to the first slight variation, then reinstates the hook phrase, orchestrated in an enriched and more dramatic manner. The next move is to build up the overdrive that begins with the sudden instrumental break, flies unexpectedly to the final modulation and climaxes with the thunderous finale. The effect achieved is pure virtuality: you have the feeling that within three minutes you have travelled a long musical distance, while you have actually remained at the same point, listening to the same melodic statement. The trick is, of course, that you do not move horizontally, tracing a melody in its development, metamorphoses and variations, but vertically: as the same melody is repeated with renewed affective momentum, you have the sense that you are rapidly shooting up to the last floor of a skyscraper.

One of the classic pieces of advice in show business is “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it;” in other words, do not fool around with a proven formula for success. With his next big musical project, *Starlight Express* (1984), Lloyd Webber and his team followed this advice and adhered to *Cats*’ formula to such an extent that the new musical can easily be called *Cats II* or *Cats on Tracks* (Walsh 163). Inspired by Wilbert Awdry’s stories about “Thomas the Tank Engine,” known in America as “The Little Engine That Could,” *Starlight Express* introduces us to the universe of anthropomorphic trains. The only difference from *Cats* is that the star-studded train show is conceived and executed on such a gargantuan scale that it makes its predecessor look like an expensive school performance. The visual concept for the show derived from Nunn, who once again directed. Realizing that the success of a musical about competing trains would rely on communicating directly the excitement

of racing speed, he had the idea of putting the performers on roller skates and transforming the theatre into a huge skating arena. With *Starlight Express*, Nunn attempted to create one more “vast experience-in-the-round” (159), but of such a visceral impact that it could even compete with and surpass *Star Wars*’ dizzying rushes of speed.

To execute Nunn’s vision, Napier, who once again designed the show, had to rip out nearly half of the 2,700 seats of the Apollo Victoria Theatre in London. Using six miles of timber, 60 tons of steel and 6,000 lightbulbs, Napier created a dazzling racing arena that comprised three tracks: the first ran around the front stalls, cutting off 200 seats in an island, the second around the back of the stalls and the third around the front of the circle (Richmond 89-90). These tracks interlocked so the performers could change levels during the action set-pieces, “soaring around the stalls within touching distance of the audience and then up to into the dizzy heights of the dress circle” (90). The set was dominated by a huge bridge, linking the two halves of the upper track, which proved far more impressive than *Cats*’ flying tire or heavenly staircase: “The sight of this behemoth, rising, falling, rotating, opening, and closing as the skaters whizzed across it at speeds up to forty miles an hour invariably elicited gasps of astonishment from the audiences, along with the longest applause of the evening” (Walsh 159). To enable the spectators to keep up with the high-speed and all-around action, even when the performers were temporarily out of their sight, huge video screens were placed around the auditorium, which also gave the whole evening the atmosphere of a sports extravaganza. As Napier confesses, “I wanted the whole thing to have a slight hint of American football ... with action replays and big screens and so on” (qtd. in Richmond 90). The football atmosphere also permeated the

rehearsals, as Arlene Phillips, the choreographer, trained her skating dancers almost like rugby players: “If you fall, get up,” she told them, “if you’re hurt, get out of the way” (qtd. in Walsh 160). *Starlight Express* became infamous for counting almost as many injuries and accidents as a rugby game!

It also became infamous for the money it cost. With a capitalization of more than two million pounds, it became the most expensive musical of its time, and so introduced us to the complex economics of the megamusical: “With costs like this, the show had to run for forty-three weeks at full capacity before backers would see any return on their investment” (Walsh 159). In other words, a megamusical of such gigantic proportions can either be a mega-hit or mega-flop. Luckily for the investors, the show proved to be a spectacular hit. In 1993, it became the second longest running musical (second only to *Cats*) in London theatre history and continued its successful run until 2002. It also became a hit of equal proportions in Germany and a crowd-pleasing sensation in Las Vegas. However, on Broadway it did not repeat its success. It opened there in 1987 with a cost of \$8 million, the most expensive show New York had ever seen, and despite \$4 million advance sales and a run of almost two years, it recouped only 80% of its investment. One of the main reasons for its failure on Broadway is careless timing: *Starlight Express* opened three days after the arrival of *Les Misérables*, the most hotly anticipated British megamusical of the season. If two supertankers are set against each other, not only in the same season but the same week, it is almost certain that one of them is going to sink. Moreover, the show was emasculated on Broadway. The Nederlanders, who owned the Gershwin Theatre, where *Starlight Express* was staged, would not let their auditorium be torn apart, so the performance had to be reconceived as a proscenium show, thus losing much of its

excitement (Citron 321). Still, even as a proscenium show, one could argue that *Starlight Express* was ahead of its time and too much for Broadway's more conservative musical theatre aesthetics. If we make a comparison with blockbuster movies, *Starlight Express* is reminiscent of the far more excessive adrenaline raisers of the 1990s, like *Speed* (1994), *Independence Day* (1996) and *Twister* (1996), which never stop moving, never allow the audience to relax, just keep on building up the tension. Broadway would finally get accustomed to this aesthetic and welcome such high-energy shows as *Mama Mia* (1999) and *Hairspray* (2001); but, back in the 1980s, *Starlight Express* seemed a gigantic leap ahead, even from *Cats*. This is the reason why many critics dubbed it as "Starlight Excess" (Richmond 93).

In addition to the record-breaking cost and the massiveness of the design, excess defined every other aspect of the production. The music was played continuously at maximum, eardrum-piercing volume. Martin Levan designed the sound according to the standards of a pop/ rock concert, giving the amplified music this distinctive punching power that almost manages to blow you off your seat. David Hersey was also inspired by the pop/ rock extravaganzas of the 1980s, popularized by such groups as Pink Floyd and Genesis and performers like Michael Jackson and Madonna, and expanded his light design so as to include the audience. Especially in London, the spectators were bathed in light, as the automated moving fixtures were scanning the whole theatre-cum-arena in order to keep up with the constant motion of this roller derby spectacular. Lloyd Webber's heavily synthesized, electric-guitar-driven score was also influenced by contemporary FM rock. This time, the big ballad, which bears the title of the show, does not display any classical influences in its melodic line and harmonization and, for this reason, it is somehow robbed of the

dramatic impact that other big Lloyd Webber ballads exhibit. It is a more American, radio-friendly, straightforward pop tune; a fact that shows that the composer's sights were set on the American Billboard charts. Actually, the whole score is very American in its sound, with references to or pastiches of such genres as R&B, funk, rap, rockabilly and country. Accordingly, the lyrics by Richard Stilgoe are well-crafted and occasionally clever pop lyrics with strong encapsulating images and repeating choruses. They combine well with the tunes in order to create many potential hit songs but not theatre songs. They fail to evoke a sense of character as Eliot's poems did in *Cats*, at least for those in the audience who could concentrate on them amidst the visual pageantry. Of course, Stilgoe is not entirely to blame, as Lloyd Webber's music is equally characterless. While in *Cats* he used a variety of musical styles in order to serve the text, in *Starlight Express* he recycles many popular styles for the sole purpose of creating hits. Thus, although the later score is a catchier one, it is also somewhat uninvolved, detached and rigid.

Both the music and the lyrics were heavily criticized, but the lyrics, in particular, were butchered not only on aesthetic grounds but also on ideological ones. Indeed, the sexual innuendoes, double-entendres and the stereotypical sexual imagery are offensive and politically incorrect. All the locomotives are male, while the coaches are female and of the most derogatorily clichéd type: Buffy, the buffer car, informs us that she is always at our service, always open wide, with her microwave on and ready to warm us from inside; while Belle, the sleeping car, like a gold-hearted, naive whore invites everyone to climb aboard. This sexually charged atmosphere permeated the whole show, from the exhibitionist choreographies, capitalizing on the dance fads of body popping and break dancing, to the outlandish make-ups and costumes that

transformed the locomotives into futuristic, aggressive über-males and the coaches into masochistic hookers from Mars. This near-perversity was even more infuriating, because the show was supposedly primarily targeted at children and adolescents. For Rich, “‘Starlight Express’ is the perfect gift for the kid who has everything except parents.”⁷³

Such ideological ambivalence is not something new. Many blockbuster films turn indeterminacy, interpretative polyvalence and systematic equivocation into their basic structural characteristics in an attempt to target different and incompatible demographic areas at the same time. Since children and adolescents constitute the most profitable demographic area, contemporary Hollywood conceives many movies primarily for them and, then, tries to extend their appeal to other areas through various discursive strategies. The most common way of achieving this is by stressing a movie’s techno-aesthetic sophistication and affective potential, which, in its own turn and in a miraculously circular way, seems to be able to transform an adult into a child. Many blockbuster movies are said to awaken the eternal child in every adult, and the same thing has been said for megamusicals such as *Cats* and *Starlight Express*. Thus, John Simon wrote about *Cats* in *New York* magazine: “you cannot help experiencing surges of childish jubilation” (qtd. in Walsh 128); while John Barber described *Starlight Express* in *The Daily Telegraph* as “an astonishing experience, which will turn every decent sensationalist into a little boy in a paradise nursery” (qtd. in Walsh 162).

⁷³ See Rich, Rev. of *Starlight Express*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *New York Times* 16 March 1987, 20 April 2008
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE4DC1E3DF935A25750C0A961948260&scp=1&sq=Frank+Rich+Starlight+Express&st=nyt>.

As the above remarks indicate, in the popular imagination the more affective modes of audience reception are conceived as experiences more appropriate for children. This happens because, in the adult world, children are seen as more prone to unreflective affective enjoyment due to their motor helplessness and cognitive immaturity, that, nevertheless, makes them more capable of seeing and hearing, of enjoying pure physiological sensation (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 3). This identification of the adult spectator with a child, which is often conceived as the infantilization of the spectator, is actually a simplistic metaphoric schema that tries to grasp a more complex cultural phenomenon: the exploration in the processes of aesthetic production and reception of more affective and archaic levels of human mentality in favour of the socially valorised cognitive, “higher” functions; the reconstitution of some kind of primitive thought that aims “to bring the *unconscious mechanisms of thought* to consciousness” (160). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this reconstitution is translated as an endeavour to gain access in an unmediated way to the primordial psychic state of the subject: a state, whereby the unobstructed circulation of affect between the proto-subject and the world is achieved. To gain access to this state in an unmediated way entails the momentary dissolution of the conscious, self-reflective ego and the regression to a bodily ego able to absorb and engulf the whole world; the momentary reconnection with a “body before discourses, before words, before things are named” (172-3): “an ‘unknown body’ which we have in the back of our heads” (201).

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, this state of fusional perfection and merging with the surrounding world is defined as primary narcissism. Since our postmodern culture has been labelled “a culture of narcissism,” the

reactivation of the primary narcissistic state cannot be limited to the consumption of blockbuster movies and megamusicals; these artifacts are rather the privileged aesthetic objects that try to capture and encapsulate a radically new and culturally dominant mode of relating to the world. For many critics, the way we relate to the world has altered profoundly in postmodern society because of the invasion of technology in everyday life. By transforming humdrum experiences into “a whole series of daily ecstasies” (Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory*, Vol. 2 73), postmodern technology creates a new world. This is a world of “spatio-dynamic fascination,” that makes the distinction between spectacle and spectator, fantasy and reality, art and life an obsolete one: social life approaches the form of “total theatre” and human space is transformed into a hyperspace, a “total, fusional, tactile and aesthetic... environment” (Baudrillard 71). As technology confers on everyday environments hyperspatial dimensions, the postmodern subject is offered proliferating chances to experience highly hallucinogenic multi-media ecstasies; such ecstatic processes open up a realm of virtuality and limitless potentiality, by expanding the human sensorium to unimaginable, almost supernatural dimensions.

Virtual, supernatural, omnipotent and colossal are the adjectives that describe most accurately the body that emerges not only in the processes of aesthetic reception and media consumption, but also as a privileged object of representation. Once again, the blockbuster movies, especially the post-*Matrix* (1999) ones, are the innovators. By combining digital technology with Hong Kong martial arts choreography, having its roots in Oriental theatre tradition and, specifically, in the Peking Opera, they achieve a visually poetic, dreamlike stylization of a digitalized supernatural body; a body that fulfils the wildest Artaudean fantasies, as corporeal “movement and gestures” are

really “enlarged to the statures of gods, heroes, or monsters” (Artaud 123). The same can also be said of such megamusicals as *Cats* and *Starlight Express*. In *Cats*, the combination of feline movement with a vast array of intricate choreographic steps and acrobatics produces a post-human, neo-primitive mutant body; while in *Starlight Express*, the super-sexy fetish body of the future tries to reach a supernatural dimension as well, by accelerating its racing speed in an effort to leave the ground, defy gravity and “touch the starlight.”

It seems that, in our postmodern culture, there is a huge enthusiasm for everything that lies beyond the limitations of the human condition. For cultural theorists, like Lasch, this is a fundamental characteristic of a narcissistic culture, and, once again, has to do with the role technology plays in everyday life and the way it shapes the postmodern imaginary. In our culture, technology takes on almost magical dimensions, because it promises the ultimate liberation from the constraints that nature imposes on us - even an impending triumph over old age and death.⁷⁴ It seems that, for the first time, technology is able to totally subdue nature and reality to humanity's wishes, creating, thus, a world responsive to our desires. For Freud, this belief in the magical omnipotence of human wishes, the conviction that we can bend the world to our desires, is the very definition of the primary narcissistic illusion.⁷⁵ This illusion permeates and defines the way in which the postmodern subject relates to reality: he/ she takes on god-like attributes and becomes both unwilling and unable to come to terms with the existential and physical constraints on his/ her power, as

⁷⁴ See Christopher Lasch, “New Age Narcissism,” 23 April 2007 <www.knapster.org/books/lasch.html>.

⁷⁵ See Chapter 3, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts” from Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* 87-115.

well as the possible catastrophic consequences that the unlimited hegemony of desire over reality may bring. Unavoidably, this narcissistic over-evaluation of human wishes affects mass cultural production. Thus, the majority of blockbuster movies give us a new kind of hero, the superhero, who defies natural constraints and shapes reality according to his/ her wishes. After all, it is not accidental that the most popular literary and cinematic hero of our times is Harry Potter, a magician.

Starlight Express presents us with a similar kind of hero in the face of Rusty. Rusty is the steam engine and, by far, the outsider to win the race, since he has to compete with such sure winners as Greaseball, the alpha-male, “pumping” diesel locomotive, and Electra, the glamorous, bisexual electric one. However, Rusty is a dreamer, who believes in the legend of the “Starlight Express,” something like a divine force, a spirit or god of trains. Like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, who discovers that the mystical Force is within him, Rusty, in the climactic moment of the show, discovers that the “Starlight Express” is nothing but the belief in himself and his wishes, the ability to dream the impossible dream. Against all odds, reality succumbs to his dreams, and so he wins the final race and his beloved female coach, Pearl. In the Lloyd Webber canon, the prototype for Rusty is Joseph, the hero of the composer's first major collaboration with Rice, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The biblical story, on which the musical is based, is actually about the death of the narcissistic fantasy through a hard education in reality, about character building through self-denial and service to God and humankind. However, Rice turns the original story on its head, by transforming it into a celebration of narcissism, a fantasy of absolute wish-fulfillment. Joseph’s gift as a dream interpreter does not derive from God, but from the alternative affective relation he has to the surrounding

world: Joseph is a dreamer, escaping from reality into a world of technicolor fantasy and psychedelic hallucination, in which he reigns as a divine being of pure light. The violent break with this primary narcissistic state of absolute symbiosis and oneness with the world and his descent into hell, the fall into the realm of reality, does not result in an acceptance of the intersubjective world as a realm independent of his wishes; it rather offers him the chance to realize his grandiose dream of self-apotheosis, to make reality an extension of his technicolor fantasies and affirm the fundamental narcissistic longing: that fantasy is the ultimate reality.

As we have already seen, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* was a work in progress, evolving over the years. With every new version, the celebratory affirmation of narcissism emerged more clearly as the show's central theme and was, finally, fully revealed in the 1991 mega-revival at the London Palladium, starring the teen pop idol, Jason Donovan in the role of Joseph. Reconceived as a lavish megamusical, the show is actually transformed into a technicolor fantasy in its own right. Lloyd Webber's pop eclecticism in the music is matched by an orgiastic eclecticism in the production design, which samples every possible stylistic reference, from art deco to Las Vegas spectacles and from Hollywood epics to 1960s psychedelia, in order to create a surrealistic pop phantasmagoria, in which Donovan really shines as the divine being of pure light. Capitalized at £1.5 million, this was an extraordinarily expensive revival, but, by this time, astronomical budgets had become customary and were expected from every self-respecting megamusical. What Barnes wrote in the *New York Post* about *Starlight Express* was now true of every megamusical: “[it] not only gives its audience value for money, but also actually lets it see how it has been spent” (qtd. in Richmond 93).

The same is true for our blockbuster films, which are always accompanied by a secondary publicity that speculates about or analyzes how vast amounts of money are spent in the production of a movie. Of course, the celebration of excessive capital accumulation as a sign of inherent worth is natural for a capitalist society and has always been part of Hollywood's promotional strategies for high-profile films.

However, the production companies' emphasis and the consuming audience's interest in a movie's economics were counterbalanced by an equal and often greater emphasis on traditional middle-class standards of artistic value: the social relevance of a narrative or the great performances of the actors. By contrast, in our postmodern society both producers and consumers show an unprecedented interest in a cultural artifact's economics to the point that the exchange value of blockbuster films and musicals, "evaluated according to the millions of dollars spent in their construction" and returned at the box-office, has become "in some complex supplementary spiral ... a commodity in its own right" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 385-6).

This commodification of exchange value reveals a lot about our postmodern society and its aesthetic products. Both blockbuster films and megamusicals exploded roughly during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, which introduced the radically new neo-liberal political and economic philosophies, that determined the ideological make-up of late capitalism. Both administrations attacked the Welfare State and were opposed to any kind of state intervention and economic planning, which were considered as collectivist in nature and threatening for individual liberty.⁷⁶ The economy, liberated from any governmental restraint, now develops for itself, creating a late capitalist society in which self-interest and competitive

⁷⁶ See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1992) 168-75.

individualism are the new ideological slogans. These slogans replace older middle-class ideologies, which preached social harmony and moral responsibility. In such an (anti-)society, the classic middle-class individual, who believes in self-denial, delayed gratification and libidinally invests in a higher collective ideal, becomes outmoded; whereas the self-indulgent narcissist, who believes in immediate self-gratification, privileges fantasy over reality and the pleasure principle over the reality principle is both the model citizen and the ideal consumer.

For this postmodern narcissist, a turbo-capitalist economy, developing for itself, and a constantly-revolutionized high technology become equivalent as privileged modes of moulding the world according to one's wishes and desires: they are manifestations of the immense abilities of techno-economic form over every given content. Technology and the economy combined become an awesome, transpersonal, unifying, supreme force, inconceivable and ungraspable by the human mind; and, for this reason, they occupy in postmodern society the place of the sublime as techno-capitalist sublime. In our profoundly narcissistic world the place of the “unfigurable and unimaginable thing” cannot be occupied in human imagination by the divine, or a boundless and limitless nature or even the democratic ideals, which were the privileged sublime objects of an older bourgeois society. In postmodern culture, these sublime objects are replaced by the decentred, global, “great suprapersonal system” of cyberspace capitalism (Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory, Vol. 2* 73).

For this reason, the technologically mediated, mega-budgeted hyper-spectacles that foreground their expensive, digital form at the expense of narrative content become one of the many points of contact with the un-representable thing-in-itself: “allegorical emblems of the whole, mesmerizing properly aesthetic postmodern

structures in which the identity of the media and the market is perceptually reenacted, something like a high-tech special effects dramatization of the ontological proof” (*Postmodernism* 353). In a supreme moment of self-referentiality and auto-reflexivity, the subject gazes with awe and libidinally invests in the ideal of his/ her limitless abilities; and only this narcissistic self-indulgence can explain the excessive pleasure that consumption of pure form generates in our era. Postmodern spectators consume not only autonomized and foregrounded techno-aesthetic form and the exchange value of this form, but also the consumption process itself. Hence the pleasure derived from visiting the hyperspaces (multiplexes and refurbished theatres) that screen or stage the hyper-spectacles and provide the feeling of being a simple participant in the global network of production, distribution and consumption - a simple cog in the techno-economic sublime “machine,” which is the prototypical hyperspace of postmodern culture.

4.3. From Revue to Pop Opera

Between *Cats* and *Starlight Express*, Lloyd Webber opened a smaller show, *Song and Dance*, which remains his most bizarre musical. *Song and Dance* is actually the combination of two previous, very successful works of the composer, not originally written for the musical stage, *Variations* (1978) and *Tell Me on a Sunday* (1980). *Variations* is Lloyd Webber's “first ‘serious’ instrumental composition” (Walsh 109), a chamber piece for a cello and a rock band, offering twenty-three variations on Paganini's Twenty-Fourth Caprice for Solo Violin. It was written for the composer's brother, Julian Lloyd Webber, who is considered one of the finest cellists of his generation, and was a crossover work, bringing together the

worlds of pop-rock and classical music. Ever the showman in search of a hit tune, Lloyd Webber wove into his composition two melodies, which may not have “the genetic feeling of having sprung from the original theme” (Citron 260), but create the showstopping effect the composer is always after; this is especially so in the melody of the fifth variation, which is reinstated dramatically in the finale, in order to lead to a thunderous conclusion. *Variations* was released on record in 1978 and became a surprisingly big hit, creating the familiar myth about Lloyd Webber, that everything he touches turns into gold (Richmond 57). *Tell Me on a Sunday*, a song cycle for a female voice, was also very successful both as a record and a telecast for the BBC. It is a collection of pop tunes, many of them written in the composer's favorite power-pop-ballad mode, which deal with the emotional odyssey of an English girl in New York, her abuse by unworthy lovers and her road to maturity. Lloyd Weber always wanted to present *Tell Me on a Sunday* on stage, and Mackintosh, who co-produced *Song and Dance* with the composer's Really Useful Company, came up with the idea of combining it with the Paganini variations, now interpreted on stage as an extended dance piece.

Thus, *Tell Me on a Sunday* became the first act of the new show, the song section, a cabaret-like one-woman-show and a singing and acting *tour-de-force* for Marti Webb, who first interpreted the song cycle on both record and TV. The second act, the dance section, became a dancing *tour-de-force* for Wayne Sleep, the principal dancer of *Cats* in London, who led the ensemble in the non-stop extravagant and flamboyant choreographies of Anthony van Laast. The two parts were loosely unified by making the Webb's and Sleep's characters inhabitants of New York, which took hyperspatial dimensions as the dramatic skyline of Manhattan, the skyscrapers and the

fire escapes, was projected on to a series of huge zig-zag screens (82). At the end of the dance section, Webb reappeared on stage to sing in “Memory”-like fashion “When You Want to Fall in Love,” *Variations'* big theme now set to lyrics, implying that her character finally found love in New York in Sleep's character. Directed by RSC's John Caird, *Song and Dance* opened in London in 1982 and was an instant hit.

Despite its success, Lloyd Webber felt that the show was not yet ready for its transfer on Broadway in 1985. So he hired an American lyricist and director, Richard Maltby Jr. to americanize some of Don Black's original lyrics, to rethink the dramatic structure of the song section and unify it more effectively with the dance section. Maltby fleshed out the character of the English girl, gave her a name and a career, Emma, an ambitious hat designer, and focused on her relationship with Joe, an all-American Nebraskan boy with commitment issues. In a strategic move, he turned Joe into the protagonist of the dance section and brought Peter Martins of the New York City Ballet to create less abstract and more dramatic, character-specific choreographies, that delineate vividly Joe and his troubled life in New York. In this way, Maltby made the whole evening the story of two people who express themselves in different mediums but both experience the same urban alienation and both feel unable to fit, communicate and find happiness in the delirious New York of the 1980s. So when Emma reappears in the dance section to be reunited with Joe, the happy ending becomes really climactic and cathartic and less forced than in the London version. Casting Bernadette Peters, who was already hailed as “the finest singing actress since Streisand” (Richmond 83) in a Tony-award-winning performance as Emma, was the final touch that guaranteed the transformation of one of the most bizarre theatrical experiments into a solid Broadway hit.

The leading New York drama critics were divided. Barnes evaluated *Song and Dance* as “the best thing that Lloyd Webber has written for the theater” (qtd. in Citron 309); while Rich found the whole thing devoid of content and, commenting once again on the composer's habit of repeating insistently his big tunes, said: “the better songs are reprised so often that one can never be quite sure whether they are here to stay or simply refusing to leave.”⁷⁷ Rich was obviously annoyed by the preposterousness of the whole endeavor: presenting together two self-contained musical pieces with nothing in common whatsoever, not as a double bill but as a supposedly coherent piece of musical theatre. One can detect his detestation of the power Lloyd Webber was granted and his fear for the future of musical theatre. It seemed that, after the success of *Cats*, he could open on Broadway anything he wanted. What next? A musicalized version of the telephone book? Moreover, with one unorthodox show following the other, Lloyd Webber appeared as being on a mission to systematically deconstruct and finally tear apart the musical theatre as Americans knew it. After so many years it took to integrate song and dance seamlessly along a linear narrative line and subject them to narrative purposes, *Song and Dance* offered a paper-thin excuse for a narrative with “the two elements polarized rather than integrated:” this “was a physical deconstruction of established elements of the musical, the opposite of the integrated musical that had come to define the genre” (Snelson 31).

The same could be said for *Cats*: by presenting a loosely tied, almost plotless, string of self-contained numbers, it seemed to be a throwback to older forms of

⁷⁷ See Rich, Rev. of *Song and Dance*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *New York Times* 19 September 1985, 20 April 2008 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9905E7D91739F93AA2575AC0A963948260&scp=2&sq=Frank+Rich+Song+and+Dance&st=nyt>>.

variety entertainment, like the revue, a more elaborate and expensive version of vaudeville. *Starlight Express* also resembles a revue, since the plot about Rusty is more or less an excuse for a series of autotelic numbers, presenting various anthropomorphic locomotives and coaches, and, of course, for the highly spectacular action set-pieces. If we also take into consideration that in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* the biblical story is used in the most generic manner, just for the purpose of stringing together the pop pastiches, we end up with another one revue-like musical. And what about *Evita*? As we have seen, Prince himself, the director, described it as a “documentary revue,” not so much an examination of the heroine's character as a collection of highlights from her life, strung together in an episodic, highly fragmented manner. The same can also be said for *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which gives us a series of vignettes from Christ's last days on earth. *Song and Dance* appears as the most disconnected of all the shows: essentially, an intimate revue, a cabaret one-woman-show to showcase the talents of Webb or Peters, followed by an irrelevant spectacular dance after-piece, whose only reason for existence seems to be the justification of the ticket's high price. Was Lloyd Webber really destroying musical theatre? Was he throwing us back to an older, outmoded, non-integrated form of variety entertainment? Or had he hit upon a different mode of integration, which borrows many elements from the revue, whose representational structure becomes once again relevant in postmodern society?

Actually, the revue is not only associated with Lloyd Webber's megamusicals, but also with the concept musicals of the 1970s, which are considered landmarks in the history of the Broadway musical. In fact, one of the usual definitions given to the concept musical is “a book show turning into a revue” (Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin'*

225). This definition stresses the variety-like, too elliptical, too serial narrative structure of the concept musical: the book, the prose sequences are submerged, trimmed, sometimes eliminated, the causal connections between the numbers become weak, and so the linear development of the narrative loses its accumulative force. Instead of being integrated on a linear, syntagmatic line and being integral parts of an unfolding narrative, the musical numbers are often organized paradigmatically around an all-encompassing theme. For example, in *Company* (1970), the theme is marriage and sexual relations in upper middle-class New York, in *Follies* (1971), the collapse of the American Dream as represented in the manufactured utopias of the mass culture and in *A Chorus Line* (1975), the harsh realities faced by the New York “gypsies,” the anonymous singing-and-dancing chorus of a Broadway show. This paradigmatic mode of organization around an all-encompassing theme rather than an evolving narrative is also a technique borrowed from the revue, and, more specifically, from the thematically integrated revues. For example, in 1918, after the U.S. entered World War I, composer/ lyricist Irving Berlin produced the all-military revue *Yip! Yip! Yaphank*, which spoofed the drudgery of Army life, but also boosted the audience's morale with flag-waving patriotism; and in 1942, when the U.S. entered World War II, Berlin gave us the sequel with *This Is the Army*. The 1930s, in particular, popularized many thematically integrated revues. A classic Depression-era revue, that exhibited a high level of thematic integration, was *Pins and Needles* (1937), the surprise hit of the decade: an amateur project of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), exploring in humoristic way the everyday life of the working class and its outlook on national and international politics.

The popularity of thematically integrated revues, promoting a paradigmatic

instead of a syntagmatic organization, is, as we have already seen in chapter two, related to the dislocation of narrative temporality, due to the fragmentation of social experience and the gradual rise of space as a cultural dominant. The spatialization of experience is also reflected in the attempt of many revue series to be organized paradigmatically around a stylistic concept and create on stage a coherent spatial organism, by evoking a consistent style and atmosphere that is infused and diffused throughout the whole production and brands the experience that each revue series provides as different from the competing ones. To attend each of these series was to enter a different world, consistent within its multiplicity.⁷⁸ In 1931, the revue reached its artistic peak with *The Band Wagon*, which achieved an unprecedented stylistic unity. This revue introduced to Broadway audiences a new stage technology: the double revolve, which “created striking stage pictures when the two mobile areas moved in opposite directions bearing dancers working in contrary motion as well” (Mordden, *Sing for Your Supper* 3). By coordinating the double revolve with the set changes and the dancing, *The Band Wagon* made movement the movement of a whole world: of a total, consistent, self-enclosed universe, whose unique kinetic laws unfolded for the first time in front of the audience. In this way, the revue transformed

⁷⁸ In the long history of the revue in the U.S., extending from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, there were many annual revue series, which were structured around a producer's stylistic vision, determining both the selection of the material and the way it was represented on stage. Thus, the *Ziegfeld Follies* perfected a vision of the theatre as a “grande boutique” (Mordden, *Make Believe* 85), an extravagant playground-cum-department store, the Galleries Lafayette of show business: their centerpiece was a surrealistically glamorous female body, the ideal locus of intersection of both the psychoanalytic and marxist theories of the fetish; the *Hitchy Koo* revues were the antidote to Ziegfeld's grandiose sexual/ materialist vision: homey, corny and filled with nostalgia for small-town life; *George White's Scandals* were more dance-oriented, fast, sleek, animated shows, with a distinctive worldly, sassy, know-it-all, very jazz-age attitude; *The Earl Carroll Vanities* followed closely Ziegfeld's example, but also emphasized a less romanticized and more brassy, burlesque-like sexuality; the *Music Box Revues* gave prominence to wit, class and elegance; *The Garrick Gaieties* communicated the energy and insouciance of youth; and the *Greenwich Village Follies* gave a bohemian, more sophisticated and a little bit grotesque image of the world. For a thorough presentation of these revue-series see Chapter 4, “The Girls of My Dreams: The Variety Show” from Mordden's *Make Believe* 83-98.

stylistic unity into spatial integration, fully realizing its ambition to become a world closed in upon itself, an autonomous spatial organism. The concept musical perfects all the previous attempts of the revue for spatial unity, because, as we have seen, it is not simply written but visually conceived and structured according to an overall and all-encompassing staging plan, which turns the stage into a unified, three-dimensional, ever-evolving visual composition: an architectural organism closed in itself, that replaces the established temporal laws of narrative organization with spatial, immanent ones, specifically devised for and applied to each individual production.

The popularization of the concept musical is concomitant with the rise of a postmodern narcissistic culture, in which the breakdown of linear temporality and the spatialization of social experience intensify. In 1970, Sondheim and Prince's concept musical, *Company*, both reflected and commented on these phenomena, by offering a penetrating look in the everyday life of a postmodern narcissist, Robert: a self-absorbed thirty-five-year-old bachelor in a state of emotional paralysis, unable to invest libidinally the outside world and commit himself to a relationship. He wanders aimlessly in New York, observing the lives of five married couples, and cannot decide whether he should risk emotional involvement. His chaotic psychological state is expressed theatrically through a chaotic aesthetic form: there is absolute lack of chronological order and dramatic progression, as the scenes from the everyday lives of his friends appear in an overlapping, nonsequential, almost stream-of-consciousness manner. Equally disorienting is the theatrical space that Robert inhabits: an abstract representation of New York as "one enormous cubist painting" (Aronson qtd. in Ilson 166). Boris Aronson's constructivist design presents

us with a huge, intricate, skeletonized metal and glass structure, surrounded by a cyclorama, on which 600 slides depicting urban life are projected. The multi-level set offers many different rectangular frames, cubes, which are connected by two open elevators and ladders, so enabling overlapping actions as well as various combinations of horizontal and vertical movement. Set against and within this abstract urban jungle, the disconnected rituals from everyday married life are derealized, denaturalized and acquire an air of absurdity, a ghostly, dreamlike unreality, which is reinforced by the metatheatricality of the show. Robert's company of friends also doubles as a theatrical company, the singing and dancing ensemble of a show. This means that the members of the cast step in and out of their roles all the time, interrupt and comment on the action, in Brechtian manner, creating a confusion between performance and identity that reinforces the confusion between fantasy and reality. Although the actor playing Robert is the only cast member that does not double as company, Robert is an equally perplexing figure. His emotional emptiness, lack of purpose and inactivity, make him less a character than a mirage, an image: a handsome, sophisticated, witty, sexy thirty-five-year-old male; in short a perfect ideal of masculinity.

Robert's character introduces us to the new performative conception of subjectivity as an aesthetic oeuvre, which presupposes the more "theatrical," postmodern society, in which fantasy is privileged over reality and virtuality over actuality. Three of the most important concept musicals of the decade explore in depth this hyperreal theatricalization of society, by using in a self-referential way the theatrical stage as their actual setting. In *Follies*, Sondheim and Prince's bitter love-letter to the revue, a nearly demolished theatre is haunted by the ghosts of its glorious

past, which act in a symbolic way as the entertainment myths of a romanticized, more innocent America. Middle-aged ex-stars and ex-chorus girls are forced to face in a nightmare-of-a-reunion their idealized reflections from the past, which materialize in the present. The virtual and the actual, the ideal and the real finally merge in a collective nervous breakdown, staged as a paranoiac Ziegfeldean extravaganza. In Fosse's "Musical Vaudeville," *Chicago*, life is transformed into a grotesque, *carnavalesque* vaudeville performance. The mythologized images of America's most favorite musical theatre stars are the masks that the characters wear, the roles they perform, in order to hide their corruption. In Bennett's *A Chorus Line*, one's whole existence is validated only through performance. An audition turns into a torturing psychoanalytic session and every aspiring chorus member of a Broadway show has to bare himself/ herself in song and dance, express his/ her individuality in aesthetic terms, perform his/ her identity. For Bennett personality is an artistic project in progress, life is a continuous auditioning process and the world is a stage: an extremely minimalist black box with descending mirrors, a void suddenly illuminated by a spotlight, providing you the chance to shine for just a moment.

As we have seen, all the above musicals of the 1970s are considered landmarks in the evolution of the Broadway musical. In this decade, the concept musical is recognized as the most progressive, groundbreaking form of musical theatre. Actually, the term "concept musical" was coined by Gottfried in this period, in order to label and categorize the decade's musicals, which exhibited a cutting-edge aesthetic form. In his book, *Broadway Musicals*, Gottfried extended the term to the past, in order to include such precursors to the 1970s concept musicals as *Cabaret* (1966) and *West Side Story* (1959). Mordden, in his series of books on the history of

the Broadway musical, extended the term back to the 1940s, in order to include Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro*, which is distinguished as the first concept musical; as well as some other forgotten attempts for conceptual musical staging, such as *Ballet Ballads* (1948), *Love Life* (1948) and *Lost in the Stars* (1949). In her important study, *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical*, Barbara Lee Horn also included the controversial and critically neglected *Hair* in this category. All these attempts to construct a history of the concept musical reveal that many critics realized that the future of musical theatre lies in the constant revolutionization of dramatic form. The three *auteurs* of the decade, Prince, Fosse and Bennett, gave a new prestige to the Broadway musical as an aesthetic object and proved that progressive aesthetic form can also be very successful commercially. Bennett's *A Chorus Line* became the biggest hit of the decade and, eventually, the longest running musical in the history of Broadway, closing after 6,137 performances. However, it did not enjoy for long its top position in the chart with the most successful musicals, because the 1980s produced a new champion, *Cats*. As we have seen, *Cats* ushered in the new form of the megamusical, whose success, many critics, historians and theoreticians of the genre argue, prevented the Broadway musical from realizing the lofty artistic aspirations it exhibited in the 1970s.⁷⁹ Was that really the case? Did the megamusical kill the concept musical? Or did the concept musical evolve and mutate into the megamusical?

To answer these questions, we have to insist on the term "concept musical."

One of the definitions that Gottfried gives us is a musical "based on a stage idea, not a

⁷⁹ This view is repeated in many recent publications, which continue to view the megamusical as devoid of any artistic merit. See, for example, Barry Singer's *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theatre and Beyond* (New York: Applause, 2004).

story, but a look, a tone - what the show will be like as a stage animal... [T]his conceptual approach to musicals is theatrical and pictorial rather than intellectual” (qtd. in Jones 270-1). To use a formalist language, according to Gottfried, the concept musical “foregrounds” aesthetic form and “backgrounds” content. For this reason, it is able to reconceive the musical number in more imagistic terms, explore its materiality as an image and foreground a third meaning that the number can communicate, beyond the informational and ideological ones. As we have seen in the second chapter, for Barthes, this is a non-representational meaning, which “cannot be described ... because ... it does not copy anything ... does not represent anything,” it is simply “what, in the image, is purely image” (*Image, Music, Text* 61). In this way, the concept musical appears as a precursor of the megamusical, because the latter does nothing but expand this non-representational domain through the constant revolutionization of stage technology. However, there is a crucial difference between the concept musical and the mega-musical: the opening up of a non-representational realm does not divorce the concept musical from representational ends, from an obligation to reflect the external world. For example, in *Company*, the constructivist urban jungle is a visual metaphor for urban alienation and narcissistic isolation; it is an effort to render representable the break-up of the link between the individual and the world. In this way, autonomized and obscure aesthetic form redoubles the alienation and obscurity of the world; and for this reason acquires a certain negative or critical power, which makes *Company*, and most of the concept musicals of the 1970s, oscillate between critique and enactment. The absurdity of *Company*, the psychopathology of *Follies*, the cynicism of *Chicago* and the subtle sense of irony of *A Chorus Line* indicate an anxiety over the narcissistic isolation and hyperreal

theatricalization of postmodern life; this anxiety produces an obligation to represent and comment on these new realities.

With *Cats*, we finally move to a more playful and properly postmodern logic, which detests representational obligations and anxieties. There is a well-known story about *Cats*, which encapsulates the major difference between the concept musical and the megamusical. In the early stages of its development, before the arrival of Nunn, Lloyd Webber hoped that Prince would direct the show. After all, he was the most conceptual of all directors, whose radical visual concepts transformed *Evita* from a successful album into an international stage hit. However, when Lloyd Webber pitched him the idea, Prince could not get it. He “listened attentively and then asked, ‘Is it a metaphor? Is one of these cats Disraeli? Gladstone? Queen Victoria? Is this about British politics?’ Lloyd Webber laughed. ‘Hal,’ he said, ‘it’s about cats!’” (Richmond 73). What Prince could not understand is that the musical’s artistic means would be devoid of representational ends and the whole show would not reflect and comment on the world, even in an oblique, metaphorical way, but would be committed to the construction of a totally fantastical topography. What *Cats* was about was the celebration of theatrical *écriture*: the creation of a new signifier, the anthropomorphic feline, and a new plastic, ideographic theatrical language. The anthropomorphic feline is a powerful phantasmatic figure, an animated stage hieroglyph, designed with the method of collage. The combination of animal movement with acrobatics and various dancing styles, set against a vast array of musical styles, creates the corporeal discourse for a neo-primitive, but also ultra-hip and trendy body (leg-warmers, arm-warmers, punk haircuts, new wave make-up). These mutant creatures inhabit a sci-fi “waste land” and speak in a distinctively

Victorian and Edwardian language, which contrasts in a playfully dissonant way with their ghetto-fabulous corporeal stylization. All these collage effects make *Cats* an exercise in orgiastic intertextuality, a properly Barthesian “text:” “a woven fabric” of “quotations without inverted commas,” which affirms the post-structuralist definition of structure as “a system with neither close nor centre,” the locus of infinite play (Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* 159-60).

There is another major difference between *Cats* and the concept musicals of the 1970s; one that betrays a mutation in the aesthetics of social space. The concept musicals are haunted by a modernist architectural conception of space, which is geometric, rational, purely functionalist and ultra-practical. *Company*’s colorless plexiglas and metallic cubist structure is a characteristic example: its stage abstraction creates a crystalline form of beauty, whose austerity, clarity and “chastity” betrays a feeling of alienation; of inhabiting an overwhelming but somewhat hostile world. By contrast, *Cats* reveals the influence of a postmodern architectural logic, which is more populist and exploits a commercial sign system, whose lexicon and syntax have been emblematically “learned from Las Vegas” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 39). Hence, the megamusical’s preference for over-saturated and flashy colors, theatrical gigantism and special effects, which recreate the postmodern experience of the techno-capitalist sublime, as it is expressed in the Las Vegas architecture and showmanship. Moreover, the megamusical’s more painterly, sculptural and architectural use of lighting, which reconceives the stage as an omni-directional space, constantly varying its angles and co-ordinates, reflects the influence of the video image (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 265). As Jameson points out, video is “so closely related to the dominant computer and information technology” that it “has a powerful claim for being the art form par

excellence of late capitalism” (*Postmodernism* 76). Video presents us with “an incessant stream of messages;” and mega-musicals, like *Cats* or *Starlight Express*, try to simulate video technique by generating a total flow of images, which almost transforms the stage into a table of information, an opaque surface on which “data” is inscribed (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 265-7).

The influence of the video image, the “subliminal” theatrical gigantism and the special effects aesthetic enable the megamusical super-directors to envision grandiose *mise-en-scènes*. Many critics complain that the grandiosity of theatrical vision is achieved at the expense of dramatic structure and narrative coherence. The same complaint has also been made about the concept musicals of the 1970s. Still, the concept musical’s commitment to representation enables it to offer, sometimes, rich characterization as a compensation for the lack of plot or narrative coherence. By contrast, the megamusical leaves behind all the traditional definitions of plot, narrative and characterization; and, in this way, it resembles the blockbuster movies of the postmodern era. However, the use of narrative and characterization as a pretext for an audio-visual “poetry in space” of increasingly higher affective intensity does not alienate the audience anymore. As we have seen, the audience’s acceptance of more fragmented narrative structures results from a distinctively postmodern interest in the consumption of foregrounded techno-aesthetic form. At the same time, this acceptance reveals that after one century of dissemination and recycling of standardized narrative structures, by Hollywood, Broadway, radio and best-selling fiction, narrative has been excessively reified and mythologized. Narrative signals are now capable of emitting in a telegraphic manner a complete narrative message in their own right, of soaking up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflex (Jameson,

The Cultural Turn 160). This fragmentation and fetishization of narrative enabled Nunn to construct fleeting impressions of character and dramatic situation in *Cats* and *Starlight Express*, mainly through corporeal gesture. The excessive reification of narrative in postmodern culture is also responsible for the success of the *Song and Dance* experiment, the transformation of a double bill into a piece of musical theatre. The minimal insertion of syntagmatic connections between the song and dance parts was enough for the creation of a rudimentary, yet sufficient, narrative pretext. This is the reason why *Song and Dance*, preposterous as it might be, seemed very state-of-the-art in a postmodern way. Finally, it is the combination of narrative reification with the increasingly higher spatialization of human experience in postmodern culture that enabled *Cats* to perfect a type of musical theatre that has its roots in the revue, takes its form in the concept musical and explodes in the megamusical.

All the above defining characteristics of the megamusical were repeated with spectacular results in 1985 in another musical supertanker, which originated in London with a mission to conquer the globe, *Les Misérables*. Responsible for the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's mammoth novel were most of the usual suspects: Mackintosh produced the show, Nunn, in collaboration with Caird, directed it and Napier designed it. However, this time Lloyd Webber did not compose the music. The score of *Les Misérables* had Gallic origins and was composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg. In 1980, Schönberg, in collaboration with the lyricist Alain Boublil and the poet Jean-Marc Natel, released on record in France a musical treatment of Hugo's novel, which was also staged successfully the same year at the Palais des Sports. In 1982, Mackintosh listened to a copy of the original album and immediately decided to produce the show in London. The original score was radically revised, new songs

were added, two lyricists, Herbert Kretzmer and James Fenton, translated the French lyrics and provided additional material, and Nunn, in collaboration with Caird, offered a more detailed dramatic adaptation of the novel. The English show, which started its life as a RSC venture, opened at the Barbican Theatre and then moved to the Palace Theatre, which had been recently bought by Lloyd Webber and his Really Useful Group. Early in its run, it became obvious that *Les Misérables* would become the new *Cats*, an international blockbuster of immense proportions. It arrived on Broadway in 1987 with a record-breaking advance sale, swept the Tony awards and established the British megamusical as the most exciting and profitable musical genre of the decade.⁸⁰

As in the case of *Cats*, the excitement that *Les Misérables* generated as a viewing experience derived partly from its restless pacing. The libretto runs through the novel like a camera, selecting for dramatization only high points in the action. Background information and exposition are largely absent and the connections between the events are provided through projections on a screen. Such fragmented narrative structure achieves a breathless montage effect, a cataclysmic editing that joins together all the big moments and the most dramatic of confrontations in the novel. In this way, a vast panorama of heroic action unfolds in self-contained episodes, out of which a melodramatic gallery of necessarily one-dimensional, rapidly defined archetypal figures emerges: Fantine, the personification of female endurance, Eponine, the sacrificial female heroine, Enjolras, the idealist charismatic leader,

⁸⁰ The association of the RSC with such an obviously commercial project generated much heated discussion in Britain. For John Bull, the commercialization of the RSC can be explained, if we read it as an outcome of “the policy of economic retrenchment,” applied by Thatcher’s Tory Government: “The present government’s insistence on self-sufficiency in business and industry, on a policy of no ‘lame ducks,’ has been extended straightforwardly to the theatre. And this, of course, means the creation of subsidy from the private sector to offset the loss of revenue from central government sources” (406).

Marius, the noble lover and red-blooded warrior. Even the two central characters, Jean Valjean and Javert, lose any sense of realism and are reduced to their mythical and archetypal dimensions: Javert becomes the personification of a cruel, impersonal, vengeful Old Testament moral code, the messenger of a punishing Father on earth; while Valjean is a messenger of the Son, a preacher of redemption, who suffers in order to atone for human sins, and so his life becomes an ongoing dialectic between crucifixion and resurrection, humiliation and triumph. However, the oversimplification of the narrative is part of the show's strength. Nunn and Caird are not interested in creating flesh-and-blood characters, but rather easily identifiable mythical figures, depthless hyperreal images on a huge historical canvas, presenting not so much a specific historical period but rather History as a transpersonal, larger-than-life force sweeping away and crushing individual life.

The telegraphic characterization and the excessively fragmented and highly eclectic dramatization of the novel creates once again a revue-like effect, which is also reinforced by the score, that is conceived as a greatest-hits compilation of power-pop ballads. Schönberg saturates his score with what we have identified as Lloyd Webber's signature Big Tunes in a way that Lloyd Webber had never attempted, until then, to do. In all his musicals, from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* to *Starlight Express*, the composer employs an array of musical styles and reserves his big ballads for one or two focal moments in the show. By contrast, Schönberg gives us one pop-operatic, anthemic, explosive ballad after the other, creating, thus, an unprecedented affective intensity. The orchestrations are dominated by the lush sound of the strings, vocal pyrotechnics and long belting finales reappear with mathematic accuracy every three or four minutes and every melodic hook goes through ever

higher modulations and ever wider amplification until it reaches its thunderous concluding crescendo. The exhausting and relentless build up of affective intensity, ultimately, makes the notion of the climax a redundant one; the show is made entirely out of climaxes, concluding, thus, in the most excessive and hysterical way Lloyd Webber's experimentation with an orgasmic mode of composition. Lloyd Webber had never succumbed to such lyrical indulgence. The terse sounds of rock and the astringent modernist sounds counterbalanced the emotional overdrive of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*, while the polymorphous pastiches of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Cats* and *Starlight Express* showed us a more playful and insouciant side of the composer. For these reasons and despite their continuous use of vocal music, these shows cannot be considered pure pop operas in the way *Les Misérables* is. Mordden defines pop opera as "an opera version of pop: building opera's intensity out of the vernacular musical idiom" (Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse* 82). This is exactly what *Les Misérables* does in almost every dramatic moment: it injects the intensity, excessiveness and extravagance of opera in every concise, compact, austerely symmetrical pop tune, giving us, thus, the effect of opera without its musical complexities.

In this way, the musico-dramatic structure creates an extremely fetishistic text, made up of high melodic and narrative moments, that dictates an equally fetishistic staging. It is not accidental, then, that Nunn and Caird's *mise-en-scène* is structured around the use of tableaux. Theorists of the tableau from Diderot to Barthes have shown that the tableau is the most effective means of dramatic condensation and affective intensity, as it presents in a painterly way the high points of dramatic action, whose communicative power is accentuated through the frequent use of the over-

emotional music.⁸¹ Nunn and Caird use the stage abstractly as a vast canvas, an all-encompassing void, filled with smoke and chiaroscuro shades, out of which highly evocative stage pictures slowly take shape and reach a painterly perfection. Hersey's rich, detailed and sculptural light design takes advantage of the abstract stage environment and exploits the vivid and sumptuous color palette of the megamusical in order to provide the stage pictures with an absorbent quality. This is a theatre of powerful images, which dissolve gracefully into each other in an almost cinematic way. The cinematic illusion is achieved through the use of a constantly revolving stage, that provides different angles and vantage-points, from which the tableaux can be scrutinized; and enables the ritualistic construction of a new stage picture upstage, while another scene takes place downstage, as well as the dissolve of the one picture into the other. The grandest tableaux are presented in the second act, when the two segments of the gigantic barricades, which split, lift and rotate, glide imperiously into place. On this massive scenic structure, the tragic events of 1832 take place, the uprising and eventual slaughter of the rioting workers and student revolutionaries. As the grandeur of the images matches the grandeur of the music and the heroic action, *Les Misérables'* definition of pop opera becomes the most excessive, overblown, monumental version of the megamusical.

Indeed, it seems that *Les Misérables* aspired to be the ultimate megamusical. The radio commercial for the Broadway version is indicative of the show's aspirations: "From despair comes hope. From adversity comes triumph. From struggle comes glory. From across the ocean comes the theatrical event of a lifetime" (qtd. in

⁸¹ See chapter three, "The Text of Muteness," from Peter Brooks classic study *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1976) 56-80.

Sternfeld 189). Eventually, the show live up to its hype and the audiences responded enthusiastically to its overflow of power-pop melodies and its overabundance of heroic characterization, which, as we have seen, is perfectly attuned to the heroic or super-heroic identifications of the postmodern individual. Could Lloyd Webber compete with this quintessential pop opera? His reply to *Les Misérables* was a bold one, a pop opera with the word opera in its title. In 1986, he unveiled the musical that captivated the audience's imagination as no other musical has ever done and created the blockbuster of all blockbusters, the biggest hit in any medium. Forget *Star Wars*, *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* or *Titanic*. "The Phantom of the Opera is here.... inside your mind."

CHAPTER FIVE

Apotheosis and Decline of the British Megamusical: From *The Phantom of the Opera* to *The Lion King*

5.1. The Exemplary High-Concept Megamusical

The Phantom of the Opera opened in London in 1986 and was immediately established as *the* must-see phenomenon of the late 1980s. It was consistently sold out and outside Her Majesty's Theatre queues lined up in rain, snow or heat wave, waiting for returns for the evening's performance (Citron 339). In New York, *The Phantom of the Opera* generated such anticipation that the first day tickets went on sale, the box office nearly broke down with a record of almost a million dollars; and, by the time of its opening in 1988, it had taken in \$16 million, four million more than the previous champion, *Les Misérables* (339). Still playing in both cities, the show has become the longest running musical on Broadway and has traveled all-around the

globe, grossing almost \$4 billion and becoming, thus, the most successful venture in show-business in any medium. The score spawned four hit singles and the album sold more than ten million copies worldwide; and apart from the album, the singles, the souvenir books and all the usual merchandize, a video game, *Phantom* jewelry and even a perfume called *Esprit de Phantom* saturated the market (Walsh 202). Although many blockbuster musicals have come after it, *The Phantom of the Opera* has retained a special position: it has become something akin to a monument of popular culture, the show that everyone must see, when he/ she visits the two musical centers of the world, New York and London.

Is the show worthy of its hype? For starters, the gothic melodramatic plot of Gaston Leroux's novel, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1911), allowed Lloyd Webber to exploit his gift for melody to the maximum and, in true pop-operatic fashion, give us one Big Tune after the other: the title number, "The Music of the Night," "All I Ask of You," "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again," "Angel of Music," "Think of Me," "The Point of No Return." Moreover, this time Lloyd Webber's trademark use of pastiche is dramatically justified. The opera world of the late nineteenth century is the backdrop against which the gothic romance takes place, so the composer had to recreate portions of the operatic repertory that was performed on the stage of the Paris Opéra. Thus, the extracts from the fictional opera *Hannibal* point to French Romantic grand opera, and more specifically to Meyerbeer, while the classical pastiche of *Il muto* betrays a Mozartian influence and suggests the shade of *Le nozze di Figaro* (Snelson 111). For the musical language of the opera managers and the diva La Carlotta, Lloyd Webber chose the discourse of operetta and composed for the "Prima Donna" ensemble a slightly Viennese "waltz of increasing vocal complexity as the

characters break into ever-more separate, contrapuntal lines” (110). Apart from the pop-operatic big ballads and the opera/ operetta pastiches, Lloyd Webber also created a modernist musical sound for the opera the Phantom composes, *Don Juan Triumphant*. In the whole-tone and dissonant styles, one can detect the influence of Debussy, while in the contrasting sections and textures and the aggressive style of the composition, the touch of Stravinsky is evident (116). Full extracts of *Don Juan Triumphant* are heard towards the finale, but hints of this modernist musical world permeate the score in its totality and gradually dominate the melodies, harmonies, and especially the orchestral textures (101). These modernist touches delineate the Phantom’s brutality, savagery and inhumanity, and communicate the primal fear that is provoked by the confrontation with the “heart of darkness.”

Apart from a few, brief expository prose scenes, which are mostly underscored, vocal music dominates *The Phantom of the Opera*. In this musical, Lloyd Webber advances his technique of using melodic phrases from his fully-developed tunes in order to create a “fluid speech-in-music” (107).⁸² Apart from the recurring fragments from his focal numbers, he also employs a large number of shorter themes and shifting motifs, which are mixed with the main set pieces in their full or fragmented form, in order to create large multi-sectional structures. As fully developed or fragmented melodic themes and motifs are restated, interwoven and juxtaposed insistently in different combinations, a complex collage of musical units emerges. However, these units are not so much developed as they are recycled and repeated in order to capture in broad strokes changing emotional atmospheres or character

⁸² The awkward operatic recitative is reserved for the operas-within-the-pop-opera. In this way, a contrast is created between the on-stage, artificial, obsolete-sounding world of opera and the backstage, musically more modern world of pop opera. As Snelson points out, “[t]he contrast here is not principally between sung and spoken dialogue, but between different registers of musicalized speech” (107).

attitudes. In its musical rigidity and simplistic, denotative dramatic function, the musical material appears as reified as the advertising slogans of TV: characters or emotional states are identified with particular melodic phrases, which are repeated each time the character or the emotional state recurs. One can argue that such use of music disregards not only musical continuity and development, but also genuine emotional growth and character development. However, as Snelson points out, this blatant, up-front, sensationalist use of the musical material is exactly what the composer is seeking (122) and rests well with the gothic melodramatic tone of the show. After all, Leroux's story is full of stock characters and situations that invite sharply and clearly formed big aural images, which can communicate immediately the polarized psychological states and the larger-than-life emotional gestures of the novel. Lloyd Webber is the expert in creating big aural images, and, in his musical adaptation, weaves together grand melodic statements of varied shape and length, in order to rapidly introduce the characters, establish vividly their relationships and carry the audience along from one dramatic high point to the next without allowing them to think or reflect on the restless, essentially cinematic action. His aim is, as always, to seduce, impress and overwhelm and Leroux's novel fitted perfectly his orgasmic musical sensibility and enabled him to realize his ideal of a fully musicalized theatre in all its pop-operatic excess. For Mark Steyn, *The Phantom of the Opera* is the composer's best score because "this story and these characters were perfectly matched to his broad, sweeping, soaring melodies... *Phantom* was made for him: Lloyd Webber made the show sing, full-throated and open-vowelled" (qtd. in Sternfeld 235).

To capture visually the extravagance of his melodies, Lloyd Webber chose Prince, *Evita*'s director, who after a series of gloomy, introverted musicals and

commercial flops was looking for a big, extroverted romantic musical and a bona fide hit to direct. Prince's contribution was substantial at every stage of the creative process, from dramatic development to staging, and his participation can be considered a very significant factor in the phenomenal success of the project. As far as the dramatic adaptation is concerned, the director is responsible for translating the gothic melodramatic plot into contemporary terms, making it, thus, relevant to postmodern audiences. Prince was inspired after watching a BBC documentary, called *The Skin Horses*:

It is a 45-minute series of interviews with handicapped people, among them, a quadriplegic, a victim of multiple sclerosis whose speech is so distorted that her intelligent commentary had to be translated in subtitles across the bottom of the screen, and a beautiful girl deprived of arms by thalidomide. Those interviews were interspersed with segments from the 1930s classic film *Freaks*, and the famous scene from *The Elephant Man* in which the actress kisses "Merrick." Some of those interviewed spoke willingly, eagerly of their sexuality; it was an element which had been missing in the design [of *Phantom*] and which, indeed, informed the subsequent rewritten drafts of the libretto. (Prince qtd. in Ilson 347)

Prince was moved by "these people's healthy, uncomplicated assertion of their own sexuality and their own needs" and realized that "the real emotional pull of *The Phantom* is erotic:" the musical should center on the main character's "attempt, however distorted, to reach for love" (Prince qtd. in Ilson 347). The Phantom's need for emotional and sexual fulfillment is already part of Leroux's novel, but, in the musical version, it becomes the driving force of the show. The musical emphasizes

the Phantom's physical deformity, the repulsive horror of his face, which is distorted, amorphous and melted, with not yet assumed definite features (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* 113-4). His horrific ugliness is the infection that poisons his love for Christine, the young soprano, who is both his muse and sexual object of desire, and condemns him to isolation, making him unable to experience sexual satisfaction and emotional communication with another human being.

This emphasis on physical deformity gave the musical a contemporary edge. The 1980s was the decade when the postmodern culture of narcissism exploded, a culture that emphasized extraordinarily outward appearance, creating impossible standards of beauty, that made many individuals feel lacking in front of the media images of über-masculinity and über-femininity. In a thoroughly mediatized, hyperreal society, which makes the manufactured and technologically mediated images appear more real and desirable than reality, the highly-aestheticized, idealized representations of masculinity and femininity become desirable and unobtainable imaginary doubles of the self: ethereal images of bodily perfection, which emphasize the fundamental dissymmetry between the real and the ideal. It seems that our media culture reactivates continuously the primordial moment of identification as alienation to an inaccessible ideal of corporeal wholeness and unity, which occurs during the Lacanian mirror stage. Like Lacan's infant in front of the mirror, the postmodern individual appears perpetually mesmerized by and fascinated with an "unveraciously complete" *imago* of bodily perfection (Nobus 116). This "radically exterior" and "strictly inaccessible" image (116) generates an intolerable, anxiety-producing contradiction between the reflected perfection of the body and the experienced insufficiency; and so produces the postmodern subject that is conditioned to feel

somewhat deformed and handicapped and anticipate a state of corporeal perfection through extreme dietic regimes and fitness programs. In this way, “a Dorian Gray-like imbalance” is created between the individual and his/ her technologically mediated mirror images: as our culture moves to ever more artificial, immaterial simulations of corporeality, the physicality and materiality of the human body is experienced as an “amorphous leftover,” a disgusting, abject remainder, “a nauseating... life substance” that continually threatens to blow up the narcissistic identifications of the individual (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* 126-9).

One of the reasons that made *The Phantom of the Opera* resonate with contemporary audiences was its clever melodramatic manipulation of the anxieties that the postmodern culture of narcissism generates. This is achieved through the sentimentalization and transformation of the hero into a powerful source of identification: the musical Phantom is not only a scary gothic villain, but also a desiring subject suffering from the dissymmetry between the real and the ideal. This “loathsome gargoyle,” this “repulsive carcass, who seems a beast... secretly dreams of beauty, secretly... secretly...” (Perry, *The Complete Phantom of the Opera* 147). In his dreams, the disgusting creature of the night longs to be one of the beautiful people of the day, represented in the musical by Raoul, the Vicomte de Chagny, the dashing and heroic aristocrat, with whom Christine is in love. Lloyd Webber manages to communicate effectively in musical terms the Phantom’s longings and desires. As we have seen, the Phantom is associated musically with modernist atonal and dissonant sounds, which capture in their subversion of musical tonality and melodic and harmonic consonance the horror that his amorphous, deformed face generates. However, in his first big solo, “The Music of the Night,” the Phantom expresses

himself in one of Lloyd Webber's most soulful, luxurious, extravagantly romantic melodies. Moreover, "The Music of the Night" exhibits many similarities in key, sentiment and characteristics with Raoul's big theme, "All I Ask of You," his duet with Christine. Actually, "the opening phrase of one is pretty much a musical anagram of the other, for both encompass the same pitches... and both are bounded by their dominant and lower and upper octaves" (Snelson 97-8). The musical similarities between these two focal ballads delineate the Phantom's narcissistic identification with the idealized figure of the romantic lover and his yearning to be recognized as such by the Other, the social mainstream and his object of desire, Christine.

This yearning is expressed vividly in the musical's most effective scene, which is not included in the novel, the performance of the Phantom's opera, *Don Juan Triumphant*. As we have seen, this opera's "musical language owes much to Stravinsky in its contrasting sections and textures, dissonant harmonies, and aggressive style, anticipating within the drama's chronology, some of those elements that shocked audiences when *Le Sacre du printemps* was first performed in Paris in May 1913" (116). Betrayed and rejected, the Phantom unleashes the powers of horror and expresses through his raw, brutal, barbarous musical style all the ugliness, pain and suffering that the civilized Parisian society refuses to see. While the performance of his opera is under way, the Phantom, undetected under his cloak, takes the place of the leading tenor, Ubaldo Piangi, so as to play himself the role of Don Juan in the seduction scene with Aminta, played by Christine. In their anthemic, ravishingly romantic but also sensual duet, "The Point of No Return," tonality is reestablished triumphantly and the Phantom at last enacts his fantasy and plays the role of the heroic lover opposite Christine. When the song ends, the Phantom steals Raoul's

melody and lyrics from “All I Ask of You” and sings to his beloved: “Say you’ll share with me one love, one lifetime/ Lead me, save me from my solitude/ Say you want me with you here beside you/ Anywhere you go let me go too/ Christine, that’s all I ask of...” (Perry, *The Complete Phantom of the Opera* 164). The Phantom never makes it to the word “you,” because Christine calmly removes his mask and reveals for the first time in front of the audience (both the fictional audience within the musical and the real audience of the musical) the full horror of his face. The Phantom, such an imperial figure up to this point, shrinks like a hurt child, a wounded animal, as his fantasy world collapses in such a public and humiliating manner.

The denouement of the action takes place in the Phantom’s lair. The Phantom has abducted Christine and Raoul tries to save her. Lloyd Webber revisits many of his melodies and creates an intricate musical collage for the three characters. When the Phantom forces Christine to stay with him in order to save Raoul’s life, she approaches him, while singing the melody from the “Angel of Music:” “Pitiful creature of darkness/ What kind of life have you known?/ God give me courage to show you/ You are not alone” (166). As the melody climaxes, she kisses the Phantom lingeringly on the lips without any sign of revulsion. For just a moment, the isolated monster realizes the fantasy of his erotic union with Christine, and, heartbroken by her act of compassion, releases the two lovers. As they depart reprising their love theme, “All I Ask of You,” the Phantom revisits his trademark tune, “The Music of the Night,” and belts out his final cry of despair: “You alone can make my song take flight/ It’s over now, the music of the night...” (167). The show ends with a set of chords (F# major-D# minor-D minor- C major- C# major), which create a magical atmosphere and provide in their sweet, serene, lullaby-like sound a final aural

representation of the Phantom's highest romantic aspirations (Snelson 118). As the devastated Phantom disappears in front of the audience's eyes in order to avoid the lynching mob, the last impression he leaves is less that of a caricatured villain and more that of a tragic lover, the mysterious and dark (anti)hero of a postmodern narcissistic culture.

As the transformation of the Phantom from a hideous monster into a star-crossed lover of tragic proportions becomes the dramatic backbone and basic narrative arch of the show, the novel's secondary characters and subplots are eliminated, so that the musical can focus on the basic erotic triangle. In fact, the narrative seems too simplified, truncated, almost elliptical: a summary version of the original that has been shorn of peripherals and reduced to its climactic moments, which are overscored by Lloyd Webber's extravagantly romantic melodies. It is like being told about the novel by a highly excited intermediary (Shone),⁸³ so excited, actually, that major plot points and, even more importantly, characterizations do not hold under scrutiny. Thus, although Prince's adaptation seems to add psychological depth to the original, in reality, the story and characters are even more schematic in the musical than in the novel. Raoul is thoroughly generic and one-dimensional as the dashing knight in his shining armor and Christine's feelings for him and the Phantom are never clarified and differentiated, so that her actions are unjustified - especially her kissing of the Phantom, which is the emotional climax of the show. Moreover, the Phantom's oscillation between terrifying psychotic murderer and sympathetic tormented lover (not to mention between uncompromising modernist artist and postmodern narcissist, longing for recognition by the society of the spectacle) is

⁸³ I am paraphrasing the always-witty Shone, who describes blockbuster cinema's narrative model, which, as we shall see, is followed faithfully in *The Phantom of the Opera*.

uneasy, making his characterization the synthesis of antithetical character traits that never results in a convincing psychological portrait. For this reason, Prince's ingenious decision to transform the Phantom into a powerful source of identification seems somewhat forced under scrutiny, despite the fact that it is highly effective on a surface level.

However, *The Phantom of the Opera* never intends to go beneath its seductive surface. Its narrative premise works as a fantasmic frame that can immediately hook the audience and be encapsulated in a series of evocative images, starting with the show's logo: a white mask and red rose against a black background. This type of narrative, which is structured around a single clever idea worked out obsessively through a barrage of spectacular images, is very popular in postmodern culture and is adopted particularly by blockbuster films. With their character and narrative arcs reduced to telegraphic shorthand, these films are pitched, funded, produced and marketed by using a single "big idea," that can be boiled down to a simple catch phrase. This idea is elaborated excessively in a series of digitally processed images, which are matched to big symphonic scores or a collection of hit songs. The most expensive and technically complex sequences, known as set-pieces, are used to market the film, because they signify the entirety of the experience offered by the movie. *The Phantom of the Opera* follows faithfully this model and one of its set-pieces has been used so extensively for promotional purposes that it has come to stand for the whole show: the famous lake scene. Lloyd Webber's darkly melodramatic title-song evokes images from Grand Guignol silent movies with becloaked villains and virginal ingénues in distress; and, accordingly, Prince envisioned the number as the first descent of Christine into the underground world of mystery, desire and horror.

The number starts with the dark and very Victorian shadows of Phantom and Christine descending into the lower depths of the opera house, by rushing across a “travelator,” a moving platform at the back of the stage, suspended bridge-like between two towers and shifting slowly downward. When they reach the depths, the Phantom and Christine, shrouded in an eerie mist, sail across a subterranean lake on a gondola, while dozens of glowing candles rise mysteriously out of the water.

This is a complex and technologically-mediated scene, which encapsulates one of the basic aesthetic premises of the show, i.e. using modern technology in order to recreate a Victorian atmosphere. The gondola is motor-driven and radio-controlled, the illusion of shimmering light on water is created through motorized wheels and rotating discs and the appearance of the glowing candles is achieved through specially designed lamps, whose tiny bulbs flicker inside a siloconget, giving the impression of moving flame (Ilson 350). What is exciting in this scene is the way in which Prince transforms the stage into a pictorial organism in constant motion and achieves movement through kinetic scenic structures that modify the stage environment. The descending moving platform, the sailing gondola and the rising candelabra are synchronized to the music and create a set choreography, which makes movement an immediate given of the stage image. Megamusicals are extremely fond of this kind of stage dance, which emerges as an animating, magical, dreamlike power that sets the whole stage world into motion. *Les Misérables* had already achieved this effect with the perfect synchronization of vocal and orchestral music with the appearance and disappearance of new scenic structures that rapidly zoom in and out, roll on and off, fly in and out, offering a series of spatial or hyperspatial anamorphoses and metamorphoses. The extra element, added by *The Phantom of the Opera* and the lake

scene, in particular, is that shifting and mobile stage entities are not simply used in order to create a sense of rapid editing between musical numbers and sequences but within an individual number, and so infuse it with spatial dynamism and kinetic excitement. This sense of restless mobility within a single sequence is particularly alluring to postmodern audiences that, through their exposure to TV commercials and video clips, which include an extraordinary number of distinct images in a time frame that ranges from one-half to three minutes, demand the highest possible affective intensity from the most minimal and fragmented aesthetic forms.

To facilitate the rapid scene change from Christine's dressing room to the descending moving platform, the first part of the song, in the lake scene, is pre-recorded and doubles of the actors playing the Phantom and Christine are used. The use of prerecorded material in a live musical performance is considered by almost every critic unacceptable, revealing the ease with which Lloyd Webber sacrifices his operatic ideals for the sake of spectacle. However, spectacle, in the sense of powerful theatrical imagery, is what pop opera, and the mega-musical in general, is all about. In pop opera, the music is not used in an operatic way, i.e. as a musically enhanced, elevated form of poetic speech, but rather as the audio component of a complex audio-visual image. Music does not occupy the centre of the stage but is integrated in an overall pattern of sound, color and movement. It loses its temporal perspective, its dynamic developmental character, and is spatialized, fetishized and reified: it becomes an easily grasped aural environment waiting to be translated visually. Of course, the use of the musical discourse as a pretext for powerful visual imagery has been part of the Broadway musical tradition for many years and is exemplified in the work of the choreographer-directors as well as in Prince's output in the late 1960s and

1970s. The significant difference that pop opera and the megamusical introduce is that set design is liberated from its immobility as a static frame of the stage action and becomes itself part of the action: spatial entities assert their performative autonomy and foreground their phenomenological presence in order to construct all-encompassing stage pictures, three-dimensional dream images.

The lake scene is one of the most effective, and, depending on the aesthetic taste of each spectator, one can find it poetic in a ritualistic, religious manner or, as the consistently vitriolic Rich pointed out, “a masterpiece of campy phallic Hollywood iconography – it’s Liberace’s vision of hell.”⁸⁴ Still, what one cannot deny is the visual power of this scene, which has become a trademark of the show and probably the most famous scene from a stage musical. Although Prince does not deliver a second picture of this magnitude, he sustains the strangely romantic, hallucinatory and mysterious atmosphere of the lake scene throughout the show, mainly by avoiding the traps of naturalism. Instead, he chooses an expressionistic approach and plunges his stage into a thick darkness, which “acquires pressing visual weight” (Garner 66). He said to his set and costume designer, Maria Björnson, “I see dark, and people coming out from nowhere, and shadows, and heavy drapes that drop and thud and pound” (qtd. in Ilson 349). Responding to the director’s vision, Björnson designed sets of suggestive simplicity, as the grand staircase leading to nowhere, and used her swirling, leaping, dropping and flying drapes in order to create an atmosphere of opulence and secrecy. In this spare scenic environment, the emerging objects are highlighted and acquire symbolic value, like the cracked mirror in the Phantom’s lair,

⁸⁴ See Rich’s Rev. of *The Phantom of the Opera*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *New York Times* 27 January 1988, 20 April 2008 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940DE7DD1138F934A15752C0A96E948260&scp=1&sq=Frank+Rich+The+Phantom+of+the+Opera&st=nyt>>.

which symbolizes his self-disgust or the dummy in the wedding dress prepared for Christine, which stands for his romantic longings. This symbolic minimalism creates a highly stylized atmosphere, which is further enhanced by the painterly artificiality of the actors' gestural vocabulary: the regal posture of the Phantom, when he appears in Christine's mirror, or his subtle but controlled gestures in "The Music of the Night," suggesting a gentle rape. This abstractly poetic universe of forbidden eroticism and mystery, which characterizes the backstage and understage world of the opera house, is contrasted with the onstage fictional operatic world, which reproduces the theatrical conventions of the late nineteenth century stage with its one-dimensional, painted-on backdrops and its detailed and lavish naturalism (Snelson 119). However, as the show progresses, the two worlds merge because the Phantom's ominous presence spreads like a plague from the subterranean depths and devours the opera world.

Prince's aim was to make the Phantom a haunting, almost supernatural, visual and aural menace, which threatens to spread beyond the world of the stage and engulf the auditorium. For this reason, Levan's sound design amplifies the disembodied voice of the Phantom and makes it omnipresent and all-powerful, surrounding the audience and covering the theatrical space in its entirety. Accordingly, Paul Daniels' magic effects, which enable the Phantom to appear and disappear at will, aim at disorienting and frightening the spectators, who never know where or when the Phantom is going to reappear. The threat embodied by the Phantom is finally realized, in the most sensational manner, in the finale of the first act, when the betrayed hero sends crashing onto the stage a replica of the Paris Opéra's chandelier, which hangs in the center of the auditorium, provoking the screams of the audience. One point where

the musical deviates considerably from the novel is in its handling of the supernatural threat, represented by the Phantom. As Snelson remarks, in the novel, “[i]t is the weakness of those interacting with the all-too-human Phantom that has created his power, that of a self-perpetuating myth built on human superstition, credulity, and insecurity” (80). By contrast, the musical version is “constantly subduing the novel’s rationalist element: the tricks are never explained, the history of the Phantom ... is perfunctorily and briefly given very late ... but hardly stressed, and the fate of the Phantom remains a mystery as he vanishes into thin air at the end” (81). Thus, whereas “Leroux’s original presents superstition and illusion in order to expose their falseness through reason, the musical elevates mystery, avoids explanation, and invites the suspension of disbelief” (81).

In this way, the Phantom becomes one more supernatural hero, like the comic-book heroes of postmodern culture. This supernatural dimension of the leading character creates the impression that the constant animation of the theatrical space, with its flying drapes and ascending and descending chandelier, derives from the super-hero’s powers: apparently, these powers transgress all natural laws, and so set the opera world into motion, transforming it into a dangerous, magical, cursed, haunted space with its own independent will. In fact, the creation of a haunted and dangerous world was Prince’s all-informing visual concept, which took shape, after visiting the Palais Garnier in Paris, the opera house, in which the action of the musical takes place. Built by Charles Garnier between 1861 and 1875, this gigantic opera house, still the largest in the world, is a hyperspace in its own right: it occupies nearly three acres and stands seventeen stories high, with the auditorium and stage areas taking up only a fifth of the total space (Ilson 346). The Grand Staircase, which

curves and bifurcates from the entrance hall into a double horseshoe in a magnificent marble sweep, is more breathtaking than any of the sets that have been presented on stage; while the ornate crystal chandelier, seven tons of metalwork and glass, hanging in the center of the auditorium encapsulates the opulence and flamboyance of late nineteenth-century high Parisian society (Perry, *The Complete Phantom of the Opera* 14-21). However, the Palais Garnier is not only a symbol of luxury and affluence, but also a mysterious and haunted place. In the depths of the opera house, there is the massive, strange subterranean lake, whose water was used to operate the hydraulic stage machinery; while in the labyrinthine cellars, “which seem to extend into the dark infinity of Piranesian voids, there is a perpetual chill that no amount of modern electric lighting seems able to dispel” (14). This underground world, which in the musical is the Phantom’s domain, was transformed into a prison house with torture chambers by the Communards, who occupied parts of Paris after the siege of the city by the Prussian army. Thus, “[i]t is easy enough to imagine that the first notion of the great building being haunted by tormented spirits took hold during the period of the siege and the Commune” (14).

Prince envisioned *The Phantom of the Opera* as a journey into this opulent, mysterious and dangerous world. Indeed, as he keeps the action confined within the opera house,⁸⁵ his *mise-en-scène* resembles a tour to various locations of the Palais Garnier (the stage, the manager’s office, the subterranean lake, the roof), all of them submerged in menacing shadows and all providing the mysterious settings for enigmatically romantic images. Moreover, this opera house includes many visual and aural allusions to the art and intellectual world of a European Belle Epoque at the

⁸⁵ The only setting, outside the opera house, depicted on stage is the graveyard, which, nevertheless, enhances the overall gothic atmosphere.

crossroads between romanticism and modernism: from the histrionic heroics of Meyerbeer to the subtle suggestion of a forbidden sexuality of Sadean or even Bataillean excess, from the elegance of Degas' ballerinas to the primitivism of Stravinsky's ballets and from gothic literature's conventional oppositions between the angelic and the demonic, the chaste and the corrupted, the pure and the impure, the healthy and the polluted to a Nietzschean ethic beyond good and evil. As in the case of *Cats*, this dense intertextuality ultimately serves the creation of a hypertextual structure, in which mythical signals constitute portals, doors, gateways to various cultural texts, which are powerfully drawn in and open up the play of signification, by allowing irreducible associations and combinations (Giannachi 14). As we have seen, this overabundance of signification is one more structural characteristic of postmodern culture, especially found in blockbuster films, for which what they "have to 'say' in any coherent ... narrative sense is much less important than how they 'play'" (Allen 125).

Such an absence of binding narrative authority in favor of playfulness is evident in the overdetermination of the Phantom, whose transformation from a monster into a tragic lover is such a general narrative premise and character arc that it does not exclude many, even mutually exclusive, readings of the hero: apart from a conventional gothic monster, standing for the repressed sexual longings of Victorian middle-class society, he can also be interpreted as a diabolic Byronic hero, a Nietzschean superman beyond good and evil, a tormented modernist artist, or a rather conservative postmodern narcissist longing for the hyperreal perfection of the society of the spectacle. This playful polysemy allows also many interpretations of the Phantom-Christine romance, and so enables the "big idea" that structures the musical

to increase “its stock as a source of meaning in some other place, as some other licensed version of itself, and as a part of someone else’s narrative” (127). This systematic indeterminacy and interpretative polyvalence is an integral part of what in contemporary film jargon is called the high concept business model, which achieves the diversification of a film’s demographic appeal through the exploitation of a narrative premise’s allegorical and metaphorical potential.⁸⁶ And, of course, there is no other musical theatre director who knows more than Prince about high concepts, since his shows of the late 1960s and 1970s were the first to introduce into Broadway jargon the term “concept musicals.” These were shows also structured around an all-informing theme or narrative premise, carrying allegorical or metaphorical meanings, which were expressed in a wealth of highly evocative stage images. However, since, back in those days, Prince was a politically-minded director, the play of signification was controlled, and so his imagery was commenting in a metaphorical manner on emerging social realities. An exemplary case was his conception of *Evita* as an evil-Cinderella story, commenting on the rise of a shallow celebrity culture. By contrast, with *The Phantom of the Opera* he succumbs to the poststructuralist maze of *Cats*, which, ironically, he could not understand, when Lloyd Webber pitched him the idea for his feline musical.

Whether we talk about concept musicals or high concept blockbuster films and megamusicals, what is important, apart from the thematic concept, is the visual one: the visual code which organizes the combinatory play of signs and images in space. In *The Phantom of the Opera*, the expressionist, minimalist and poetic recreation of a Victorian opera house functions as a very strong overarching visual theme that unites

⁸⁶ See for an analysis of this model, Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: U of Texas, 1994).

the richly textured and supersaturated with mythical images visual experience into a coherent and consistent thematic milieu.⁸⁷ In this way, *The Phantom of the Opera* is not really different in its essence from *Cats* or *Starlight Express*, because it offers like its predecessors the theatrical equivalent of a Las Vegas theme park. However, Prince's decision to exchange a flashy and glitzy Las Vegas aesthetic for a more "artistic" one makes *The Phantom of the Opera* look like a more theatrically ambitious show in the league of *Les Misérables*. Nevertheless, both these Victorian-themed musicals are typical, if not the prototypical, megamusicals, in the sense that they provide a roller-coaster ride, a total environmental experience that transports magically the audience to a nineteenth-century phantasmagoric dreamland.

For Sternfeld, in *The Phantom of the Opera*, Lloyd Webber's "lush score does a great deal of the transporting that an audience experiences" (263). This comment provides a perfect opportunity to reveal one more secret of this composer's phenomenal success in a postmodern culture – a culture organized in spatial rather than temporal terms. He has been so often accused that his music is too generic and characterless,⁸⁸ and the truth is that, most of the time, he cannot subject his melodic gifts to narrative purposes. He cannot postpone or sacrifice the pleasure in the present for the achievement of a narrative goal in the future, because he does not believe in delayed gratification, which is the basic presupposition for writing a coherent

⁸⁷ To reinforce the overarching theme of the Victorian opera house, the outside and the marquee of the Majestic theatre in New York were redesigned to be lit with gaslight (Ilson 354). For the 2006 Las Vegas opening of the show, now renamed as *Phantom: The Las Vegas Spectacular*, the 1,800 purpose-built theatre at the Venetian was designed to look like a nineteenth-century opera house.

⁸⁸ For *The Phantom of the Opera*, Rich has famously written in the *New York Times*: "Mr. Lloyd Webber has again written a score so generic that most of the songs could be reordered and redistributed among the characters (indeed, among other Lloyd Webber musicals) without altering the show's story or meaning."

narrative. This is the reason why his mode of composition can be characterized as orgasmic. Every moment is so permeated by excessive pleasure that the outcome does not resemble so much a traditional dramatic narrative as a delirium: a relentless succession of impressive aural signifiers. However, he compensates for the lack of systematic syntagmatic organization, by offering a strong paradigmatic one. Lloyd Webber's scores are most effective when they are organized around an overarching stylistic and/ or thematic concept, like the combination of rock with a classical sound in *Jesus Christ Superstar* for the creation of a rock-operatic aesthetic, which encapsulates in aural terms the show's organizing thematic concept: the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, the divine and the secular. *The Phantom of the Opera* is one of his most successfully stylistically integrated scores because every melodic or harmonic choice has to do with the world of opera: classical opera, romantic opera, light opera, modernist opera or his own unique pop-operatic sound. In other words, he provides a very consistent melodic environment, a total musical universe, a unified spatial experience in aural terms. His complex allusions and references to the world of opera and classical music create a virtual aural architecture, in which every melodic phrase constitutes a portal to a different lush, extravagant soundscape, capturing in impressive and unashamedly larger-than-life aural images all the passion, excess, doom and torment that Prince paints with his visuals.

5.2. A Postdramatic Composer in Search of a Dramatic Aesthetic

Following Lehmann's terminology, one can define Lloyd Webber's mode of composition as a postdramatic rather than a dramatic one. His devaluation of coherent narrative structures in favor of richly textured aural environments invite

environmental, theme-park-like stagings, which try to capture in grandiose physical terms the grandness of the composer's melodies. In other words, the visual extravagance, for which his shows are usually criticized, is not redundant but actually invited by the musico-dramatic text. However, Lloyd Webber never really understood how dependent his megacompositions were on megastaging and early on he started feeling uncomfortable with the critical and popular attention that the visual aspects of his shows were receiving.⁸⁹ For this reason, he promised that his first post-*Phantom* show, the eagerly awaited *Aspects of Love*, would be a chamber opera, a character piece of intimate proportions: "Intimate, intimate," he said in an interview in *The Independent*, "It's got to be intimate" (qtd. in Walsh 223). In other words, *Aspects of Love* intended to be a deviation from the megamusical format, a small-scale musical, in which music gains more phenomenological weight than before and aspires to become a *mise-en-scène* in its own right: its representational and experiential capabilities, its power to create worlds on stage and evoke emotional landscapes, would finally replace the material space as the principal scenic arena. Lloyd Webber believed that *Aspects of Love* would be his masterpiece, the musical that would establish his reputation as a master of musical theatre. This time his music was going

⁸⁹ His uneasiness with the visual extravagance of his shows was expressed in a public and rather embarrassing way, during the Broadway version of *Starlight Express*. He included the following disclaimer in the theatre program, so that each audience member could know his views on Nunn's staging:

At the 1982 Sydmonton Festival *Starlight* was finally performed with the intention that it might become a concert for schools. Here it was heard by Trevor Nunn. First there was a plan that it should open the new Barbican Centre in London as a concert sung by all the schools of the City of London, but the ever-resourceful Mr. Nunn had other ideas. He felt the story should be more about competition, that for children today it should be more of a pop score and above all that it could be a staged event because trains could happen through roller skates. Frankly all of us had doubts so the first act was "workshopped" in 1983 [at Notre Dame Hall]. It was great fun so the button was pushed on the London production of *Starlight Express* which opened in March 1984.

I hope Trevor and my other collaborators will forgive me for saying that despite the commercial success the show had had in London, something of the joy and sense of pure fun that was the original intention seemed to get lost and *Starlight Express* was not quite what we intended. (qtd. in Walsh 164-5)

to be the protagonist of the show and the absence of any spectacular *coups de théâtre* would guarantee that nothing could steal the spotlight from his score. Still, was *Aspects of Love* really the small-sized character piece that could be staged successfully in the minimalist manner Lloyd Webber envisioned?

Based on David Garnett's little known novella, which was published in 1955, *Aspects of Love* chronicles the emotional education of the young, idealistic Englishman Alex Dillingham. At the beginning of the show, Alex falls madly in love with the French actress, Rose Vibert, and runs away with her to his uncle's villa in Pau, a small town on the edge of the Pyrenees. Rose is in love with Alex but she is also fascinated by Alex's visiting uncle, the fifty-eight year old, expatriate aristocrat, George Dillingham, and so she becomes his mistress and eventually his wife. George, an advocator of multiple sexual relationships at the same time, is in love with Rose but also has a relationship with the Italian sculptress Giulietta Trapani. Giulietta, who is haunted by her relationship with George, also has a brief lesbian *liaison* with Rose, and after a succession of unworthy lovers ends up in love with Alex. Alex, who has now changed from a star-struck boy in love to a dashing man of the world, has to choose, at the end of the show, between Giulietta, the widowed Rose and his teenage

cousin Jenny, the daughter of George and Rose, who is madly in love with Alex in the same way that he was once with her mother.⁹⁰

For a musical that aspires to be a character piece, *Aspects of Love* is amazingly characterless. Don Black and Charles Hart's lyrics are usually too generic: good pop lyrics that capture in big encapsulating images the emotional atmosphere of a scene but stay at a distance from the characters and lack penetrating depth. For this reason, the musical is more effective when it describes the simplest aspects of love: Alex's youthful infatuation with Rose and, later on, Jenny's with Alex. All the other more ambivalent pairings do not come to life, as the characters' shifting sexual alliances are simply presented rather than explained. However, the lyricists are not entirely to blame for the deficiencies in characterization, because Lloyd Webber's music is equally characterless. No character is assigned a specific melody or musical style, but rather all of them share fragments of the score, which is conceived as a uniform musical palette, whose colors can paint the emotions of every scene. As Snelson points out, the effect of this technique is the creation of an emotional atmosphere rather than the communication of a specific emotional meaning: in their intricate

⁹⁰ The musical is a faithful adaptation of Garnett's novella, which was inspired by the writer's adventurous and unconventional love life. In 1942, Garnett, at the age of forty-eight, married the twenty-two-year-old Angelica Bell, the supposed daughter of Clive and Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf's sister. Angelica's real father was the homosexual painter Duncan Grant, who had an affair with Vanessa and was also Garnett's lover. To complicate things further, Garnett also tried, unsuccessfully, to have an affair with Vanessa at the time when Angelica was conceived and, out of jealousy, announced to the notorious libertine, Lytton Strachey, his plans to marry baby-Angelica once she turned twenty. As must by now be obvious, Garnett's circle of "friends" was the Bloomsbury circle, which, apart from determining the agenda for the cultural vanguard of the British nation, has also become (in)famous for its sexual avant-gardism. In the same way that its members believed in the aesthetic autonomy of art, its liberation from representational ends and social obligations, they also privileged the sexual autonomy of the individual, his/ her right to experiment without inhibition, fear or guilt. They detested conventional morality and sought to liberate themselves from a bourgeois sense of emotional commitment or anxiety-generating considerations of their actions' long-term implications and consequences. "Living in the present" and "living for ourselves" was the Bloomsbury group's credo not only in theory but also in practice, as it is exemplified by the frenetic, near-incestuous, polymorphously "perverse" sexual affairs of its members with each other. This historical background on Bloomsbury's avant-garde aesthetic style and sexual lifestyle derives from Gertrude Himmelfarb, "From Clapham to Bloomsbury: A Genealogy of Morals," 4 December 2007 <<http://www.facingthechallenge.org/himmelfarb.php>>.

combination the melodic fragments and motifs “convey the flow of the emotional subtext rather than a particular moment of significance” (202). In other words, the detailed emotional landscapes Lloyd Webber composes float above the action rather than being anchored in it or an inseparable part of it. As far as the intimacy of the score is concerned, the composer definitely employs “acoustic chamber orchestra timbres” (208) in the orchestration, which create a musical delicacy, fragility and tenderness; but there are also the thunderous full orchestral crescendos, overpoweringly amplified, that everyone pays to hear in his shows.

Moreover, the musical is not conceived on such a small scale as Lloyd Webber claimed, since it exhibits the epic sweep of a big family saga, spanning almost twenty years, from 1947 to 1964,⁹¹ and documents how, according to the show’s theme, “Love Changes Everything” in the intertwined lives of this curious family’s sexually all-too-active members. Lloyd Webber, who was mainly responsible for the adaptation of the novella and the narrative structure of the musical, also chose an epic theatrical form, comprising many miniscule scenes in rapid succession: the musical never takes a breath as it hurriedly rushes to the next passionate embrace, bitter parting and ecstatic reunion. This rapid succession of brief but emotionally overcharged scenes aims at creating a total flow of romantic images, able to transport the audience into an adult loveland of dangerous liaisons and forbidden passions. Once again Lloyd Webber tries to overwhelm his audiences, albeit this time in a gentler, less bombastic manner than usual: the feeling that is sought after is that of a sweet mesmerization of the senses, gradually leading to a euphoric intoxication that only a bottle of fine

⁹¹ The musical deviates from Garnett’s novella in the chronology, as, in the original, the action expands from the mid-1930s to the early post-war period. Moreover, there seems to be a mistake in the published libretto as far as the listing of the passing years is concerned. The musical supposedly ends in 1961, but if one adds the passing years it should end in 1964.

champagne can provoke. However, his eagerness to intoxicate the senses leads to a narrative that actually makes little sense: he sacrifices dramatic coherence for an overabundance of impressive images, which leads to a rather chaotic accumulation of intense moments not bound to a clear narrative logic. Fragmenting the score in order to capture more and more romantic action, he mostly fails to provide fully developed pop-arias that could offer an opening to the inner world of his characters, which lack not only psychological depth but also a reasonable motivation for their actions.

Obviously, Lloyd Webber's conception of what constitutes a character piece betrays a certain naiveté. It is as if he believes that a musical that does not concentrate on a towering mythical figure, like Jesus Christ, Evita or the Phantom, and deals, not with anthropomorphic felines and trains, but with recognizable, human-scaled characters can be automatically called a character piece. However, whatever Lloyd Webber's intentions were, *Aspects of Love* did not deviate considerably from his earlier musicals, in the sense that it exhibits the same mode of postdramatic composition. As we have seen, strongly sustained narratives and psychologically developed characters were never his strength; hence, his penchant for the revue format or stories with a mythical cultural status that, through their familiarity, provide immediately an elementary dramatic frame. Garnett's novella lacked this mythical status and, for this reason, Lloyd Webber's deficiencies in dramatic storytelling were, now, more pronounced than ever. However, as we have seen, the composer compensates for the lack of systematic syntagmatic organization with a strong paradigmatic one. The score for *Aspects of Love* provides one more consistent aural environment, because it is thematically organized around the concept of love as a transformative, larger-than-individual-life force. Lloyd Webber's complex musical

montage of recurring impressive aural images creates a flying-carpet of a score, restless, hyper-active, forward-moving and unstoppable; one that is experienced as a vertiginous phenomenal field, transforming reality into a delirium and impregnating every moment with the possibility of affective plenitude.

In this way, Lloyd Webber's adaptation resembles less a traditional dramatic composition and more an epic pop-symphonic poem suggested by Garnett's novella. It is the musical equivalent of the dramatic text as a postdramatic landscape, which was described by Thornton Wilder, not as "a story read from left to right, from beginning to end," but rather as picture "held full in-view the whole time" (qtd. in Lehmann 63). However, this postdramatic musical approach was not entirely right for *Aspects of Love*. This show needed a delicate balance between postdramatic and dramatic techniques, one that could recreate on stage the euphoric states of being, acquired by these love-and-sex junkies, but also show how these people hurt and destroy each other and themselves through their love addiction and narcissistic self-absorption. There is a barbarous and tragic undercurrent in characters like the criminally insecure Rose, who sexually manipulates every character in order to gain attention, but ends up alone without an admiring audience; or George, who, like Lord Henry in Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, "corrupts" both Rose and Alex, as he robs them of the remnants of their youthful idealism and innocence, but, finally, is destroyed by the thought that his (not-too-)innocent teenage daughter can be similarly "corrupted" by Alex. In order for these characters to come to life, many changes were needed in the dramatic adaptation (slowing down of the hectic dramatic pacing, control of the melodic overflow, clarification of dramatic situations and introduction of many character-defining numbers), which could have been suggested

by the director. Nunn, who once again directed, was more than adequate for the job, not only because of his rich and multifaceted experience in the theatre, but also because he had exhibited in *Cats* and *Les Misérables* an ability to create a coherent fictional cosmos out of essentially non-dramatic material. However, in the post-*Phantom* era, the director could no longer enjoy this kind of creative freedom.

Aspects of Love is a turning point in Lloyd Webber's career, because it is the first musical in which he assumes total creative control. In contrast to his past shows, in which the directors played an essential role at every stage of the developing process, shaping or even altering his ideas, now, the show primarily becomes an expression of the composer's vision. Inescapably, this redistribution and centralization of creative power affects the staging as well, and this is obvious in *Aspects of Love*, whose physical production was uncertain, awkward and, ultimately, indifferent. Nunn responded instinctively to the epic structure of the musical text, and employed the now familiar, megamusical aesthetic of the animated stage, with its mobile and shifting scenic structures, in order to present in rapid succession the miniscule romantic scenes against picturesque backdrops of continental finesse and sophistication. With dizzying speed, he takes the audience from Montpellier and Paris to Venice and various locations in and around the Pyrenees and from ateliers, galleries, salons, cafés, theatres and boudoirs to the gardens, terrace and various rooms of the vine-covered, madhouse of love at Pau. However, this kaleidoscopic succession of continental urban and rural landscapes fails to create the impression of an amorous world ablaze with passion, mainly because most of Björnson's set designs are too cold, gloomy and dark. George's villa in Pau and the Pyrenees locations looked too oppressive, suggesting, as Rich graphically put it, "an enforced holiday in

Ceausescu-era Romania.”⁹² Björnson’s dark monochromatic palettes proved ideal for *The Phantom of the Opera*’s expressionistic visuals; but in *Aspects of Love*, her extended brown, russet and gray surfaces, the burnt-out vines and the somewhat cold and forbidding mountains create a permanent autumnal atmosphere, which may be appropriate for certain scenes in the second act, but seems inappropriate when it dominates the visual tone of the whole show. After all, as Walsh observes, this “story is primarily about love and not death” (224). It seems that Nunn and Björnson tried to satisfy the new imperative of Weberian intimacy, and so create a Chekhovian or even Strindbergian atmosphere,⁹³ which would suggest visually the emotional depth that was missing from the show, making it look less like a megamusical and more like an intimate character piece. For this reason, the formal possibilities of the theatrical image remain largely unexploited and the overall look of the performance is more naturalistic, with a few poetic flourishes, rather than strikingly and radically pictorial and imagistic. As a result, the show offers an unimpressive and dull viewing experience, despite its cataclysmic montage and non-stop stage animation.

Aspects of Love is a musical that never found its visual identity, which is clearly an impressionistic one or, rather, one that balances between realism and impressionism. The impressionistic element is written all over Lloyd Webber’s score, which achieves a kind of pop musical impressionism in the way the melodic cells acquire an enriched and enhanced life of their own, like a brushstroke on an

⁹² See Rich’s Rev. of *Aspects of Love*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *New York Times* 9 April 1990, 20 April 2008 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE3DF1F3BF93AA35757C0A966958260&scp=1&sq=Frank+Rich+Aspects+of+Love&st=nyt>>.

⁹³ Unfortunately, the ghosts of Chekhov, Strindberg or even Bergman have also haunted all touring productions of the show, including the most recent one in 2007, directed by Nikolai Foster.

impressionist painting, and every note provides different affective coloring, through the subtle isolation and foregrounding of solo sonorities in the orchestration.⁹⁴ In *Aspects of Love*, Lloyd Webber takes his pop-operatic, orgasmic method of composition to the extreme as isolated phrases from his melodic set-pieces and motifs, that almost approach the song-format in their melodic completeness, are recycled in every possible combination in order to musicalize even the most prosaic and banal lines of dialogue. This melodic richness tries to capture the euphoria of love and reveal every moment in the characters' tempestuous love lives as emotionally significant and highlight its specific affective tenor. Every word is vibrating with emotion, is contaminated by an affective surplus and the role of music is to embody this fluctuating emotional subtext, to externalize elusive and transient states of feeling. For this reason, what is missing from the staging are the flashes of pure color and blinding light that could function as an immediate visual analogue for the head-spinning dizziness and dreamlike phantasmagoria of sexual ecstasy, which is captured so effectively by Lloyd Webber's score. Moreover, the representation of love as an impressionist spectacle could provide the visual hooks and impressive coups that were missing from the staging as well as an overarching visual concept that could clearly identify and differentiate the viewing experience that *Aspects of Love* was offering.

⁹⁴ The choice of impressionism as the visual language for the staging of the show is also historically justified, since the aesthetic and sexual ideology of the Bloomsbury circle which inspired the novella is closely associated with this movement. After the first post-impressionist exhibition in 1910 in London, organized by Roger Fry and including the works of the new wave of impressionists, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne, Woolf famously pronounced: "In or about December 1910 human character changed" (qtd. in Macleod 202). Impressionism had such an impact on the members of the Bloomsbury group because it was the most accurate visual expression of their artistic style and lifestyle. The hallucinatory derealization of the phenomenal world through the unearthly and sensuous use of light and color captured the very essence of the heightened, intense and euphoric state of consciousness they tried to attain through their experience and express in their work.

Still, despite its problems, *Aspects of Love* seemed to be a winner. After the phenomenal success of *The Phantom of the Opera*, the announcement of a new Lloyd Webber show, promising to be the ultimate musical about love, generated immense anticipation. The recording of “Love Changes Everything” by Michael Ball, who played Alex, reached #2 in the British charts, while the Original Cast Album topped the charts after the premiere of the show in London in 1989. The critics were mostly favorable and the general feeling after the opening was that Lloyd Webber had done it once again. Eventually, the show played for more than three years on the West End and proved to be a hit, albeit a minor one when compared with the composer’s blockbusters. However, the transfer of the show onto Broadway in 1990 was an entirely different story. Lloyd Webber’s love opus was massacred by the critics,⁹⁵ and, despite a huge advance sale, it was soon playing to half-empty houses. After 377 performances, the show closed losing \$8 million. For Citron, the monumental failure of the show on Broadway was mainly caused by its explicitly sexual subject matter at a time when HIV was still terrorizing people (353). Cultural attitudes may have played their role, but, even if the cultural climate was different, it is doubtful that *Aspects of Love* could have been a blockbuster success. This was a show torn by its own internal aesthetic contradictions: a flawed megamusical posing as an intimate piece and repressing its mega-proportions through a visually conservative but expensive crypto-megamusical staging.

After the humiliating failure of *Aspects of Love* on Broadway, Lloyd Webber tried to recapture, in a rather hysterical manner, his blockbuster glory with his next

⁹⁵ Rich, whose animosity against Lloyd Webber had reached an almost personal level, gave once again the most vitriolic review in the *New York Times*, claiming that the show “generates about as much passion as a visit to the bank.”

project, *Sunset Boulevard*, his musical adaptation of Billie Wilder's 1950 classic film noir about the dark side of Hollywood's industry of dreams. The movie documents the tragic downfall of the young, unsuccessful scriptwriter, Joe Gillis, who, in the opening sequence, is found dead in the swimming pool of a Hollywood mansion on Sunset Boulevard. The film is one long flashback, recounting the events that led to his murder, which, in typical noir style, involve a fatal female figure, Norma Desmond. However, this *femme fatale* is quite unorthodox and unconventional: a middle-aged, self-obsessed, near-demented star of the silent era, brutally pushed aside after talkies came, but still dreaming of a comeback. Norma lives isolated from the rest of the world in her almost gothic palazzo on Sunset Boulevard and her only companion is her macabre butler, Max von Mayerling, who proves to be her first husband and the director that made her a star, but now has devoted himself to feeding and supporting her dreams of glory. After a car accident, Joe lands up in this mysterious world and Norma offers him the job of script-editor of her unfilmable opus, *Salome*. Gradually, he sympathizes with the plight of this deluded woman and in a moment of emotional vulnerability, after she attempted suicide because he rejected her erotically, he becomes her lover, kept man and gigolo. Together with Max, Joe supports her fantasies and does not reveal to her that the sudden interest Paramount shows in her is not because they want to film her script but because they want to use her antique car in a movie. However, after he falls in love with his fellow-scriptwriter Betty Schaffer and becomes increasingly uncomfortable with Norma's hysterias, he reveals to her the truth and shatters brutally her delusions of grandeur. Unable to handle both Paramount's and her lover's rejection, Norma descends into madness and murders Joe when he tries to leave her.

The final mad scene is one of the most emotionally powerful, sardonically tragic and grotesquely campy sequences Hollywood has ever produced. Norma, dressed as Salome, appears in a state of shock at the top of the sweeping staircase of her living room, which is filled with policemen and reporters. For the last time, Max assumes the role of the director and guides his frightened star down the staircase to the awaiting policemen. Mesmerized and seduced by the sound of the newsreel cameras, Norma is convinced that she is at last shooting her comeback film and, overwhelmed by joy, thanks her audience, the “wonderful people out there in the dark,” and famously declares that she is ready for her close up. This is an operatic scene reminiscent of romantic opera’s mad scenes, that cries out for musicalization, and so is perfectly suited to Lloyd Webber’s pop-operatic aesthetics. In fact, the first draft of his biggest hit, “Memory,” was written with this scene in mind in the late 1970s, when the composer first considered the idea of making a musical out of Wilder’s film. This is the reason why the melody of “Memory” fitted perfectly the doomed, half-mad operatic heroine from *Cats*, Grizabella, who is a musical precursor of Norma. *Sunset Boulevard*’s heroine also recalls other towering figures in Lloyd Webber’s musical pantheon: her self-absorption and insatiable narcissistic needs remind us of *Evita*, but she also shares many affinities with the Phantom, as she is a near-monstrous, psychotic relic of an obsolete era, secluded and isolated, lost in a delirious world of fantasies and illusions.

As in the case of the Phantom, Lloyd Webber uses his music in order to sentimentalize her, and for this reason the theatrical Norma is far more melodramatic than the cinematic one. On film, Norma was a creepier figure, the barbarous victim of an economic system that creates overblown egos and scrupulously destroys them once

cultural tastes change. Moreover, the casting of Gloria Swanson, a big star of the silent era who disappeared with the advent of talking pictures, in the role of Norma provided a chilly documentary authenticity, which clearly made the movie an indictment of the Hollywood star system. By contrast, in the musical, Norma becomes a more generic figure: the traditional ruined diva from Maria Callas, to Judy Garland and Edith Piaf, a fading prima donna and tragedy queen. With Lloyd Webber's soaring melodies, such as "With One Look," "New Ways to Dream" and "As If We Never Said Goodbye," which are all devoted to Norma's passion for moviemaking and the "golden" silent era, this tragedy queen becomes one more heroic narcissist, defending the power of illusions and magic over the harsh realities of life. For this reason, "she sounds, musically, like a creature from another world, conjured by clean, spare, almost translucent 4/4 ballads, whose eerie strings and woodwinds hover like the soundtrack to a trance" (Steyn qtd. in Sternfeld 309).

Her melodies, which resemble a silent film score, contrast vividly with Joe's more jazzy restless, anxious and discordant music, full of aggressive and punchy phrases, which represent the uncertainty and hardness of his life as well as his more cynical world view (Snelson 128-9). The contemporary film world of the 1950s with its chorus of young hopefuls, who dream of making it in Hollywood, is portrayed with bright dance rhythms of the period in pop songs with short and catchy melodic phrases, animated further with brassy swing band orchestrations (130). Finally, the romantic moments between Joe and Betty are captured in the popular ballad style of the 1950s, and their big duet, "Too Much in Love to Care," becomes Lloyd Webber's homage to the Broadway ballad of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Overall, *Sunset Boulevard* is one of Lloyd Webber's most unified scores, as it creates a coherent retro

musical universe with references and allusions to various popular compositional styles, which are, nevertheless, harmoniously integrated to a musical whole and do not sound like pastiche. Instead of simply reproducing musical styles, Lloyd Webber's compositional approach in this score consists in taking rhythmic, metric, harmonic and melodic archetypes, understanding their connotations and accommodating them as a framework for his own personal style rather than making them the technical essence of it (Banfield 215).⁹⁶ Moreover, *Sunset Boulevard* is one of his most balanced scores. The input of an experienced dramatist, Christopher Hampton, who supervised the theatrical adaptation and contributed to the lyrics, provides the dramatic backbone that was missing from *Aspects of Love*. Hampton's creation of a more coherent and consistent narrative cosmos enables Lloyd Webber to control his vertiginous recycling of motifs and melodic fragments, which are now subjected to dramatic purposes and sound more like traditional reprises.

This more traditionally dramatic atmosphere is further enhanced by the groundbreaking, for Lloyd Webber's standards, introduction of dialogue sections, which are not sung. However, the use of prose does not necessarily mean that Lloyd Webber exchanges his postdramatic mode of composition for a dramatic one; he rather achieves a delicate equilibrium between the two. The introduction of dialogue offers him the chance to explore a compositional genre he had not used extensively before: underscoring, and, particularly, its most lush variant, which is found in silent movies and the talking pictures of the 1930s. This kind of underscoring or, rather, overscoring, which makes a triumphant comeback in the symphonic scores of the

⁹⁶ This is, actually, Stephen Banfield's description of Sondheim's compositional technique in *A Little Night Music* (1973), which, I believe, can also describe accurately Lloyd Webber's compositional method in *Sunset Boulevard*.

postmodern blockbuster movies, creates a continuous musical text, which is matched to the film images and augments their power through grand melodic statements. This is a technique that derives from nineteenth-century melodrama, which, as the etymology of the word shows, was primarily conceived as a genre that combines dramatic action with continuous underscoring music. The melodic excess that this use of music presupposes fits perfectly the melodramatic world of *Sunset Boulevard* and is exploited to the maximum by Lloyd Webber. He sets every prose line to underscoring music, and so makes the instrumental orchestral accompaniment the driving force of the show: wild orchestral crescendos continuously underline Norma's overdramatic statements and sometimes both vocal music and dialogue are abandoned for thunderous instrumental interludes. This aggressive use of underscoring unites the vocal with the dialogue parts and creates a continuous musical experience, which as the show progresses becomes more and more delirious, signaling the passage from a dramatic to a postdramatic aural universe or from realism to the surrealism of Norma's delirious imagination.

Overall, Lloyd Webber's music resembles once again a symphonic score for a Hollywood epic, oversized and larger-than-larger-than-life. In his designs, Napier tried to depict visually the aural magnitude of the score, and delivered sets of such visual excess that they are only comparable to the ones he made for *Starlight Express*. His centerpiece is, of course, Norma's mansion, a rococo architectural folly that resembles less the opulent Hollywood house of a film star and more a phantasmagoric recreation of a 1920s exotic movie palace, like the old Roxy theatre. Its monstrous monumentality, overblown size and blinding dazzle generate the impression of a modern Babylonian temple, devoted to the worship of a pagan goddess – a metaphor

that points to the religious myth that Hollywood produced about itself in its early days. Napier's Hollywood dreamland is filled with serpentine columns, Moroccan arches, flickering candles, ornate furnishings, spooky, wall-high inlets and alcoves, balconies and arcades, and is dominated by a grand, gilded, curving staircase, which passes diagonally across the rear to sweep round to centre-stage, with inset beneath it a pipe organ and its horseshoe-shaped keyboard (Perry, *Sunset Boulevard* 98). An electronically controlled hydraulic system enables this massive construction to glide silently and airily in and out, up and down, forward and back, and, in the most impressive coup towards the first-act finale, to rise upwards and accommodate the New Year's Eve party of the young hopefuls, which is attended by Joe, who has just rejected Norma's erotic moves. In this way, a split-screen effect is created, juxtaposing the gaiety of the young people with the haunting emptiness of the mansion, in which a desperate Norma contemplates suicide.

Despite its dramatic poignancy, this split-screen effect is primarily designed in order to provoke the massive hydraulic lift-up, and so generate the audience's applause. Equally impressive and applause-provoking is the first time Norma's mansion eerily glides in: its size and its juxtaposition of many dazzling surfaces create a breathtaking first visual impression. However, as the eye gets used to it, its visual effectiveness gradually wears thin, even more so since most of the scenes take place in it. The problem with this set is its monolithic monumentality, which, ultimately, creates a static effect: in spite of its ability to move in all directions, it remains an illustrative and decorative background to the action, failing to explore the postdramatic possibilities offered by Lloyd Webber's score. It cannot open up psychic landscapes that could draw us into Norma's mind and present her mental state, always

in-between reality and fantasy; nor can it recreate on stage the mad religiosity of 1920s Hollywood that occupies her mind and to which the show's music and lyrics constantly refer. Its outsized grandeur points only metaphorically to that obsolete movie world, instead of painting haunting images from the silent era, filtered and augmented through Norma's wild imagination and deranged mind. Simply put, the set design does not interact with the music and the stage action for the creation of dynamic audiovisual imagery, and so the aural and visual dimensions of the performance image remain at a distance, becoming two separate scenic discourses.

The lack of interaction between scenic discourses helps us not only to understand *Sunset Boulevard's* staging problems, but also to decode the reasons for Lloyd Webber's demise. Before doing so, we have to insist a little more on the term interaction, which is used widely in contemporary multimedia performance art in order to suggest the employment of "electronic and computer-assisted *interfaces*" (Birringer 21). The use of interactive technology provides "an expressionistic doorway" (Saltz 125) into subjective sensations, fantasies, dreams, hallucinations and deliriums, and so creates a new aesthetic practice of virtuality: it "interfere[s] with the viewer's sense of presence and imagination" in order to "remove them from the world they are in and allow them access to a ... space of virtual reality – a space where the real can be seen inside out" (Giannachi 159). Virtual theatre must be considered as the latest, high-tech mutation of postdramatic performance art, whose origins lie in the avant-garde theatre experimentations of the early twentieth century. For this reason, the aesthetic of virtuality is not something radically new, but rather the most technologically advanced manifestation of more-than-a-century-long postdramatic experimentation, whose logic has always been, in a sense, interactive.

The basic premise of interactive technology is the “live concatenation of different, sometimes conflicting media” (Birringer 21). In non-mediated forms of postdramatic experimentation the effect of stage interactivity is achieved through the liberation of scenic discourses (lighting, stage décor, costume, sound) from strictly representational functions and their transformation into antagonistic partners, battling for dominance on a stage which is primarily conceived as a field of perceptual activity.

As we have seen, such stage interactivity has been systematically explored on the musical stage since the late 1960s and has been apotheosized by the British megamusicals, which, in their preference for magical, fantastic, virtual landscapes, become the most effective mass cultural appropriation of both mediated and non-mediated forms of postdramatic experimentation. Lloyd Webber’s orgasmic mode of composition, which privileges the accumulation of grand aural signifiers in hypertextual aural environments, offered a great opportunity for orgasmic *mise en scènes* in hyperspatial scenic architectures, in which the dynamic interaction of visual forces brings a new affective intensity into the musical number. Postdramatic interactive experimentations are invited not only by Lloyd Webber’s orgasmic mode of composition, but also by the thematic content of his musicals. As we have seen, *Aspects of Love* was about the impressionistic sensations and states of consciousness provoked by the experience of love and sexual ecstasy. Similarly, *Sunset Boulevard* was about the “New Ways to Dream,” opened up by the highly imagistic and gestural medium of silent cinema. One actually wonders why in this essentially cinematic musical there were no multimedia effects⁹⁷ to blur the boundaries between projected images and live action, and so create the no man’s land between lived reality and

⁹⁷ The show resorts to multimedia devices, such as film projections, only for illustrative reasons, such as the depiction on stage of the car-chase scene.

cinematic virtuality occupied by Norma. Such “expressionistic doorways” to virtual landscapes were necessary for capturing not only Norma’s state of mind but also the ghostly unreality that surrounds Joe, who has the privilege of being one of the few dead narrators of popular culture. He is on the borderline between reality and unreality, both a character and an im-material presence or, rather, a virtual character, whose remembrances constitute a virtual locality and temporality, a liminal zone beyond any rational explanation.

Of course, back in the 1990s, when the show was produced, the use of digital interactive systems for the creation of virtual landscapes was rather unthinkable, since the application of digital technology in theatrical performance was still in an embryonic stage. However, the use of digital or analogue multimedia devices was not the only path to the virtualization of theatrical space. In *The Phantom of the Opera*, Prince’s sculptural use of lighting created a gothic dreamland full of menacing, all-encompassing shadows and opaque dark backgrounds, which derealize space, and so potentialize it infinitely: they generate multiple ethereal any-spaces-whatever, which are “extend[ed] into the unknown of the surrounding darkness” and create “a realm of possibility and surprise” (Snelson 119). Moreover, the interaction of lighting with mobile scenic entities, as in the lake scene, achieves a virtualization of space that not only externalizes the sensations and images of a hallucination, but also creates an intense synaesthetic experience for the audience, as the grandeur, pulsating rhythm and majestic sweep of the music are painted on stage – in other words, they are translated into visual terms. In *Sunset Boulevard*, as previously in *Aspects of Love*, you cannot “see” the music anymore, because songs are not staged but sung against impressive but static backgrounds, generating the unsettling feeling that the mental

imagery created by the music is far richer than the expensive imagery presented on stage. This lack of interaction between the scenic and musical discourse also prevents the lighting from expressing poetically in spatial terms the changing musical atmosphere, because, in *Sunset Boulevard*, the mammoth sets tend to absorb all the light, in order to become autonomous gigantic installations, hovering above the rather simple stage action. Ultimately, the experience the show offers is a schizophrenic one: it resembles an intimate piece, most of the time involving two or three people on stage, that is overblown to outlandish proportions through Lloyd Webber's epic-size score and Napier's monstrous designs.⁹⁸

These problems were evident when the show opened in London in 1993 and, despite the expectations it generated, it soon became obvious that *Sunset Boulevard* could not repeat the triumph of *The Phantom of the Opera* either in the West End or on Broadway. Probably in order to avoid the hostile critics, but also because a cinematic setting fitted better his cinematic musical, Lloyd Webber chose Los Angeles, instead of New York, for the American premiere of *Sunset Boulevard*. He also cast a film star in the role of Norma, Glenn Close. In London, Norma was played by Broadway's original Evita, Patti LuPone, who gave an electrifying vocal performance, her big belting voice rocketing to the auditorium for the finale of Norma's trademark anthems, "With One Look" and "As If We Never Said Goodbye." However, the eagle-profiled LuPone seemed too beautiful and rather young for the part, lacking Swanson's grotesqueness, and her approach to the role was too sentimental: she was a sympathetic, although somewhat bizarre, woman, clinging

⁹⁸ Apart from Norma's mansion, equally large-sized sets are the studio backlot at night, with scenery representing New York streets, and the *Samson and Delilah* soundstage, visited by Norma, when she triumphantly re-enters Paramount studio.

desperately to a glorious past and the man she loves. It was a melodramatic interpretation, whose sentimentality was further enhanced by the overt lyricism of Lloyd Webber's melodies.

By contrast, Close gave a performance that reinvented the role as well as the whole show. Although she possessed a relatively thin, but still adequate, unschooled soprano voice, which could not be compared with LuPone's impressive vocal instrument, her risky, daring and, ultimately, breathtaking interpretation of the part was pure theatre, a consummate piece of acting rarely seen in a musical. She conceived Norma as a heroine from ancient Greek tragedy, a Medea-like mythical, strange, frightening but totally enchanting female beast, whose actions cannot be judged or understood by ordinary human standards. Abnormally glamorous in her kabuki-like make-up, imperially regal in her golden and silver turbans and always on the verge of psychosis, with her face constantly illuminated by the fire of the oncoming madness, this Norma was the hypnotic center of the show: a subliminally monstrous Medusa, the Frankenstein-like creature of an industry that specializes in the creation of criminally self-absorbed, egomaniac monsters. Her deathly confrontation with Joe is so savage and emotionally raw that it becomes almost abject and embarrassing to watch, while her climactic mad scene avoids sentimental kitsch. Descending for the last time her palatial staircase in her grotesque approximation of Salome, Norma gains strength from her madness, because at last she has lost any connection with the reality that crushes her. Her swan-song is not a cry of despair but of triumph, making it impossible for the audience to sympathize or empathize with her; they rather stand in awe as they witness the fall of a titan.

These titanic proportions, which were missing from LuPone's performance, made *Sunset Boulevard* a better integrated show: suddenly, the outsized sets found a dramatic justification, as they became the natural habitat of Close's sublime creature. Moreover, in Close's performance, Lloyd Webber's melodies were robbed of their excessive sentimentality as they became the musical accompaniment of Norma's hysterics: they seemed less the expression of her emotional wealth and more part of a conscious or unconscious drive for overdramatization, blurring the line between identity and performance, art and life. Close's Norma is a woman that has only learned to overact and overreact in her life, which is nothing but a long and exaggerated performance. Predictably, Close's *tour-de-force* became a big media event, and Lloyd Webber, unable to resist the sweet smell of success, provoked a scandal and a field day for the press, by breaking his contract with LuPone, who was ready to open the show in New York, and announcing that Close would be the Broadway Norma. He also announced that the Hollywood legend, Faye Dunaway, would replace Close in the Los Angeles production of the show. However, during rehearsals, Lloyd Webber fired Dunaway, claiming that her voice was not up to the part, and so provoked a second scandal – as well as a \$6 million lawsuit from Dunaway. All this backstage drama in relation with the exorbitant cost of the Broadway production (\$13 million), made *Sunset Boulevard* the most over-hyped megamusical ever to arrive in New York as well as the most hotly anticipated one – and this anticipation was reflected in the unheard-of \$38 million advance sales. The

show opened on Broadway in 1994, gaining mostly positive reviews and giving Lloyd Webber, at last, his first undisputed critical success.⁹⁹

For a while, it seemed that *Sunset Boulevard* would be his third musical to join the privileged company of *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, his two blockbusters that threatened to become almost permanent Broadway fixtures. However, once Close left the role, sales began to drop and the show closed two years after its opening, recouping only 80% of its investment. The musical theatre veterans, like Betty Buckley and Elaine Paige that succeeded Close, proved inadequate to fill their predecessor's extravagant shoes, because in its route from London to New York, *Sunset Boulevard* had been transformed into a star vehicle or rather the mega-reinvention of the Big Lady Show. This was a sub-genre that had appeared in the 1960s and generated a number of musicals, whose *raison d'être* was the apotheosis of a big leading lady, who was actually the main attraction of the evening (Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse* 12): Lauren Bacall in *Applause* (1970) and *Woman of the Year* (1981) or Katharine Hepburn in the role of the Parisian dress designer, Coco Chanel, in *Coco* (1969). In this respect, *Sunset Boulevard* could only survive if Lloyd Webber had applied the strategy that Broadway producer David Merrick had employed to make *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), the quintessential Big Lady Show, a lasting success: simply to cast one big leading lady after another in order to provoke continuous media hype, and thus, audience interest in the show. After Carol Channing, who created the role of Dolly, Merrick hired such names as Ginger Rogers, Betty Grable, Ethel

⁹⁹ For the first time one of his shows got a positive review by the *New York Times*, as Rich was replaced by David Richards, a theatre critic who was clearly more favourable towards Lloyd Webber and the megamusical. See Richard's Rev. of *Sunset Boulevard*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *New York Times* 18 November 1994, 20 April 2008 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE1DD1031F93BA25752C1A962958260&scp=1&sq=David+Richards+Sunset+Boulevard&st=nyt>>.

Merman and Pear Bailey for the Broadway production and Mary Martin and Dorothy Lamour for touring productions. Similarly, *Sunset Boulevard* needed desperately the big names of its own time, Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand, Julie Andrews, Meryl Streep (initially regarded a front-runner for the part) in order to set the media hounds barking and the audiences storming in. Still, one wonders if this already overbudgeted production could stand the heavy paycheck of such stars and manage to turn a profit.

The fact that *Sunset Boulevard* was a show held hostage by its star was surprising, because no previous Lloyd Webber show had needed a star name or performance to succeed; in fact, the show itself was the star. However, this turn of events was the logical outcome of Lloyd Webber's decision to create a more extravagant theatrical replica of the film, rather than radically reconceive it for the stage. He offered, in this way, the theatrical equivalent of a cinematic realism, which makes the show look like a conventional book musical, overblown to outlandish proportions in order to justify the label of the megamusical. This was a staging that repressed the postdramatic stage potential of the show in favor of a more traditional, albeit hysterical, dramatic look, which transformed *Sunset Boulevard* into the postmodern version of a traditional Rodgers-and-Hammerstein musical. However, by exchanging a postdramatic with a dramatic staging aesthetic, Lloyd Webber missed the chance of creating the unforgettable journey that his previous megamusicals offered. To do so, he should have assigned to a director the job of re-imagining the film for the stage. It is not accidental that Nunn's name surfaces this late in this analysis of *Sunset Boulevard*. As in *Aspects of Love*, his role was significantly reduced, resembling now more that of a handsomely paid stage manager, handling the busy stage traffic and blocking out the scenes, rather than conceptualizing the

performance. Actually, in none of Lloyd Webber's later musicals does the director function as a conceptualist, who proposes a bold interaction of scenic discourses, providing a signature look, a unique visual sign, which eventually brands and themes the theatrical experience. This lack of a revolutionary directorial vision finally prevented *Sunset Boulevard* from becoming Lloyd Webber's ultimate megamusical Hollywood experience, one that juxtaposes Technicolor and black-and-white virtual landscapes in a vast panorama of Hollywood magic, glamour, decadence and madness.

5.3. From Lloyd Webber to Disney

As Barry Singer points out, "*Sunset Boulevard* proved a very significant milestone," because its failure, Lloyd Webber's second one in a row, revealed that the age of the British megamusical "had begun to wane" (97).¹⁰⁰ The composer's third failure with his next project, *Whistle Down the Wind*, cemented this view and proved that the British invasion had ended for good. Lloyd Webber wanted to follow a reverse route with this show, opening it first on Broadway and then transferring it to the West End. However, its brief tryout run, from December 12, 1996, until February 8, 1997, in Washington, D.C., convinced the creative team of *Whistle Down the Wind*

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the only successfully exported British megamusical in the 1990s was Mackintosh's production of *Miss Saigon* (1989), his second collaboration with Boublil and Schönberg, the writing team of *Les Misérables*. It was one more exemplary high-concept megamusical: an adaptation of Puccini's widely known *Madama Butterfly* during the Vietnam War and an exercise in ideological ambivalence. It managed to be almost hilariously melodramatic but also cynical, since it had, in the character of the Engineer, an ironic commentator in the style of the M.C. in *Cabaret* and Che in *Evita*. Its eclectic staging united successfully many different theatrical styles, from cinematic hyper-realism to symbolism and epic theatre, plus a surrealist daydream sequence, which presents the Engineer's cartoonish vision of turbo-capitalist America. Of course, *Miss Saigon* is mostly famous for its central coup, its widely advertised set-piece: the spectacular separation of the two lovers during the last minutes of the Fall of Saigon, when a helicopter lands on stage to take away the American soldiers from the embassy. Despite its visual power and enormous success, *Miss Saigon* exhibited the first signs of the British megamusical's fatigue in its recycling of every successfully applied narrative and staging megamusical device. It was the last great triumph before the fall.

that the show had insurmountable problems on every artistic level, and so the New York opening was first postponed and then put off indefinitely. A reconceived and restaged production opened in 1998 in London, where it played for two and a half years, but never made the transatlantic journey to New York. Lloyd Webber's failure to open a major new musical on Broadway, confirmed that he was no longer the king of 42nd street.

Whistle Down the Wind was based on Mary Hayley Bell's children's novel, published in 1958, and its darker and bleaker 1961 film adaptation, directed by Bryan Forbes. In its original non-musical forms, it tells a simple, touching, inspirational story about youthful innocence, faith and idealism as contrasted to adult sterile rationalism and cynicism: a group of children mistake an escaped convict for the Jesus of the Second Coming and are determined to prevent their parents from crucifying him again. However, as history has shown, no story can remain simple under Lloyd Webber's treatment, especially one that offers him the chance to allude to his previous blockbusters and revisit his favorite characters. In particular, *Whistle Down the Wind* provided him with the opportunity to repeat the religious ambiguities of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, since in the children's eyes the escaped convict, simply called the Man, is the Son of God; and in the end, when the mob tries to lynch him, he disappears mysteriously, leaving behind him only the sign of the cross on the wall of the farm building. Lloyd Webber also exploits the tantalizing, and once shocking, overlapping between religious and sexual ecstasy that the Jesus Christ-Mary Magdalene relationship generated, by transforming one of the children, Swallow, into a teenager, who, like the kids, mistakes the Man for Jesus, but is also sexually attracted to him. As if the allusions to *Jesus Christ Superstar* were not enough, Lloyd

Webber also decided to redeploy the *Phantom* motif. Thus, the Man is a tortured soul in search of spiritual salvation, referring to himself as a beast, in his grandiose anthem “Nature of the Beast;” while, in “Unsettled Scores,” he evokes a panorama of social malaise and suffers as cruelty, exploitation and greed triumph over idealism and innocence. These numbers make him less a common criminal and more a mythical figure, the scapegoat of a corrupt civilization, which condemns him to carry the sins of the world. Moreover, not only is the Man modeled on the Phantom, but also his relationship with Swallow parallels the Phantom-Christine relationship: dangerous, psychologically deformed, dark man longs for beauty, heaven and light through erotic union with a virginal, angelic ingénue.

Apart from the above alterations, the composer also changed the geographical setting of the story: the English countryside (Sussex in the novel and Lancashire in the movie) is replaced by an American rural landscape, Louisiana in the late 1950s. This relocation serves only musical purposes, i.e. the exploitation of the distinctive regional musical flavor, but also dramatic ones: the Bible-Belt-Baptist Louisiana, with its snake-handlers, fighting the devil in ecstatic and paroxysmic rituals, introduces the element of religious fanaticism, creating a sharper contrast with the children’s innocence, captured musically in saccharine, feel-good numbers, obviously alluding to *The Sound of Music*. Moreover, the 1950s American setting provides the opportunity for the introduction of colorful secondary characters, like Amos and Candy, the two horny rock ’n’ rolling teenagers, standing for the explosion of a rebellious youth culture, disgusted with adult hypocrisy and conformism. Their relationship breaks not only sexual but also racial taboos (since Candy is African-American), defying, thus, not only social but also legal restraints. Although the

emergence of a rebellious youth culture is not the central theme of the musical, one of its posters, which also became the cover of the Original Cast Recording, uses this theme for inspiration: it shows a young man standing in front of a motorbike and holding a rifle over his shoulders. This is an image that points to the quintessential “rebel without a cause” of the 1950s, James Dean, with whom Amos identifies in the musical.

Obviously, Lloyd Webber uses the original story as an elementary dramatic backbone, around which he inserts, in a highly conceptual manner, numerous narrative signals from disparate sources, cultural symbols that have acquired mythical status, including in a self-referential manner his own mass-cultural texts, in order to create a dense intertextuality. All these intertextual references, which are structured around proliferating binary oppositions between the sacred and the profane, the divine and the secular, innocence and corruption, heaven and hell, create once again a hypertextual structure, allowing the combinatory play of mythical signals. Music also serves the purposes of intertextuality and hypertextuality, as the composer exploits to the maximum the mythical connotations of various musical styles in order to create a highly significant aural environment. Thus, as we have seen, the feel-good musical atmosphere of *The Sound of Music* provides the inspiration for the irresistible and disarming innocence of the children’s numbers; while another Rodgers-and-Hammerstein classic, *Carousel*, can be detected as a direct influence for the title number, which reproduces the hymn-like, quasi-religious atmosphere of “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” Gospel is used as the archetypal musical style for the expression of transcendence through religious devotion in “The Vaults of Heaven,” while the more secular rituals of the daily life of the community are represented through the

language of country music in “Cold.” Finally, the musical text that is most strongly and consistently evoked is Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar*, as the composer chooses this score’s epic rock stylistics, which now reaches Wagnerian proportions,¹⁰¹ in order to paint musically the allusions to the Second Coming and communicate aurally the cosmic theme of a morally bankrupt world in need of spiritual rejuvenation.

The reader may be surprised to learn that Lloyd Webber conceived *Whistle Down the Wind* as his “little musical” (Walsh 271), calling, once again, for an intimate, small-scale staging, and invited Prince to direct it along these lines in Washington. When this stripped-down staging did not pay off, he mounted a more elaborate London production, directed by Gale Edwards, who added the now-familiar split-screen effect of *Sunset Boulevard* and delivered an elaborate but unimpressive coup, showing a train almost running over Swallow. Despite their differences in scale both productions share an essential similarity: the performance text simply frames the musico-dramatic text, underlining, thus, its weaknesses. For a musical with a basically hypertextual structure, this is catastrophic and leads to an unfulfilling spectatorial experience, since the schematically drawn characters and situations appear vacuous in a decorative and illustrative stage environment, which does not exploit their dense, multi-layered symbolic potential. Taking the two principal characters as an example, the Man is so overdetermined that he appears less as a character and more as a fantasmic screen, upon which various and often contradictory and mutually exclusive cultural myths are projected. Similarly, Swallow’s character sinks into absurdity,

¹⁰¹ The lyricist of *Whistle Down the Wind* was Jim Steinman, a very successful rock lyricist and composer, whose grandiose style of composition gained him the title the “Wagner of Rock.” Lloyd Webber, actually, imitates and even expands on Steinman’s Wagnerian rock in such numbers as “Tire Tracks and Broken Hearts” and “A Kiss Is a Terrible Thing to Waste.”

because, in order to allude to *Phantom's* Christine, she must become a young woman on the brink of adulthood. However, if she is a near-adult she should be mentally retarded to exhibit the simple-mindedness of a child and mistake an escaped convict for Jesus Christ. When such characters are placed in a naturalistic stage environment, their rich connotative and allegorical potential is backgrounded, while their inability to function as three-dimensional characters is foregrounded.

Just like *Aspects of Love* and *Sunset Boulevard*, *Whistle Down the Wind* reveals Lloyd Webber's desire to move to a more conventional staging aesthetic, despite the fact that his instincts as an aural *auteur* lead him to the creation of postdramatic musical texts, which are not well served by this aesthetic. He seems willing to strip his shows of their extravagant visuals, but, when this technique does not pay off, he moves to the opposite extreme and offers an insanely expensive visual extravagance, devoid of any dramatic functionality. These contradictions prove that Lloyd Webber has a very limited understanding of the kind of musical theatre he helped to create as well as of his own powers and limitations as a composer. Under his influence, the musical became such a powerfully theatrical and imagistic medium that not even his name on the marquee could guarantee a show's success and longevity. And, as we have seen, when we talk about a powerfully imagistic medium we do not refer to the construction of expensive semi-naturalistic sets but rather to the rearticulation of the stage as an overwhelming visual field, a hyperspatial structure of combating visual forces, and the transformation of the stage image into a highly formalized object of perceptual activity and scrutiny. This kind of theatre transforms the director into a visual *auteur*, a role that is not freely granted to the directors of Lloyd Webber's later shows. His inability to release some creative control resulted in the weakening of his

shows' visual as well as aural appeal, since his essentially postdramatic aural landscapes seem devoid of aesthetic power in more traditional staging environments.

After his string of mega-flops, "Lloyd Webber was widely quoted as saying that the era of megamusicals was over" (Walsh 271), but the truth was that the era of the British megamusicals was over.¹⁰² The kind of theatre that Lloyd Webber's shows created would continue to flourish and reach new commercial as well as artistic heights through a series of landmark megamusicals, conceived and sponsored neither by a composer-producer nor an individual über-producer, like Mackintosh, but by a corporate impresario, Disney. In fact, Disney decided to expand into the theatre business after the phenomenal success of the British musical blockbusters, which redefined the economic potential of the musical as a Broadway fixture, a touring production and an international export. Disney was not a stranger to musical aesthetics: the company had a long history in the production of animated film musicals; and, after the renaissance of its animation department in the mid-1980s, it has saturated the film and video market with a string of musical blockbusters, which could be easily transferred to the stage, since they were scored by Broadway veterans and had the benefit of immense name recognition. Moreover, the theme-park aesthetic that British shows like *Cats*, *Starlight Express* and *The Phantom of the Opera* had introduced on the musical stage was actually invented by Walt Disney himself, who opened in 1955 in suburban Anaheim in southern California the first theme park, Disneyland, which over the years had staged many live attractions inspired by the company's catalogue of animated film musicals.

¹⁰² Lloyd Webber's next show, *The Beautiful Game* (2000), never opened in New York, while the Broadway transfer of *The Woman in White* (2005) was a flop.

The conquering of Broadway and the international musical stage would offer Disney the same economic opportunities that its themed live shows had provided: the further and more intensified exploitation of existing titles that could generate more possibilities for merchandising, create new audiences and, in short, achieve what, in economic terms, is known as synergy, the phenomenon that occurs when every arm of a conglomerate successfully feeds the next. Taking the example of *The Lion King*, Disney's Alan Levey describes the economic reasoning behind the company's invasion on Broadway:

The Lion King would have remained an animated film released in 1994, to be re-released ten years later in video, and in the interim, it would have remained dormant. Along comes a Broadway musical that opens in 1997, three years after the film opened, and suddenly, there is reiteration and reinvigoration of *The Lion King*. While a successful stage production's profitability may not meet that of a successful film over the course of the film's theatrical, video, and DVD releases on a dollar-for-dollar basis – although all productions of *The Lion King* internationally are certainly profitable – it does extend the life of, and add equity to, a property significantly. And it generates additional opportunities for merchandising and positive press that otherwise wouldn't exist. (qtd. in Adler 90)

This purely economic jargon and reasoning, which derives from an executive's awareness of handling an asset in the world market, brought a much-needed rationalism and objectivity in the process of conceiving, developing and staging a megamusical. Despite his acute instincts as a producer, Lloyd Webber was driven by artistic passions as well as by an artist's craving for critical acceptance, which blurred

his vision, destroyed many projects and proved totally unacceptable for the kind of theatre he had created. Under his influence, production and weekly operating costs escalated rapidly, far outstripping inflation: with a capitalization of more than \$10 million and weekly expenses exceeding \$500,000, a large-scale musical has to earn blockbuster status, selling at or near 100% of gross potential, just to break even. Recognizing these economic exigencies as well as the fact that a megamusical is not just a musical play but an institution and an international franchise, Disney has adopted a radical approach in the creation of stage musicals: it has used its vast financial resources in order to fund a years-long, multi-production developmental process, involving many readings, workshops and out-of-town tryouts. In this way, the corporation manages a portfolio of theatrical projects intended for both Broadway and the international market, greenlighting the right project at the right time. Its approach resembles that of a film studio, and especially of “MGM in its heyday, when a number of films were simultaneously in development by contract writers and directors. While Disney does not engage artists for multiyear, exclusive contracts, it has aggressively commissioned new works from some of the most successful and accomplished artists in American theatre” (Adler 95). It offers them “the precious commodities of time and money to nurture works in relatively unpressured fashion” (96), bring them to their right shape and open them only when they are ready to conquer the national and international market.

Disney entered the megamusical arena in 1994 with the stage adaptation of its 1991 animated musical blockbuster, *Beauty and the Beast*. The film exemplified Disney’s standard practice of taking a fairy tale in the public domain and transforming it into a corporate property, generating a billion-dollar profit through theatrical, video

and DVD releases, theme-park adaptations, soundtrack sales and merchandising. Apart from achieving the status of a franchise in its own right, *Beauty and the Beast* also gained artistic credibility, as it became the first animated feature to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, received rave reviews and was considered by Rich as a musical that bettered anything Broadway could offer (Singer 169). It was probably this warm reception of the film by the “butcher of Broadway” that convinced Disney president, Michael Eisner, to take a chance with *Beauty and the Beast* on 42nd street. On stage, Disney’s fairytale did not deviate from the standard megamusical formulas. Thematically, it had many similarities with *The Phantom of the Opera*, which is, after all, a variation on the myth of *Beauty and the Beast*, and, in its staging, it combined its predecessor’s romantic imagery with the wild fantasy of *Cats* and the extravagance of *Sunset Boulevard*. Overall, it was a highly efficient but rather predictable adaptation of the original, which was met with enthusiasm by the audience but with derision by the critics, who obviously feared an oncoming Disneyfication and Mickey-Mousing of Broadway. The vitriolic comments and the bad publicity were hurting the public face of the company and it was obvious that if Disney wanted to realize its theatrical, empire-building ambitions it would need a change of direction, which was taken when Eisner made president and vice president of Walt Disney Theatrical Productions Peter Schneider and Thomas Schumacher respectively: the two men who were responsible for the economic and aesthetic rejuvenation of Disney’s feature animation division in Hollywood.

Schneider and Schumacher were ideally suited to their new post, because they knew theatre very well, since they had spent most of their pre-Disney years in the not-for-profit theatre world. Their first venture as heads of Disney Theatrical was the

stage adaptation of the company's most valuable animated film property, *The Lion King*, which broke box office records in 1994 and was considered as one of the greatest animated film musicals ever made. Schneider and Schumacher believed that this was the musical that would change the perception of what Disney could achieve on Broadway, and, for this reason, it had to be "Not just different," but "Push-the-envelope unique. Astonishing" (Schumacher qtd. in Singer 170). To achieve this end, they knew they had to take risks and not repeat the well-known megamusical formulas, but rather hire a director, unknown to the world of musicals and commercial theatre: a visionary, whose progressive theatrical style could bring a refreshing musical aesthetic, able to astound the hostile Broadway establishment and, at the same time, enthrall the audiences. Thus, in contrast to *Beauty and the Beast*, which was conceived, developed and staged by Disney's theme-park division, *The Lion King* was entrusted to the hands of Julie Taymor, whose "aesthetic could well be described as the antithesis of Disney's:" her output comprised "fiercely individual music-theater works that never condescended, never pandered to the lowest common denominator, and never compromised" (145).¹⁰³ With the choice of Taymor, Schneider and Schumacher were determined to offer the boldest, most audacious and cutting-edge theatrical work that had ever been presented on a commercial stage, and, in doing so, to make everyone on Broadway take Disney very seriously.

The stage adaptation of *The Lion King* posed many difficulties, mainly because the charm of the animated film derived from the highly artistic and technologically advanced design that was used for the recreation of the animal kingdom. The animals

¹⁰³ Taymor specializes in ritualistic performance theatre, heavily influenced by Oriental practices. Among her most acclaimed works are *The King Stag* (1984), *Juan Darien, a Carnival Mass* (1988) and *The Green Bird* (1996).

came to life with a *National-Geographic*-like documentary authenticity, which was also combined with anthropomorphic expressions in order to achieve an intersection between the animalistic and the human. For Taymor, “[o]ne of the most powerful elements of the film is the rich humanity of the animal characters. Their voices, speech patterns, and emotionally wrought facial expressions are the crux of the humor and the pathos achieved” (30). For this reason, she rejected from the outset the use of full-body suits and whole masks, that would eliminate the human presence in order to achieve a naturalistic representation of the animal characters and tried to achieve the combination of the human and the animalistic through more poetic, abstract and impressionistic methods. Taymor is particularly known for her mastery of many multi-cultural traditional theatrical crafts, especially puppetry, and, in *The Lion King*, she exploited her expertise in this domain to the maximum in order to create a richly textured, wildly imaginative \$20 million puppet show. Her overarching visual concept was not to hide the actors animating the puppets, but rather emphasize the duality of the animate and the inanimate, which would also open many possibilities for the exploration of the duality between the human and the animalistic element. For example, in one of her earliest designs for a zebra, the zebra’s neck and head extend off the dancer’s chest, the rear part extends off the dancer’s back and the performer’s legs form the animal’s front legs (30). Once Taymor realized the visual possibilities that this intersection between the animate/ inanimate, human/ animalistic form opens up, she experimented with even more radical stylizations and devices, like, the one she calls, “corporate puppetry:” “one person conveys the essential movement of a group, often by manipulating or wearing a device that carries multiple figures. For

instance, five dancers will each bear three gazelles puppets; one on each head and one on each arm, thus creating a herd of fifteen” (31).

Similarly radical techniques were used for the creation of masks, which were designed according to the principles of the minimalist and architecturally severe African sculpture and carried symbolic meanings. For example, the austere symmetrical mask for Mufasa, the powerful lion king, is embellished with surrounding orbs, rings that represent his mane, and make him look like a Sun God (41). The mask is worn as a headdress above the actor’s head and, via a cable control hidden in the sleeve of the costume, it can move forward and backward or from side to side (53). When worn above the actor’s head, the mask preserves the vertical line of the human body, but, when it moves forward, it can provide the horizontal shape of an animal by suggesting a lion’s arching spine and create a powerful effect, when the actor playing Mufasa, using two swords as front legs, strides regally about the stage (53). The masks serve an ideographic function, as they communicate in a single image a character’s dominant trait, but since they are mostly worn above the head, the actor’s facial expressions as well as his/ her body movements can diversify the image projected by the mask. As in the relationship between puppet and puppeteer, Taymor creates the singular essence of a character through the interplay between the performer and his/ her extended and sculpted animal character (124-5), and this interplay results in a kind of theatre that is both highly formalized (echoing Gordon Craig’s *Über-marionette*) and corporeal, throbbing with human physicality. Taymor worked extensively with her performers for the development of a corporeal language, “a physical, spatial, and rhythmic score” (143), which could communicate viscerally but also abstractly emotions, mental states and character traits. In this way, she

created an Artaudean corporeal “poetry in space” that extends the boundaries of the human form, not only through animalistic gesture, but also through the use of prosthetic sculpted components, and so “reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature” (Artaud 27).

Taymor is certainly no stranger to Artaudean techniques and methods. She is one of the primary exponents of American performance theatre, whose father is Artaud, and her works are characterized by the master’s trademark disregard for conventional representational techniques and a preference for gestural and hieroglyphic modes of representation, which emphasize the athleticism of the body and the phenomenal density of the scenic environment as sensory field. Apart from an intensely felt sensory field, the Artaudean stage is also an enchanting and enchanted space, dominated by magical forces, which present themselves in Taymor’s theatre as well. Her insistence on bringing the puppeteer on stage and exploring his/ her relationship with the puppet, the way he/ she infuses life into a lifeless thing, aims at celebrating the magical power of the human spirit, its ability to animate an inanimate object (Taymor 29). In this way, *The Lion King*’s ritualistic meta-theatricality produces its own *gestus*: an instantly readable theatrical sign, sketching in a hieroglyphic manner the phenomenon of animism, the virtual animation of the inanimate world, which is encountered in primitive societies. For Freud, the phenomenon of animism in the course of human development corresponds to the state of narcissism in the course of the individual’s psycho-sexual development, and since our postmodern society regresses to primary narcissistic states, animism (or rather its postmodern variant) makes a triumphant comeback. In fact, our hyperreal society of

the spectacle transforms everyday life into a festive celebration of animism, as increasingly artificial, digitally processed, ethereal images assume an autonomous existence and dominate lived experience. Of course, in our societies the virtual animation of the inanimate world is not only the product of human imagination but also the outcome of technological magic and prowess; and *The Lion King*, in combining traditional animatronics with the megamusical's techno-aesthetics (as we shall see, mainly through computerized set and light design), creates a diachronic link between animism and animation, as analogous manifestations of the human craving for magic.

The magical tone of the show is set from the opening number, "Circle of Life," in which Rafiki, the shaman baboon, summons the animal kingdom to celebrate the birth of Simba, king Mufasa and queen Sarabi's son. The rising curtain reveals an almost bare stage, with a ground row of distant mountains, suggesting the African savanna, enveloped in a cyclorama. To create the sense of a vast panorama and infinite landscape on a proscenium stage, Taymor with light designer, Donald Holder, and scenic designer, Richard Hudson, extended the cyclorama to the side masking, or legs, behind the proscenium arch, by installing on either side of the stage hollow, translucent Plexiglas rectangles, with lighting instruments mounted inside (74). By emitting the same colors and densities as the lights located behind the cyclorama, they wrap the stage in a continuous tone and create the illusion of an enveloping sky (74-5). Against such an enveloping deep orange sky, a giant sun appears, a slatted saffron circle made from ribs of aluminum with silk strips attached to them, giving the impression of the shimmering lines the sun creates on a desert horizon (78). Rafiki's chant breaks the silence of this haunting image and the animal kingdom gradually

occupies the stage, as animal puppets with their puppeteers move onstage from the wings or parade down the aisles in close proximity to the audience. The whole theatre is filled with Taymor's hieroglyphic combinations of African sculpture, human and animal form, suggesting in a poetic manner birds, cheetahs, gazelles, giraffes, zebras, wildebeest and elephants. As the animals slowly gather on the stage, the computer-controlled Pride Rock, a revolving asymmetrical construction, spirals majestically upward to a height of twenty feet, with Mufasa and Sarabi at the pinnacle. The number ends with Rafiki on the Pride Rock presenting Simba, the new-born and future lion king, to the animal kingdom.

Through her evocative imagery, Taymor transforms a number celebrating the miracle of life into one affirming the power of theatrical magic, and its effect is so strong that the deeply moved audiences, at least in the performances that I attended, burst out in enthusiastic screams or cry throughout the number. After such a dynamic opening, one wonders if a coup of similar power can be achieved, but Taymor's imagination proves to be inexhaustible, as she unravels one memorable stage picture after the other: the grassland journey, the elephant graveyard with its menacing hyenas, the mourning lionesses pulling white ribbons of tears from the eyes of their urn-like masks, the tropical paradise of the jungle and the most spectacular sequence, the wildebeest stampede. This scene takes place in a canyon formed by five sets of portals, which slide in from the wings and are located one behind the other in such a way as to recede in false perspective (98). The effect of hundreds of stampeding wildebeest is created by a canvas scroll, painted with images of wildebeest, at the rear of the stage and rollers dotted with miniature models of wildebeest in the front; as the scroll moves and the rollers turn, stomping dancers covered in five-foot wildebeest

shields rise out of the stage-wide trap downstage to complete the illusion of animals rushing toward the audience, which is further accentuated by subwoofers that communicate aurally the sensation of trampling hooves (99).

The stampede scene exemplifies Taymor's favorite technique of "integrat[ing] the human form mostly as an element in landscape-like spatial structures" (Lehmann 81), and this technique is used many times in *The Lion King* to striking effect. In the grassland journey, for example, Taymor achieves the theatrical equivalent of a panoramic long shot, by having her twenty-seven performers carrying trays of grass on their heads and forming hills and valleys as they slowly move about the stage, while two dancers carry miniature puppets of Mufasa and Simba traveling through the grasslands (Taymor 82-3). For the tropical paradise of "Can You Feel the Love Tonight," she creates once again a moving, breathing scenery worn and operated by the performers, who become blossoming flowers, rising from the plants and descending from the flies like floating vines in a landscape, whose color palette transmutes from green to fuschia to golden yellow and orange (105). This systematic de-anthropomorphization of the theatrical space aims at liberating the stage from representational obligations, in order to transform it into a site for the inscription of material signifiers, created by the irreducible interactions of architectural structures, lighting, human bodies and stage props. Taymor's landscapes raise the musical theatre's experimentations with interactive postdramatic techniques to a fascinating new level, because they achieve an unprecedented subjection of the musical stage to a radically and aggressively pictorial and formalistic directorial gaze. In this way, Taymor offers a purely "visual dramaturgy" (Lehmann 93), in which the performance

text is conceived primarily as a “*scenic poem*” (63): “a site of an ‘écriture’ in which all components of the theatre become letters in a poetic ‘text’” (58).

Taymor’s directorial style is, obviously, textual rather than representational; and if this style seemed at first too progressive for a Disney show, in the end, it proved to be the most appropriate one, because it was Disney, with its animated films, that first introduced mass audiences, from the first decades of the twentieth century, to textual aesthetics. This illuminating point is made by Jameson, who argues that the textual, “materialistic,” and “paradoxically nonfictive” specificity of the animated film “is at least twofold:”

involving on the one hand, a constitutive match or fit between a musical language and a visual one (two fully elaborated systems which are no longer subordinate to one another as in fiction film), and, on the other, the palpably produced character of animation’s images, which in their ceaseless metamorphosis now obey the “textual” laws of writing and drawing rather than the “realistic” ones of verisimilitude, the force of gravity, etc.

Animation constituted the first great school to teach the reading of material signifiers (rather than the narrative apprenticeship of objects of representation – characters, actions, and the like). (*Postmodernism* 77)

Disney’s textual aesthetics gradually dominated mass culture, and its influence is intensely felt in our postmodern artifacts, from blockbuster films to TV commercials and video clips, whose digitally processed imagery renders obsolete the photographic representation of the world in favor of a highly artificial, textual, hyperreal recreation of it. As we have seen, this textual aesthetic also entered the musical stage in the late 1960s and especially with the advent of megamusicals took hold of it. Through the

autonomization and liberation of lighting and set design from representational ends, the stage image became increasingly non-representational and textual: a highly formalized object of perceptual activity, which rearticulates the performance field into a predominantly visual field.

Within this visual field, there are no longer operative either the laws of verisimilitude or the Cartesian principle of objectivity, “through which object is subordinated to subject within a field of mutual definition” (Garner 96). By contrast, as we have seen, stage objects and design elements assume a “transgressive self-assertion” (95), an independent will and phenomenological agency, and redefine theatrical space from a static backdrop or frame of the action into an active participant, constantly changing shape and form. Taymor understands very well the megamusical aesthetic of stage animation and set choreography, because one of the first decisions she made about the staging of *The Lion King* was that the “scenery would function as a mobile event rather than a static stage picture” (Taymor 29). Accordingly, the structuring principle for Hudson’s set design was that the audience should “always be looking at a different spatial arrangement; each scene should make the audience feel as though it is in a different place” (Hudson qtd. in Taymor 74). In this way, Taymor and Hudson apply the visual dynamism that Prince achieved in the lake scene from *The Phantom of the Opera* to almost every musical number and sequence, and so create a series of three-dimensional, hyper-kinetic stage pictures. This spatial dynamism and mobility, within each sequence, provides the affective intensity that was missing from Lloyd Webber’s mega-flops, in which his big ballads were simply sung against a static background, rather than interacting viscerally with light and set design.

As Taymor exploits to the maximum this visceral interaction between the audio and visual components of the stage image within each musical number, she makes *The Lion King* the definition of the anthological musical: a collection of aesthetically complete, technologically elaborate and phenomenologically rich (post)dramatic moments. This perceptual plenitude calls for a vertical instead of a linear, horizontal kind of reading, as the spectator is immersed in aesthetically dense landscapes offered for phenomenal contemplation and scrutiny. Still, Taymor knows that every mass cultural text needs a minimum of syntagmatic, logico-temporal organization, and so uses the popular narrative of the original animated film as a guideline in her postdramatic maze. She retains the adorable comic situations but also emphasizes the epic and heroic dimensions of the story, which is after all an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for children, and, finally, introduces a strong African symbolism that enhances the overall ritualistic atmosphere. The transition from vaudevillian comedy to epic heroics and African ritual is usually abrupt and resembles channel switching to different programs on television, which is, nevertheless, as Jameson points out, "the very epitome of a postmodern attention and perceptual apparatus" (*Postmodernism* 373). However, these syntagmatic incongruities do not delimit the aesthetic pleasure that *The Lion King* offers in its totality, because the show is so powerfully organized on a paradigmatic axis around Taymor's overarching visual concept (the duality of human/ animalistic and animate/ inanimate) that it becomes a wholly gratifying spatial experience: one that offers an unforgettable journey to the African landscape as seen through the eyes of Taymor's postdramatic imagination.

Overall, *The Lion King* affirms the power of the director as conceptualist, *auteur* and driving force of the postmodern musical to such an extent that for the first time he or she overshadows the role of a composer. The score of the show was not written by a single composer and lyricist but rather “composed by committee, with no fewer than seven composers and lyricists cited, including Taymor herself, plus a crew of film-industry music professionals, all of them veterans of *The Lion King* movie” (Singer 146). Taymor retained the five original songs of the movie, written by Elton John and Rice, who made a comeback with Disney at the time of Lloyd Webber’s decline, and ordered three new songs from the composing duo. She also used some of the movie’s orchestral symphonic music, composed by Hans Zimmer, as well as several melodies from the album, *Rhythm of the Pridelands: Music Inspired by Disney’s The Lion King*, featuring songs by Zimmer, Mark Mancina and South African performer Lebo Morake, known as Lebo M. The latter also composed for the stage version many original chants, which were sung in Zulu and added a touch of authenticity to the African atmosphere of the whole piece. The orchestrations, which include authentic African percussion instruments, unite these diverse musical references into a consistent aural environment structured around various combinations of Western pop, South African pop and South African traditional music. As Singer points out, the “score seemed ultimately to have been composed by Julie Taymor using multiple composers as her instruments” and the fact that it works on stage is a further proof of the strength of her vision and the power of her aesthetic (149).

Inspired by Taymor’s achievement, Disney hired Anne Hamburger, once a well-known producer in New York’s avant-garde theatre scene, to supervise the company’s theme park and cruise ship productions and use her theatre contacts in order to bring

in some of the most established and promising theatre artists (Adler 100). If we add to the directors and conceptualists the whole host of architects and designers who are employed by the company, one can speak of a new form of “postmodern patronage,” as Disney has been gradually transformed “from a simple producer of cartoons to a postmodern and corporate version of the Medici family of the Renaissance” (Sylvia Lavin qtd. in Phillips 284). This form of postmodern patronage that brings together elitist, avant-gardist, bohemian iconoclasts with corporate giants extends beyond the theatrical realm and becomes a dominant phenomenon in the movie industry as well. Nowadays, most of the blockbuster films are visually conceived and directed by *auteurs* from the art-house film world: Peter Jackson directed *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Bryan Singer the first two *X-Men* movies and the new *Superman* film, Ang Lee gave us *Hulk*, Alfonso Cuarón helmed the third *Harry Potter* installment, Sam Raimi did all three *Spiderman* movies and Chris Nolan reinvigorated with *Batman Begins* the Batman franchise, which was initiated by another art-house director, Tim Burton. The corporations behind these films hire the above visionaries and expect them to employ their idiosyncratic visual language in order to create the most aesthetically progressive, cutting-edge imagery. This merging of corporate economic interests with progressive visuals proves, once again, one of the fundamental arguments of this study: in a postmodern culture, where commodity production and consumption are so dependent on image production and consumption, highly artistic visuals, that explore the non-representational, textual dynamics of the image, lose any negative character they had in a previous modernist culture and are thoroughly commodified.

Thus, Schneider and Schumacher's choice of Taymor as the director of Disney's most valuable property proved to be a strategic one. Her radical visuals won over the critics and the sophisticated theatergoers, giving to the company a much-needed artistic credibility; but, at the same time, they did not alienate the family audiences, at which Disney's products are mostly targeted, since today even five-year-old children acquire, through their exposure to digitally animated films and video games, a visual sophistication unimaginable for adult middle-class audiences fifty years ago. By achieving both critical recognition and blockbuster status, *The Lion King* proudly announced that Disney had arrived on 42nd street and had no intentions to leave, since Taymor's adaptation became the biggest musical phenomenon on Broadway since *The Phantom of the Opera*. However, Disney's determination to establish itself firmly on Broadway extended far beyond the creation of musical super-hits. In July 1995, a formal announcement was made that the company signed a forty-nine-year lease on the derelict New Amsterdam theatre, which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had staged *The Ziegfeld Follies* and was now going to be the home of *The Lion King*. After a costly restoration, the historic theatre became once again the shining jewel of 42nd street and the symbol of Disney's new-found Broadway supremacy. The company's decision to own its own theatre venue on Broadway affected greatly both the economy of New York and the look of the theatre district. Following Disney's example, a stream of chain stores, movie theatres and conglomerates were suddenly clamoring for space on the Times Square area (Adler 72), and this economic reinvigoration was exactly the aim of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who worked hard to meet Disney's demands (206). As a company specializing in wholesome family entertainment, Disney was particularly concerned with the atmosphere of urban decay

characterizing the Times Square area, which after World War II had been slowly transformed “into a grotesque American version of a Felliniesque inferno” (9). With Giuliani’s intervention, the sex shops and massage parlors disappeared and in their place were erected office and retail skyscrapers, high-rise hotels, multiplexes, restaurants, the headquarters of MTV, a Virgin Records store, the World Wrestling Federation and Madame Tussaud’s wax museum.

The bustling corporate activity has altered radically the look of the area, which is now “ablaze with a crazy quilt of signs and lights – stock and news tickers, enormous billboards, neon come-ons for every conceivable product, live video feeds – that transforms the theatre district at night into a twenty-first-century corporate assault on the senses” (207). The area has now become one more hypermediated brandscape, like the ones proliferating in other late capitalist media-cities, like Las Vegas and Tokyo. In these cities, we encounter a complex interaction between material and immaterial spaces, as electronic screens, which have now migrated from domestic to public space, invade the urban environment in the form of large-scale architectural surfaces or hypersurfaces. With their restless, constantly changing imagery, these hypersurfaces dematerialize and liquidize stable and solid architectural space, which is now animated, mobile and shifting, participating in its own peculiar performance art (Giannachi 97-9). This invasion of media and virtual aesthetics into the theatre district restores and enhances the atmosphere of visual and technological excess the area possessed before World War II, when New York was the most dazzling electropolis in the world and all other metropolises were trying to create their own “Great White Ways” to rival the electric lights of Broadway. In fact, the massive electrification of public spaces can be considered as a forerunner of contemporary

media architecture, since a similar dematerializing and liquidizing effect is generated when buildings are floodlit and their solidity, mass, stable shape and sense of volume begin to waver.¹⁰⁴

The high-tech restoration and renovation of 42nd street is one more stage in the century-long, capitalist process of transformation of public space into spectacular space, which, as Benjamin has shown, started in the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, international world fairs and luxurious department stores and continued with the twentieth-century “Great White Ways,” theme parks, shopping malls and spectacular media cities, like Las Vegas.¹⁰⁵ So, although many traditionalists may accuse Disney of transforming Broadway into its own image, into a gigantic, tourist-oriented, family-friendly, high-tech theme-park, this momentous transformation was more a matter of historical necessity and time, since plans for the corporate invasion on Broadway and its concomitant theme-parkization existed decades ago. Disney rather gave the impetus to city and state forces as well as international conglomerates to go on with their plans. Schneider’s words on this issue are revealing:

In some sense, I liken it to a jigsaw puzzle. People had been working forever on the edges, on the middle of the pieces. And along comes the jerk who says, “Oh, look, I found a piece, I’ll put it in. Look, it’s finished!” So in some sense, we were the last piece of the puzzle. We were not the first piece, we were not the driving force of the pieces. People have for twenty-

¹⁰⁴ This point is made by Scott McQuire in “The Politics of Public Space in the Media City,” 4 December 2007 <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/special11_2/mcquire/index.html>. His views also inform theoretically the argument on the spectacularization of public space.

¹⁰⁵ This spectacularization and theatricalization of public space is also defined as theme-parkization. For an in-depth analysis of theme-parkization, see Mark Gottdiener, *The Theming of America: Dreams, Visions, and Commercial Spaces* (Colorado and Oxford: Westview P, 1997).

five years been making Times Square and Forty-second Street work. A lot of things happened when Disney said yes. Did Disney give other people the courage to say yes? Yes. Did people have more confidence in the real estate development if Disney was going to redo the theatre? But fundamentally, we were the last piece of the puzzle. And we got a lot of credit, because we were the first big name company to stand up and say “We’re on Forty-second Street.” We were the last piece – an extremely important piece, an extremely visible piece, an extremely powerful financial piece – but we were not the drivers. (qtd. in Adler 10)

The most important of these drivers was, of course, Lloyd Webber. His megamusicals attracted first the tourist and family audiences, transformed the musical into a mass cultural institution and led the genre both aesthetically and economically into its postmodern phase. When Lloyd Webber lost his knack for the blockbuster musical hit, Disney entered in and with an amazing coup finished the puzzle, whose first piece, I would argue, was the opening of *Jesus Christ Superstar* on Broadway in 1971.

APPENDIX

The Musicals of Andrew Lloyd Webber

Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat

Lyrics: Tim Rice

Premiere at Colet Court School: 1st March 1968

West End opening at the *Albery Theatre*: 6th February 1973

Director: Frank Dunlop

Broadway opening at the *Royale Theater*: 27th January 1982

Director: Tony Tanner

West End revival at the *London Palladium*: 12th June 1991

Director: Steven Pimlott

Jesus Christ Superstar

Lyrics: Tim Rice

Broadway opening at the *Mark Hellinger Theater*: 12th October 1971

Director: Tom O' Horgan

West End Opening at the *Palace Theatre*: 9th August 1972

Director: Jim Sharman

Jeeves (retitled as *By Jeeves* for the revised version)

Book and Lyrics: Alan Ayckbourn

West End opening at *Her Majesty's Theatre*: 22nd April 1975

Director: Eric Thompson

Broadway opening at the *Helen Hayes* (as *By Jeeves*): 28th October 2001

Director: Alan Ayckbourn

Evita

Lyrics: Tim Rice

West End opening at the *Prince Edward Theatre*: 21st June 1978

Director: Harold Prince

Broadway opening at the *Broadway Theater*: 25th September 1979

Director: Harold Prince

Cats

Lyrics: T. S. Eliot/ Additional Lyrics: Richard Stilgoe and Trevor Nunn

West End opening at the *New London Theatre*: 11th May 1981

Director: Trevor Nunn

Broadway opening at the *Winter Garden Theater*: 7th October 1982

Director: Trevor Nunn

Song and Dance

Lyrics: Don Black/ Revised lyrics for the Broadway production: Richard Maltby Jr.

West End opening at the *Palace Theatre*: 7th April 1982

Director: John Caird

Broadway opening at the *Royale Theater*: 18th September 1985

Director: Richard Maltby Jr.

Starlight Express

Lyrics: Richard Stilgoe

West End opening at the *Apollo Victoria Theatre*: 27th March 1984

Director: Trevor Nunn

Broadway opening at the *Gershwin Theater*: 15th March 1987

Director: Trevor Nunn

The Phantom of the Opera

Book: Andrew Lloyd Webber and Richard Stilgoe

Lyrics: Charles Hart/ Additional Lyrics: Richard Stilgoe

West End opening at *Her Majesty's Theatre*: 9th October 1986

Director: Harold Prince

Broadway opening at the *Majestic Theater*: 26th January 1988

Director: Harold Prince

Aspects of Love

Book adaptation: Andrew Lloyd Webber

Lyrics: Don Black and Charles Hart

West End opening at the *Prince of Wales Theatre*: 17th April 1989

Director: Trevor Nunn

Broadway opening at the *Broadhurst Theater*: 8th April 1990

Director: Trevor Nunn

Sunset Boulevard

Book and Lyrics: Don Black and Christopher Hampton

West End opening at the *Adelphi Theatre*: 12th July 1993

Director: Trevor Nunn

Broadway opening at the *Minskoff Theater*: 17th November 1994

Director: Trevor Nunn

Whistle Down the Wind

Book: Patricia Knop, Gale Edwards and Andrew Lloyd Webber

Lyrics: Jim Steinman

U.S.A. opening at the *National Theatre*, Washington, D.C.: 12th December 1996

Director: Harold Prince

West End opening at the *Aldwych*: 1st July 1998

Director: Gale Edwards

The Beautiful Game

Book and Lyrics: Ben Elton

West End opening at the *Cambridge*: 26th September 2000

Director: Robert Carsen

The Woman in White

Book: Charlotte Jones/ Lyrics: David Zippel

West End opening at the *Palace Theatre*: 15th September 2004

Director: Trevor Nunn

Broadway opening at the *Marquis Theater*: 17th November 2005

Director: Trevor Nunn

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