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Corporeal Modification In The Hollywood Musical: New Paradigms For Genre Analysis

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CORPOREAL MODIFICATION IN THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL: NEW PARADIGMS FOR GENRE ANALYSIS

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2012

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Francis Y. Nakagawa and Steven H. Gullen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
This dissertation is the product of a life misspent watching too many musicals, on both the screen and the stage and collecting copious soundtracks and score recordings. That it has assumed a concrete form is down to many other people than just myself.

First and foremost, an enormous debt of gratitude is owed to my dissertation advisor, Jackie Byars - thank you for the advice, the guidance, the friendship and the many delicious Writers Group meals; this project would not have been possible without you. My entire doctoral committee has been supportive throughout these past years and I cannot thank them enough, Hayg Oshagan, Katheryn Maguire, Loraleigh Keashley and Blair Anderson. Special thanks go to the staff of the Wayne State University Department of Communication for their tireless assistance and accommodation, especially from 1200 miles away during the last third of my degree. Many friends and colleagues have been encouraging over the years, but I want to especially thank Karen McDevitt, Lara Hrycaj, Debbie James Smith, Carl Michel, Cherif Shawky, Joel Silvers, Wendy Turner, Tom and Jamie Sperti, Kirsten M. Thompson, Tom and Kristen Wright, Erika Thomas, Marylou Naumoff, Laura Wynn and Bill Trapani. Special thanks go to my dear friend Nick Schlegel for his unwavering support, loyalty and friendship over the years and miles and my beloved partner, Heather Rudd, for her constant love and encouragement. My parents, Clyde and Sue, and sister, Aimée have indulged my eccentricities and devotion to books, music and film over the years and have been a constant support, in every way imaginable, during my studies: to them I offer love, thanks and apologies in equal amounts. Finally, I thank my late grandfather, Frank and my beautiful son, Steve. You are my joy, my love and my inspiration; this is for you both.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, METHODOLOGY

*The musical shares numerous structures and strategies with American life. To understand the musical is to understand the overall cultural system in which it develops and makes its meaning.*
- Rick Altman

*Today it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying.*
- Theodor Adorno

Introduction

In his essay, “Myth and Ritual in Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” French literary critic René Girard examined the subtexts of the play to argue that the romantic love posited by the Bard was actually desire acting violently and destructively toward the individual. A reading of the play may not immediately make these assertions apparent, however Girard was arguing *subtext*, those nuanced statements that literary texts do not make; rather they hide behind that which is explicit. Consider literary critic Ralph Cohen’s quip that “If...the literary text makes a theoretical statement, it does so by not making it [but] by requiring the reader to unveil it from its hiding place behind the explicit” (380).

This dissertation calls for a re-reading of the Hollywood musical away from the standard classification, that of one strictly imbued with wistful nostalgia and heteronormativity. Indeed many musicals contain this aesthetic, but lying beneath the surface, a number of films have abrogated these traditional ideals to create, in essence, a carnivalesque representation of the societal norms through a genre, and a production code, that had sought to preserve them. I will argue that several musicals from the past few decades use sexual lust, homoeroticism and violence to intentionally subvert the hegemonic status quo that was historically present in this relatively conservative genre resulting in a trend that bears strong similarities to the horror film.
These latter texts have led me to declare them the “corporeal modification” cycle, a trend in the musical that doesn’t seem to be subsiding. As opposed to uniting the community, the family and the couple in an inviting high-key mise-en-scène, these recent films featured dark and satirical para-realities that included murder, debauchery, and cannibalism. With the replacement of the Hayes Code in 1968 by the Motion Picture Association of America’s film rating system, Hollywood became increasingly more liberalized, allowing the musical to explore progressively darker themes and include more explicit content.

The pairing of music and transgressive themes in performative texts is nothing new. One need only to look to the history of opera, the French Grand Guignol, the Punch and Judy shows and Busby Berkeley’s choreography, amongst many others to find a plethora of examples of texts in which music is tied to sexuality, identity politics and violence in a staged (or in the lastmentioned case, filmed) milieu. The American musical owes its history to all of these forms (and more, if you also include Viennese operetta and ballet) as it has developed and matured over the last eighty years since the first real film musical, The Broadway Melody of 1929, premiered. The musical is certainly no stranger to coverage in scholarship. Along with Rick Altman’s seminal text, scholars like Jane Feuer, Richard Dyer, Steve Cohan and others have devoted lengthy studies and articles to the genre, each contributing different beneficial approaches and analyses. What has not been accounted for by these previous scholars, nor anyone else for that matter, is how these seemingly anomalous musicals fit into the generic corpus. This leaves a clear gap in scholarship that needs to be addressed.

This dissertation also argues that the musical, perhaps more than any other genre, is a cinematic manifestation of American culture and the consummate genre to study with regards to audience catharsis, sociopolitical commentary and the economics of predictability. For example,
many scholars claim that the period of the eighties was a relative dead zone for the musical save for a few gems like Blake Edwards’ *Victor/Victoria* (1982), Frank Oz’s *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) and Disney’s animated production of Ron Clements and John Musker’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989). While this decade didn’t see much in the way of the film musical, however, the stage mega-musical was rushing full-steam ahead with Lloyd-Webber’s *Cats* (1982 on Broadway), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988 on Broadway) and Boublil and Schönberg’s *Les Misérables* (1987 on Broadway), the first two of which would have their Broadway versions directly adapted to the cinema twenty years subsequent. Audiences flocked to Broadway, Toronto (the home of lengthy runs for *Phantom* and *Les Misérables*) and touring company productions in their home towns to see these shows as much as they were driving up the box-office receipts for blockbuster films like *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *E.T.* (1982) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). The musical is a genre of audience demand and like American culture itself, is in constant flux. This makes the need for an exploration such as this necessary, as audiences often seek to find purgation through the cinema and, at the time of this writing, the musical is currently undergoing a resurgence in Hollywood with over thirty productions filming or in post-production for release in 2012 and beyond.

For my argument illustrating audience participation to be clearer, I’ll utilize Tom Gunning’s concept of “the cinema of attractions” to illustrate how the corporeal modification musical, which draws from a genre that by its very nature is one of spectacle, inextricably links the audience and the film together, especially in interactive experiences such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Gunning first articulated the cinema of attractions in 1985 with his observations that early cinema held more to the audiences than just the image on the screen, “it is a cinema that bases itself on the quality that [Fernand] Léger celebrated: its ability to show
something” (230). Gunning goes on to comment, “…the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. musicals) than in others” (230). The cinema of attractions, like the musical itself on stage and screen, is aware of the audience, creating a narrative with singing and dancing that is there specifically for them to see. One only needs to look at the choreography and camera work of Busby Berkeley’s musical numbers to see this illustrated. Prior to Berkeley’s arrival in Hollywood, most musical numbers were shot with straightforward wide and *plan-américain* shots much as one would view the actors on the stage. One of Berkeley’s many innovations was the introduction of the moving camera in the musical number that allowed him to create ornate kaleidoscopic performances with overhead shots for the pleasure of the audience. Both instances were, to once again quote Gunning, “willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator” (230). The musical is the only genre that can interact with the audience in such a manner. It is the modification musical, however, that has made this interaction particularly salient. Other recent musicals haven’t achieved the same level of penetration to go on road shows or inspire audience participation scripts. This dissertation will discuss that peculiarity.

The primary films that I will be studying in this dissertation are Brian de Palma’s *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), Jim Sharman’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), Frank Oz’s *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), Tim Burton’s *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007) and Darren Lynn Bousman’s *Repo! The Genetic Opera* (2008). I will also be gesturing in a smaller capacity to other films (e.g. Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), Trey Parker’s *Cannibal! The Musical* (1994), John Cameron Mitchell’s *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001)), to theatrical performances (e.g. the stage versions of the
above films), and to television programs (e.g. the musical episode of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* entitled “Once More, with Feeling” (2001)) that were an influence on this trend. These texts are considered “integrated musicals” in that the numbers play a significant role in narrative movement and character development and exposition. While the main focus of this dissertation will be the cinematic iterations of the above productions, I will gesture to their respective stage counterparts when appropriate, especially when the confluence of the two media comment specifically to the text’s significance.

The theoretical approach through which I’ll read these films will draw primarily on the work of semiotician and linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically his discussion of the carnivalesque, the literary mode which undermines and frees the conservative hegemony through which the musical was intended vis-à-vis the erotic, the comedic and the violent. While Bakhtin first introduced his ideas on carnival in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, (1963), he fully articulated his position in one of his most famous works, *Rabelais and his World* (1968), originally submitted as his doctoral dissertation to the Gorky Institute of World Literature, but not defended and published until many years later. In the latter book, Bakhtin examines François Rabelais’ *Garangtua and Pantagruel* (circa 1532), focusing on the carnivalesque, one of the main themes that runs through the text. The transgressive themes mentioned above were very apparent in the films of genres like the horror or the action film. What was not quite so expected was that these motifs would, I argue, creep into the so-called “family-friendly” Hollywood musical.

The carnivalesque is drawn historically from the Feast of Fools, a medieval festival in which sacred rituals were burlesqued and the conventional positions of morality were overturned and profaned. It is an especially appropriate metaphor for the musical considering the genre’s performative nature. At one point in the text, Bakhtin implies that the participants and spectators
in the carnival must remain linked in order for the event to have puissance⁴, which ties directly to the text-audience parallel that I discussed earlier. Bakhtin’s usefulness within this context is multifaceted. If we look to literary theorist Makita Hoy’s discussion of him with respect to the novel,

Although Bakhtin insists that the novel is the key form of the time, his advantage over everyone else working on novel theory is his appreciation that the novel, rather than assimilating its language to form, shapes its form to languages and consequently appears as what Michael Holquist describes as a ‘supergenre,’ ingesting and engulfing all other genres (765).

That said, I will argue that instead of, to once again borrow from Hoy, “limiting the term novel to a narrow piece of textual fiction, Bakhtin uses it to name the interplay of heteroglotal strata at work within any given literary system,” and that we can see the musical as one such system (765). More than any other genre, the musical, especially within the last forty years, has shaped its own form to the languages of popular culture, be they rebellious, sexual or violent. As stated, the musical’s unique relationship with the audience comes from its theatrical roots, and I shall explicate this further when discussing the history of the musical in Chapter Two. The musicals that I will be specifically studying in this dissertation exemplify a contemporary application of the carnivalesque within the genre, a trend that seems to be continuing not just through my primary texts but other ancillary television programs, theatrical exhibitions, rock and roll and the music video, and further films that are currently in development.

Review of the Literature

In recent years, scholars have devoted extended studies and articles to the Hollywood musical in all of its facets; song dubbing, the wartime musical as propaganda, the aesthetic of camp and gendered bodies and so on. I intend for this dissertation to contribute to this growing body of work.
In recent compendiums and anthologies on film, whenever the film musical is mentioned, Rick Altman is often the author of the entry, or at the very least, the most cited when discussing it. In early 1988, Indiana University Press released Altman’s *The American Film Musical*, widely regarded as the pièce de résistance in the lexicon of film musical scholarship with respect to critical genre classification and analysis. In the text, which serves as both a genre theory discussion and an in-depth study of the musical, Altman identifies three classifications for the film musical: the show musical, the folk musical and the fairy tale musical. The common thread between these classifications is the eventual union of the (heterosexual) couple, and a restoration of order to the community. Of particular interest however is his examination of the musical’s narrative structure and how it differs from other films, “Whereas the traditional approach to narrative assumes that structure grows out of plot, the dual-focus structure of the American film musical derives from character” (*The American Film Musical* 21). Altman drives home the point of this deeper consideration of the genre by doing an extended analysis of Minnelli’s *Gigi* (1958). He then structurally and stylistically discusses the musical and subsequently embarks on chapter-length explications of his semantic/syntactic analysis that has produced his three classifications.

The film musical is a massive genre spanning nearly a century’s worth of material with numerous trends, anomalies and cycles: The Freed Unit, the Astaire-Rogers cycle, Paramount’s Cab Calloway short films, the Pasternak Unit, the generic and racially integrated musical; all of these elements make up the genre’s complex history, but by examining the implications and forms of musicals that take place backstage (the show musical) or revolve around the family and community (the folk musical) or are drawn from the rich history of American and European operetta (the fairy tale musical), Altman gives us a useful place to start with the genre.
His text, however, is not without its shortcomings, with one of the clearest being a lack of any update or revision since its original publication over twenty years ago. In that period, the musical has gone through massive change and resurgence. The interplay between Broadway and Hollywood has seen a rebirth the likes of which haven’t occurred since the musical’s earliest beginnings in the late twenties and thirties. In addition, audiences have seen the intertextuality of the musical on television and other media (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Scrubs and Futurama to name a few and the viral internet phenomenon Dr Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog). The genre is far too relevant for one of the most canonical texts to simply go unrevised and ignorant to its future. In addition, Altman’s taxonomy fails to properly acknowledge musicals he either does not like such as A Star Is Born (1954) or those that fall outside of his classification schema, including films like Rocky Horror, Phantom of the Paradise and Purple Rain (1984). It would appear that if a musical exists that doesn’t work within Altman’s paradigm, he either ignores it entirely or dismisses it. While Altman’s book is a great place to start, his study is far too restrictive.

Another slightly more abstract yet no less significant text is Jane Feuer’s The Hollywood Musical (1993). Feuer’s study focuses mainly on the musical as a rhetorical device and its social implications. Early on, she comments:

The Hollywood musical is one degree farther removed from ‘folk’ art in that it involves mechanical reproduction and mass distribution. From the movie musical’s industrial origins stems an alienation between performer and audience that has both a sociological and aesthetic dimension (2).

Here, Feuer is citing Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and the manner in which the classical Hollywood musical has been robbed of its ‘aura’ and is passed off as mass art masquerading as folk art. She continues, “The Hollywood musical as a genre perceives the gap between producer and consumer…The musical seeks to
bridge that gap by putting up ‘community’ as an ideal concept” (3). This community that is created partially helps locate the genre as, according to Feuer, one of the most culturally conservative in the canon of classical Hollywood. Her discussion of the musical’s social implications makes this study vastly important not only to scholarship (it’s still one of the most in depth philosophical analyses of the genre) but to my individual work as well.

Another recent study, which serves an interesting approach to the musical, is Steven Cohan’s *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value and the MGM Musical* (2005). Cohan’s text explores the relationship between camp value and the MGM musicals of the 1940’s. Camp is “defined as the ensemble of strategies used to enact a queer recognition of the incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality” borrowing from Susan Sontag’s influential essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” published in 1964 (qtd. in Cohan, 1). Cohan looks at the MGM musicals during and immediately following the studio era arguing that the aesthetics of camp overlap and inform the style and cultural value of the MGM Musical. The importance of a study such as Cohan’s cannot be understated as camp goes to the very heart of the musical’s deliberately herniated verisimilitude; to use Sontag’s words: “Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”). While other genres sought to enhance realism, the musical sought to blend story and spectacle. In a way, this dissertation can be seen as an expansion upon Cohan’s study, examining both the precursors and subsequences to the MGM musicals.

Finally, an invaluable piece of scholarship is Robert Stam’s *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (1992). While this text doesn’t discuss the musical directly, it is the first extended study of Bakhtinian thought on film and has proven very useful to the expanding use of the semiotician’s influence in cinema studies and popular culture. Stam
dissects and carefully reviews all of Bakhtin’s work before explaining how the notions of power, carnival and the grotesque body are applied to filmic texts. While Stam acknowledges carnival’s importance for the musical, his study is fairly broad in scope. This dissertation narrows the field down to a specific genre, but it is books like Stam’s which go to prove the importance of Soviet semiotics and Bakhtin’s circle in contemporary scholarship.

Despite the relative infancy of literature in film studies compared to other fields in the arts, it seems a genre as important as the musical would warrant a far larger canon of work. However aside from the texts mentioned above, several books published from popular presses, a handful of articles in journals and anthologies, the academy has avoided extensive discussion of the film musical (there is far more covered on the stage musical). The musical has played a large role in film history, as well as in other areas such as African-American studies, feminist media criticism, music history and popular music studies. The aim of this dissertation, thus, is to assert that the musical’s importance is manyfold especially as it pertains to a reexamination of the fragmented body and identity, a trope that is being played out in numerous other areas: popular music and the “torture film” subgenre in horror are two examples. I will later examine trends within rock and roll music, specifically the subgenres of gothic rock and heavy metal that frequently incorporate dark themes and a fractured identity and corporeality.

**Methodology**

In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin commented that, “Texts continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation…they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth” (“Discourse in the Novel” 422). This quote represents the crux of what I intend to argue in this section, that the musical as a text has changed according to the needs of the times and audiences
in ways that are often far from its original intentions. Bakhtin articulated his interpretation of the carnival in *Rabelais and His World* in which carnival is “a mode of language opposed to the official norms of church and state” (Morson and Emerson 443-456). Carnival is perhaps one of the best modes of reading the musical due to its notions of the expression of universal freedom: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (*Rabelais and His World*, 7).

As a genre, the musical is *separated* from other genres due to its intentional break with verisimilitude. The singing and dancing occurs within the diegesis of the musical and “nowhere else.” The integrated musical provides no explanation for this break as the audience does not see an orchestra or band accompany the performers. The music is ubiquitous and diegetic, and we are expected to accept this world as well. The horror film tries to explain the monster; the musical doesn’t care that the monster is there, but rather embraces it and invites it to join in. Furthermore, I have stated the musical is a spectatorial event that exemplifies the cinema of attractions. Bakhtin addresses this as well by commenting: “In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community” (*Rabelais and His World*, 255). Thus, the audience, by their mere presence at the event, and especially in active participation events such as *Rocky Horror*, are invited to become part of the collective body that is the experience of the musical such that, seeing a musical - whether filmed or staged - is not like seeing any other text but a totally immersive event.
Brecht once derisively commented that the Broadway musical was “the authentic expression of all that is American” (qtd. in Greenspan, 154). Of course, he was referring to his interpretation of the Polyannaisms that was so common in the stage musical during the early portion of the century. However, I would suspect that Brecht might take lesser issue with the corporeal modification musical. By involving the audience in the manner just described and thus breaking the fourth wall, the corporeal modification musical aligns itself perfectly with his notion of epic theatre that distances audiences from the typical immersive nature of the cinema. Of course, the purpose of this distancing, according to Brecht, was to allow the audience to engage with his theatre as a social construct to motivate them to enact change in their surroundings. As will be discussed and demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the modification musical had the same goals. This connection to the audience was a characteristic unique to this trend in the musical. Whether it was the huge fanbase of Phantom of the Paradise in central Canada, the audience participation in Rocky Horror or the continued revivals of Little Shop of Horrors, the modification films, through their carnivalesque representations, connected strongly with audiences that refused to accept the conservative dishings-out that Hollywood was proffering them. Thus, Bakhtin’s writing in Rabelais and His World delves into three main areas that revolve around the musical and my argument: the social (the audience), the literary (the musical text) and the meaning of the body (themes of transgression; identity politics and corporeal modification) (Clark and Holquist, 297-299).

It has been all too common for scholars to place the Hollywood musical within a discursive formation of nostalgia and heteronormativity. Simply taking Altman’s schema, for example, might nullify the films within my schema as musicals at all. As Jane Feuer states:

Altman…overwhelmingly bases his model for the genre on ideas of normative (for the 1950s) heterosexual coupling. For Altman, to reject heteronormative
coupling is to reject the genre; his theory does not explain how resisting readers may transform musicals…Altman’s ‘mass audience’ involves an acceptance of what by the 1960s were already outmoded gender-based conventions of partnering (124).

I assert that the musical is one of the most misunderstood of genres because of its flip-flopping between conservative and liberal aesthetics (intra-marital heteronormativity versus raw lust). Just as I am calling for a new reading of the Hollywood musical, Bakhtin wrote Rabelais and His World to call for a fresh interpretation of Gargantua and Pantagruel “that would cut away the dross of moralizing-officializing, puritanical-puristic ‘misreadings’ and that would once more lay open Rabelais’ work within the cultural and semantic context of the Renaissance, that unique epoch in which ‘folk art and high culture converge’” (Lachmann, 116). The musical has been called a longing cinematic quest for utopia. I argue that while there is a certain kernel of truth to this assertion, the utopia that I (and Bakhtin) argue is not the same utopic myth that other scholars are referring to. Bakhtin’s utopia is a freedom: freedom from the hegemonic cloisters of the church and ruling class. The musicals that I discuss in the subsequent chapters are a realization of that desire. As Bakhtin says:

> In the framework of class…this specific character [moments of change, catharsis and renewal] could be realized without distortion only in the carnival and in similar marketplace festivals. They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance (Rabelais and His World 9).

Richard Dyer also recognizes that the musical is not true escapism but responsive to historical pressures through its form: “This emotional register characterizes what the genre offers as entertainment; that is, through its numbers the musical makes evident the contradictions of a capitalist, patriarchal society recasting them as ahistorical needs such as ‘abundance’…and ‘transparency’” (17). The utopian myth as described by other scholars (especially Altman) on the musical relates to the longing for a conservative aesthetic that focused on familial and civic
unity. While some musicals did portray this idea, several featured the carnivalesque spirit, albeit sometimes cloaked in a veil of sobriety. The appropriateness of reading a genre such as the musical through the lens of Bakhtin is further illustrated by a point made by Clark and Holquist who comment that:

Bakhtin has written a book about another book that constantly plays with categories and transgresses the limits of official ideology. Like Rabelais, Bakhtin throughout [Rabelais and His World] is exploring the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, like old and new, official and unofficial (qtd. in Lachmann, et al., 117).

This reading of the musical that I am calling for places the genre at that said interface - films that are in a constant state of change, acting in a cinematic taffy puller between the convergence of high art and popular culture; between the limits of realism and formalism and the need for total immersion of the audience. This dissertation is arguing gender and identity politics as much as it is exploring cinematic representations of the culture-at-large. I do not, however, want to merely imply strict causality here, post hoc ergo propter hoc (after this, therefore, because this) but that these musicals also exist to exploit the cathartic experience of the audience due to the combination of music and said fragmentation’s recreational terror.

**Origins: Bakhtin and Carnival**

Bakhtin’s work has become more acceptable to scholars with respect to his examination of popular culture. “[Bakhtin’s] acute study of the folkloric rituals of carnival - from the phallopors of epic Saturnalia, whose role was to joke and cavort obscenely, to the rogue comedians at turn-of-the-century country fairs - uncovers a vast and fertile dialogue of heteroglossia” (Hoy, 765). Whether it is style magazines and punk music as Hoy’s study focuses on, Yael Sherman’s study of carnival in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series or my own research herein, Bakhtin’s influence is multivalent and germane. I admit that I am
bewildered at other scholars lack of willingness to engage Bakhtin’s work in their studies on the musical especially since, as I’ve demonstrated thus far, his ideas provide the opportunity to examine this genre from a different theoretical point of view.

While Bakhtin coined the literary term, the *carnivalesque*, historians date the celebration of carnival back to pre-Christian times, possibly having its origins in the Roman feasts of Saturnalia and Bacchanalia. Due to its strong Catholic roots, the first actual carnival celebrations are believed to have been celebrated in Italy and included music, dancing, elaborate feasts and the use of masquerade. The festival was a period of public revelry allowing practitioners to express more carnal passions prior to the forty-day sobriety of Lent, which culminated in the festival of Easter. Throughout the centuries, the carnival was appropriated by other countries and regions into their own respective festivals including the Brazilian Carnival and the Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans, Louisiana. While modern iterations have morphed or done away with some of the classic traditions, the spirits of revelry, debauchery and masquerade have still maintained their presence at carnival festivals around the world. Bakhtin does argue that we must not simply lump his idea of the *carnivalesque* with the contemporary Mardi Gras celebration due to the latter event’s preoccupation with spectacle exclusively and the former’s power of creativity. I believe that it would be more appropriate to compare Bakhtin’s carnival with an event such as The Burning Man Festival held every September outside of Gerlach, Nevada.

The roots of carnival, then, are tied directly to the corporeal, or as Bakhtin termed, the grotesque body in *Rabelais and His World*. The idea of the grotesque body related to the degradation of all that was patrician down to a material or corporeal level. The grotesque body represents the literary yin and yang of life, the celebrations of the body human that make living realized (copulation, consumption, defecation) and the darkness that is death and decomposition.
Bakhtin says, “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style...pleasure is caused by degrading high literature. All that is high wearies in the long run. The more powerful and prolonged the domination of the high, the greater the pleasure caused by its uncrowning” (Rabelais and His World 303-305). If we examine this literary trope within the context of film genres, it might immediately suggest that we look to the horror film due to horror’s connection of the body, the monster and repression. Robin Wood offers this commentary: “It is the...relationship between normality and the Monster that constitutes the essential subject of the horror film.” (176). This relationship plays out in the various iterations of horror: the psychological horror, the slasher film, the supernatural horror, the contemporary torture film and so on. The division between life and death is an essential component of the horror aesthetic. But this division is also present in the musical albeit metaphorically, and more specifically, in the corporeal modification musicals that make up my discussion. Just as Bakhtin used the grotesque body to act as a metaphor for social and cultural systems, I argue that the performer in the musical acts as the grotesque body within the greater milieu of cinema. I am speaking of its continuity in its act of becoming - grotesque in its dissimilarity with other cinematic characters from other genres. Bakhtin defines the grotesque body as “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continuously built, created and builds and creates another body.” (Rabelais and His World 217) Thus, even though the diegesis, even though the film is completed, the performers continue to exist, to exercise their expression and liberation via song and dance, in perpetuity. The musical still exists, vis-à-vis other texts such as the television program, Glee. In essence, the musical performer is in a constant state of becoming.

From the trope of the grotesque body, Bakhtin articulated the carnivalesque: a metaphor
for the activity that plays out in the various carnivals of culture, which, of course, includes various iterations of the arts. In the carnivalesque, the dominant hegemonic ideology is overturned and derided. Initially, the presence of this spirit was subtle in musicals acting as the proverbial ‘wink and nod’ to audiences in the know as Cohan discusses in his study of MGM musicals that I referenced earlier. One of the integral pieces to the development of the musical form during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was satire, which holds its origins in the concept of humor and laughter and how they’ve been treated throughout the history of drama.

While, during the Renaissance, laughter was lauded as an essential part of the literary text and the culture at large as much as if not more than solemnity, from the seventeenth century onwards, the attitude towards laughter changed radically as Bakhtin comments:

[Laughter] can only refer to individual and individually typically phenomena of social life. That which is important and essential cannot be comical. Neither can...kings, generals heroes- be shown in a comic aspect...the place of laughter in literature belongs only to the low genres, showing the life of private individuals and the inferior social levels. Laughter is a light amusement...of corrupt and low persons (Rabelais and His World 67).

This ‘laughter’ however is not simply limited to the jocular but rather situations in which the desire to profane the status quo was present. Thus, while the films that I am discussing may not be humorous per se, the work that they are doing from a Bakhtinian perspective certainly would fit within that paradigm. I do want to make it very clear that unlike Altman’s restrictive thesis, I am not at all implying that a musical, especially one created within the last twenty years, has to incorporate elements of the carnivalesque to have validity or be considered a postmodern text. The corporeal modification cycle of films has specific characteristics that include violence or modification of the body or the identity, by another party, for the purposes of profaning specific institutions or ideas.

My goal in this section has been to lay the groundwork of how we can read musicals
through Bakhtinian thought, namely the carnivalesque. While initially controversial, scholarly use of Bakhtin’s theories has become more pervasive in analyses of texts in popular culture and the arts. I will continue to return to and expand upon these ideas in the pages and chapters that follow.

**Chapter Discussion**

In Chapter Two, I set forth a detailed history of the film musical drawing together the relevant elements which establish the foundations that led to this specific trend within the musical genre. By observing the influence of the Hayes Code and how the musical went through changes during the sixties and seventies, the ancestors of the modification musical will become clearer.

Chapter Three is dedicated to works from the seventies and eighties which included *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) as modern cinematic interpretations of the Grand Guignol: productions that blend elements of the erotic, grotesque and satirical. Once the significance of the Grand Guignol and other alternative theatrical formats has been discussed in Chapter Two, we can properly address the rationale and impact of these films.

One important aspect of *Rocky Horror* that will be examined is its modification into a theatrical experience, not unlike the Laterna Magika theatre that has been performing in Prague for the past four decades. The Laterna Magika blends together a screened film with a theatrical performance that is based on the film. Originally considered an experiment in political theatre for the Brussels Worlds Fair in 1958, the response to Laterna was slightly more enthusiastic than expected:

A distinctive form of theatrical entertainment combining film with live onstage action in an integrated, synchronized manner, Laterna Magika...proved to be such
a hit with international visitors at Brussels that Czech authorities decided to support its ongoing work by adapting a former Prague movie theatre for its permanent home...under the wing of the National Theatre (Burian, 33).

As Burian goes on to explain, Laterna Magika is anything but mainstream and it “rejects conventional realism as a form of expressionism: cubism, surrealism and post-modernism come chiefly to mind” (35). The theatre has continued to thrive in various forms and serves a good example of the postmodern aesthetic in which these texts are viewed both on stage and screen.

In Chapter Four, I will examine texts from the nineties and two thousands. The former period was one of relative latency for the modification musical however the act of bodily modification moved forward as a rhetoric of resistance in other tangential media texts and the popularity of trends within rock music like the establishment of industrial and gothic rock. While Steven Sondheim’s musical rendition (and the subsequent 2007 Tim Burton film) are perhaps the most well-known iterations of Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, the story has been around for over a century and a half in which Todd appeared as a main character in the penny dreadful series titled The String of Pearls (1846). Audiences became engrossed in the idea of the blood-thirsty vengeful barber who slashes his victims throat with a straight razor and then, with the help of his landlady Mrs. Lovett, bakes said victims into meat pies for the citizens of London to feast upon. The film is perhaps one of the perfect examples of how a story, while still macabre in nature, takes on more explicit thematics with changing audiences and time periods. In addition, the film gestures back to one of the main operatic narratives of the deranged social outcast.

Chapter Four will also address the use of rock music and gore in the film Repo! The Genetic Opera as well as the fervent attendance at festivals and road tours by a different audience than typically associated with the genre. Repo! seems almost the anti-musical in every way,
shape and form. The melodies are often syncopated rhythmically and feature heavy use of minor keys and chords. Several of the musical numbers within the film take place during the very act of violent modification and dismemberment, and the film is almost entirely sung - true to its name as an opera - and not unlike the megamusicals that appeared on Broadway.

The concluding Chapter Five will “tie up the loose ends” and synthesize my arguments. This chapter will also serve as an appropriate point in which I discuss the musical’s revival in recent years and future corporeal modification musicals that are in pre-production or production, such as the stage version of the 1985 horror film, Re-Animator.

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1 Cats was released as a television special/direct-to-video feature in 1998 in which the stage production (sans audience) was essentially filmed using multiple cameras. The Phantom of the Opera has a long history in Hollywood with one of the most famous films being the 1925 version with Lon Chaney and Mary Philbin in the lead roles. Joel Schumacher directed a film version of Lloyd-Webber’s The Phantom of the Opera in 2004 with Gerard Butler and Emmy Rossum in the lead roles. Tom Hooper, director of The King’s Speech (2010) made the film version of the Les Miserables Broadway show that will open in December, 2012.  
3 As opposed to backstage or show musicals. I will expand on the notion of what makes a musical in Chapter Two. Additionally, Phantom of the Paradise is not an integrated musical – I will expand on this in Chapter Three.  
4 Puissance is defined as “having great power or influence.”  
5 Bakhtin coined the term “heteroglossia” in his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” which was included in his collection The Dialogic Imagination (1975), and it refers to “a complex mixture of languages and world views that is always, except in some imagined ideal condition, dialogized, as each language is viewed from the perspective of the others. This dialogization of languages, dialogized heteroglossia, creates a complex unity, for whatever meaning language has resides neither in the intension of the speaker nor in the text but at a point between speaker or writer, listener or reader” (Morson and Emerson 284-90). I argue that meaning in the musical sits in that interstice, that point, between the performer/text and the audience.  
6 “Burning Man is an annual art event and temporary community based on radical self expression and self-reliance in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada” (www.burningman.com).  
7 When I say that the musical still exists, I mean that its numbers and influence continue into perpetuity in popular culture. While one wouldn’t break into a scene re-enactment from Gone With the Wind or Inception, the program Glee does it regularly with musical numbers from films even going so far as to often construct a similar narrative and mise-en-scène to the original song’s context. Another example of this is Seth McFarland’s animated comedy program Family Guy, which often takes musical numbers and reappropriates them for the episode’s narrative purpose, sometimes without even changing the lyrics.
CHAPTER TWO

THE PROGENITORS TO THE CORPOREAL MODIFICATION MUSICAL

In her essay, “The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies”, Vivian Sobchak comments, “[we] hide from the frightening reality of our fragile innards by believing in the strength of plastic and supermarkets. Yet we [are] fascinated as we have always been, by blood and tissue and bone” (82). Historically, genres like the Hollywood musical have been Sobchak’s “plastic and supermarkets” where viewers can find a cinematic safe haven peppered with folksy nostalgic charm. As Caryl Flinn writes in Strains of Utopia, “One thing that emerges quite clearly from the musical activity of the 1930’s and 1940’s is an emerging sense of utopia, an ideal organized around the notion that collective identity could somehow be materialized through music” (22). The corporeal modification musical works to fracture that traditional notion of a collective identity not unlike what Lee’s 2005 film Brokeback Mountain did for the Western. A 2009 interview with the Times of London discussed Richard O’Brien’s “alternative” musical The Rocky Horror Picture Show, which opened in 1973. The interview comments that

It can be read as an allegory of a drug trip, a paean to (or warning about) sexual experimentation, a love letter to old B-movies, even as a satire on the political degeneracy of America: the 1975 film version, which has repaid its $1 million budget more than a hundredfold, is pointedly set on the night of Nixon’s resignation (Wells, “Richard O’Brien: Rocky Horror? It was all about my mother”).

When O’Brien comments that his “hedonistic, self-indulgent, voluptuary...ego-driven” yet still-beloved antagonist, Dr. Frank-N-Furter was patterned off of his overbearing ‘bonkers’ mother, it might seem oddly anachronistic for such a genre that places such emphasis on family and the community, but for the text, entirely acceptable as it is, after all, the outrageousness of the characters and musical numbers that have helped contribute to its cult following all of these years later (Wells). Thus, within the films that I am studying, we see overt transsexuality,
sadism, promiscuity, cannibalism, explicit torture and gore and Satanism. While these are topics that the musical has avoided exploring in past decades, it does beg the question as to how we arrived at these texts from films like *Flying Down to Rio* (1933). The musical has one of the richest histories of any cinematic genre. To fully chronicle the film musical’s past is beyond the scope of this chapter and dissertation; many other authors do that quite competently. I do, however, want to argue in this chapter that certain events allowed the modification musical to come into maturity and it is beneficial to examine those in detail.

The idea of pairing music to drama has been an integral part of entertainment in many cultures throughout history, and American film is no exception. Historically, the Hollywood musical was never a genre that one would necessarily associate with violence, sex, cannibalism and a secret desire to lampoon and overturn the status quo. If one were to utilize the masterpiece tradition (a method of looking at film history according to cinema’s most significant texts that was en vogue during the sixties) and examine the top musicals from either the American Film Institute or the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry, nostalgic texts such as *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) and *Top Hat* (1935) appear\(^1\). Thus, one may wonder how the corporeal modification musical emerged, when and why. This chapter will address those questions. It would also be helpful to define exactly what constitutes a musical to avoid confusion or the departure onto tangential commentary.

Whenever we discuss the history of the film musical, we must start with the genre’s theatrical roots. Sexuality and violence have been part of the dramaturgical tradition since the beginning as the origins of Greek theatre lay in religious rites celebrating fertility. As discussed in Chapter One, the carnivalesque that Bakhtin analyzes in *Rabelais and His World* started in this early period as carnivals that took place to celebrate Dionysus (in Athenian theatre) or, later on,
feasts honoring Saturn or Bacchus (in Roman theatre). These rites eventually became performed plays that depicted the struggles, tragedies and triumphs of daily life, oftentimes including lust and violence within their narratives. Such themes would continue in differing forms in the work of Shakespeare and other dramatists throughout subsequent centuries. The librettists and composers of opera also didn’t shy away from using such content in their works, and operas such as Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea) about the court of Roman emperor Nero or Bizet’s classic Carmen showcase plots that have debauchery and murder, often with political satire running as the subtext. The key thing to remember here is that as composers and theatre producers created these works, audiences attended. While there may have been controversies (with the originals or revivals – the Seattle Opera’s productions of *Carmen* in 1995 and 2011 were very controversial for their inclusion of violence and sensuality\(^2\)), the reason these works are still performed and loved today is that they have stood the test of time and audience interest; cursed hunchback jesters and wicked courtiers are fine but rendered far more interesting if some sex and violence are thrown in.

Straight theatre also acted as a location for transgressive themes in the performative, most notably the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, which lasted in Paris from 1897 to 1962, and its predecessor, Théâtre Libre, an avant-garde troupe that performed for the prior decade in the artistic enclave of Montmartre. These productions acted as unconventional exhibitions that combined biting satirical humor with the macabre and the erotic, flouting the saintly norms of more mainstream performances. As Richard Hand and Michael Wilson write on the former Théâtre:

[We should] interpret the Grand-Guignol as morally erratic, taking place in an indifferent universe where there is no justice but definitely retribution, albeit far from divine...[it strove] for mimesis not just in the verisimilitude of its sex and violence but in its attempt to reflect the crises of modern consciousness in a
nihilistic universe (272).

The Grand Guignol had a reputation as the ‘French Theatre of Horror’ with plays displaying such “explicit violence and blood curdling terror that a resident doctor was employed to treat the numerous spectators who fainted each night” (Hand and Wilson, 266). Such lurid testimonials certainly brought in the curious and daring alike, but the reality of course is not so sensational but quite complex with far-reaching influences to other cinematic and theatrical genres.

Thematically, the Grand Guignol drew upon the success of Théâtre Libre, which featured taboo topics, depictions of the Parisian underworld and a special attention to Realism and Naturalism. The Guignol took things one step further, adding elements of the macabre and the erotic, with a twist of social satire and comedy, thereby taking the audience on a bizarre roller coaster ride of thrills, titillations and laughs all in one evening. One distinct difference that should be mentioned between contemporary horror films and their predecessors was the use of explicit violence before the audience. The artistic team at Grand Guignol took great pains to minimize the amount of actual onstage bloodshed and left the horrors to the imagination. As André de Lorde, one of the most prolific and distinguished of the Grand Guignol playwrights, commented:

A dramatic event that happens without any preparation...will just distract spectators or make them laugh. Thus, the author should strive to create an atmosphere, an ambience to suggest to the audience, little-by-little, that something dreadful is going to happen. Murder, suicide and torment...are less frightening than the anticipation of torture, suicide or murder. (de Lorde qtd. in Deák, 36)

Yet another important aspect of the Grand Guignol that relates to my argument is its interactivity with the audience. The performances that the theatre had often elicited quite visceral reactions from the audience that ranged from fainting to getting sick to laughter; in fact, the company of the theatre would often regard the number of persons who got sick or walked out as
a measure of a show’s success. But the spectators did not enter the theatre uninformed; they were well aware of what they were going to see and the desire for macabre spectacle (as well as the physical journey through the labyrinthine streets to get there) was part of the experience. The Grand Guignol had far reaching implications past its shadowy Montmartre location. The style was exported to London in the early twentieth century and flourished during the 1920’s. The theatre’s influence was felt and acknowledged in the cinema of Hitchcock, in the theatre and cinema of Edgar Wallace and, of course, in the American horror genre, especially the Universal monster films and the late-twentieth century slasher films. The films *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003) and *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), both by director Rob Zombie, could be considered contemporary prototypical examples of Guignol’s influence (albeit with more on-screen blood and guts) on the horror genre. Even more importantly to my discussion, all of the musicals within the focus of my analysis featured elements of the Grand Guignol. On the 2008 DVD release of *Sweeney Todd*, a short featurette entitled *Grand Guignol: A Theatrical Tradition* makes direct reference to the influence of this important genre on present day cinema, and the musical in particular. As scholar Mel Gordon comments:

One of the surprises for scholars doing deep research was the great influence of the Grand Guignol in Hollywood... The Grand Guignol, certainly by the early sound era, had its own styles of presentation that were both realistic and totally stylized. If you look at Bela Lugosi...Boris Karloff...Lon Chaney...the influences come directly from Grand Guignol. It has aspects of something magical and cartoonish mixed in with something morbidly natural (*Grand Guignol: A Theatrical Tradition*).

Additionally, Richard Hand and Michael Wilson alternately discuss the importance of the experience of the theatre:

**WILSON**: An evening at the Grand Guignol doesn’t start in the theatre; it starts when you emerge from the nearest Metro station...to the bright lights of the Red Light District...the small alleyway where the theatre was kind of emerges on you all of a sudden.
HAND: It’s not the kind of place you stumble across; you go there with a purpose and when you turn that corner down that little cobblestoned alleyway, you know where you are and what you’re gonna see.

WILSON: The auditorium was intimate, wider than it was longer so no matter where you were, you were close to the stage (Grand Guignol: A Theatrical Tradition).

This precursor to the cinema of attractions goes to the heart of one of the most important tenets of the Grand Guignol and by extension, the musical: that of spectacle, of burlesque, of a totally immersive experience.

The themes presented in the Guignol were not the exclusive province of France however, and they slowly made their way into American performances. Much of the violence in early American opera was centered on the pervasive tensions between blacks and whites. As post-Reconstruction America still dealt with the pains of ubiquitous racism, this frustration was expressed in the artistic milieu. For example, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s Show Boat, which premiered at the Ziegfeld Theatre in 1927, features the black characters in a perpetual state of turmoil. At one point in the narrative, when the Caucasian Stephen is found guilty of miscegenation through his marriage to the black Julie, he cuts her hand and drinks her blood in order to become a “Negro” himself (Gross, 190).

What all of this stage history points to, of course, is that corporeal modification in theatrical exhibitions has always been around! For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is not just something for the audiences to watch; it is an experience, something for spectators to participate in, to live in. It is a motif that has run through presentations for centuries as a part of the fabric of a national theatre’s culture, either as a period of public revelry to lampoon the ruling class, or as an aspect of the bohemian lifestyle appealing to artists, writers and other members of the creative pursuits. So why does it seem like such a taboo and rare subject for the film musical to address?
Part of the answer to this lies in the genre’s bedrock in Americana and the influence of censorship in the twentieth century.

From the first exhibitions of moving pictures, as much as there was astonishment on the part of directors and audiences as to the potential of this new medium (both artistic and economic), there was a small but vocal contingency of the populace that was concerned about the effects of cinema, particularly on young people. In the first ten years of the century, much of the ire was aimed at the nickelodeons, described as, to use a quote from feminist reformer Dr. Anna Shaw, “the recruiting stations of vice” (Bowser, 38). In addition to their unsavory locations and appeal to the working poor, the nickelodeons were targeted by reformers for their content: crime and violence, suggestive topics, sensual costuming and slapstick comedy. All of these were deemed unfit for women and children. Variety and Moving Picture World, two trade publications, provided some fairly colorful reviews of films from this period:

‘The frank way in which marital infidelities are carried on in Paris though a lame moral is sometimes worked in at the end, the eating of rats and cats, the brutal handling of helpless infants, do not appeal to the American sense of humor.’ Variety’s reviews of French films reflect a similar prejudice: At The Seashore was acted ‘with an abandon of manner and dress not found on this side’; Avenged By The Sea was ‘simply morbid and gruesome, one of a kind which should never be taken, let alone placed on the market’; and as for The Night Watchman, ‘Europe may like that sort of thing, we don’t-and don’t want to’ (Bowser, 40).

As the content in cinema continued to include (and some might argue, promote) dissolute “hobbies” (many of the films were French which seemed to make them more scandalous), the furor from the reformers grew louder. This content was buttressed by salacious news of the performers’ personal lives as sources of embarrassment and scandal to the studios.

Stories of affairs, drunken orgies and loose, lascivious lifestyles had been offending (yet also quietly fascinating) the sensibilities of Middle America as money continued to pour into Hollywood, but it was Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle’s 1921 trial for the rape and murder of starlet
Virginia Rappe that brought the situation to a boiling point. Despite being acquitted for lack of evidence in 1923, the indiscretions of Arbuckle and his contemporaries forced the Studios to implement changes that would alter the face of American motion pictures forever.

In 1922, the Studios formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (which would be renamed to the now-familiar Motion Picture Association of America in 1945) and selected former Postmaster General - and ultra-conservative Republican Committee Chairperson - William Hays as its leader. For the first few years of its existence, the Hays Office mainly policed the stars’ personal lives and acted as a governmental lobbying organization. As David Cook states, Hays, in a move that would later be repeated by Senator Joe McCarthy’s Hollywood witchhunt, created a list:

[Hays] compile[d] a blacklist of 117 stars who were banned from the industry because of unfavorable publicity about their personal lives…[and] provided whitewash for overly enthusiastic manifestations of the ‘new morality’ and helped producers subvert the careers of stars whose personal lives might make them too controversial (186).

During this early period, the Hays office also maintained the Studios’ own self-policing list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” but after the advent of sound and the creation of increasingly racier pictures, the priggish Production Code was created and went into strict enforcement in 1934. Up until this point, Hollywood had been a fertile ground of yielding films that depicted and interrogated various cultural issues including violence, the penal system, homosexuality and societal morality. One famous example would be I’m No Angel (1933) with Mae West and Cary Grant. The Pre-Code film drew the rancor of moralists (even the tagline was sexual: “A story about a gal who lost her reputation – and never missed it!”) for West’s bawdy performance, which included lines like: “I’m always wonderful at night,” “When I’m good, I’m very good. But when I’m bad…I’m better” and “It’s not the men in your life that counts, it’s the life in your
men.” While these comments may seem extremely tame by today’s standards (especially in a world of films like *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008)), for the early thirties, this was considered quite controversial and led the Hays Office to enact stricter “standards.”

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 2.1 Even Mae West's spider-web dress drips with sensual overtones in *I'm No Angel*.

The Code forbade such content stating (amongst other things):

Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, not shall sympathy be created for its violation. Pointed profanity (this includes the words, God, Lord, Jesus, Christ…) or every other profane or vulgar expression however used, is forbidden. Sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden. Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden. The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home [read: heteronormativity] shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship [read: homosexuality] are the accepted or common thing. No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith. Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains (*The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930*).

Thus, with one fell swoop, Hays eliminated not only content that was potentially objectionable, but also virtually every characteristic of the corporeal modification musical (as well as many comedies, horror films and melodramas). While there were several films, directors and stars that used subtext and entende to get around the Hays Code, for the most part, filmmakers followed
the rules if they wanted their movies to play in national theatre chains. The tide did slowly start
to change after World War II, as Americans were exposed to more risqué foreign cinema and
directors pushed the envelope farther and farther:

When Otto Preminger made *The Man with the Golden Arm*, featuring Frank Sinatra as an addict, he didn’t get a seal of approval – but he did get good reviews, and enough theater bookings to make plenty of money. When Sinatra received an Oscar nomination in 1955 – from the same Hollywood establishment that had refused to give the film he was in its seal of approval – it was clear that something was amiss (“Remembering Hollywood’s Hays Code, 40 Years On”).

The Hays Code officially stayed in effect until 1968 when the MPAA instituted the much more liberal Ratings System of G (General Audiences), PG (Parental Guidance), R (Restricted to those under 17 without guardian) and X (No admittance to persons under 17) that is still in effect today. While the Production Code and its disintegration were not the sole items that contributed to the creation of the corporeal modification musical, they are very important factors.

For the majority of its history, and for the most part, up until the time period that this Dissertation addresses, violence and sexuality were rarely seen in the film musical. When they were, such content was extremely muted or cleverly hidden. This is not to say that characters didn’t die - they did - and starting with World War II, the bodies started to fall in greater numbers. As Americans recovered from the horrors of the War, Broadway (and shortly following, Hollywood) complemented those musicals that were straight comedies with dramatic texts featuring more complex storylines and sobering set pieces. As Charlotte Greenspan notes, the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein in particular were a collective bloodbath: “Jud Fry dies in *Oklahoma!* (1943); Billy Bigelow dies in *Carousel* (1945); Lieutenant Cable dies in *South Pacific* (1949); the King of Siam dies in *The King and I* (1951). This was the moment when the narrative shifted” (155). The deaths were not just restricted to Rodgers and Hammerstein, Wise and Robins’ *West Side Story* (1961), drawn from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and one of the
best loved musical films in American history, saw the deaths of Tony, Bernardo and Riff via violent means during the film. And, of course, the Biblically-inspired musicals Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) and Godspell: A Musical Based on the Gospel of St. Matthew (1973) see the deaths of Jesus. It’s important to note however that these are not corporeal modification musicals. The major difference between the deaths that occur in these early musicals and in the films studied here is how and why characters die. In the earlier films, violence and character death is relatively subtle with little attention given to bloodshed or malicious intent. There is no glory taken in the suffering of the victims on the part of either other characters or the camera. In both Oklahoma! and Carousel, Jud and Billy die by falling on their own knives. And in Carousel, even though carousel Barker Billy commits a violent robbery that results in his own suicide, he does it with the sole intention of providing for he and his wife’s unborn child. The musicals of this time, in addition to being subjected to the restrictions of the Code, strayed away from explicit depictions of murder because it wasn’t essential to the narrative and they weren’t trying to make a statement. In the corporeal modification films, the death is not only intentional and violent but it’s used to make a strong sociopolitical statement. If we can accept that the ultimate goal of the early Hollywood musical had been the satisfactory resolution of the heterosexual coupling mechanism, it is important to address why the corporeal modification musical questions that theme. If the very foundations of the genre’s scholarship have relied on Altman’s classification that the end result of the musical’s narrative praxis is to result in marriage, why then have these particular musicals relied on situations that eviscerate the familial unit? As Steve Cohan discusses in Incongruous Entertainment, the MGM musicals were beloved by universal audiences, both gay and straight, but featured a camp subtext that acted as a “wink and a nod” to homosexual audiences. As the social changes swept through America during the sixties and
seventies, there was a paradigm shift as audiences began to see new forms of coupling. These changes further penetrated into the musical and gave rise to a radical rhetoric of resistance through their use of the modified identity or body, satirizing generic tropes and employing nontraditional musical numbers embedded with the rebellious descants of rock and roll, and a display of the postmodern erosion of the distinction between highbrow art and popular culture. During the countercultural movements that were birthed to directly challenge the authority of the ruling class: civil rights, the women’s rights movement, the gay rights movement, SDS and the crusade against Vietnam; the aesthetic of these factions’ desires moved into the discourse of the cinema as a mode of catharsis for the audiences. I argue that during this period, these desires moved into the musical and manifested themselves explicitly within the films that I am studying.

One of the most well-known dance numbers in Thorton Freeland’s *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) was the Berkeley-esque “Carioca” number, notable for not only being the first onscreen dance between Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (during their initial cinematic pairing) but for the ironic sexuality at play. As was so typical during films of the period, Blacks and Latinos were subjected to their hyper-sexualized stereotypes while the dances that were performed by the white actors were a more elegant subtext of sexual desire; permissibility granted to them because of their race and class. Within the context of Performance Studies, performativity relates to the construction of social realities, especially those regarding gender and sexual orientation. While Austen argued in “How To Do Things With Words,” that we must take as suspect, or “hollow and void,” those utterances or performatives that occur in an artistic context and that we should only concern ourselves with legible ordinary circumstantial utterances, I will argue that the subtext that is present in these filmic and theatrical texts should be taken as artists continuing the project of the social avant-garde by undermining the principles of bourgeois liberalism (22).
Thus, the performative exits the exclusive artistic milieu and enters the social sphere as a legitimate movement that interrogates the hegemonic ideals imposed by the ruling class. As part of this examination of the performative, I will examine the musical score and songs from the films to illuminate how the integrated numbers further the films’ overall goals.

To illustrate how filmmakers in Code-period musicals not only pushed the sexual envelope but did so rather subtly, I’ll discuss an example here of a supposedly utopic “family-friendly” picture whose mise-en-scène and musical numbers have become iconic in American culture: Morton DaCosta’s 1962 film The Music Man, adapted from Meredith Willson’s 1957 stage production of the same name. The Music Man tells the story of traveling salesman cum con man Harold Hill (Robert Preston, reprising his Broadway role) who arrives in River City, Idaho to bamboozle the residents out of their money by promising them a boys’ marching band. While in River City, Hill actually falls for the prudish librarian Marian Paroo (Shirley Jones) after a feigned attempt at seduction lest she blow the whistle on his scheme. Willson’s music and lyrics gave birth to some of the most well known numbers in the decade’s history and are often now associated with small-town Americana. While the film is whimsical in nature, there are several instances where the lyrics in the numbers are laden with the subtext of raw lust and promiscuity, not unlike the carnal indulgences that were so common during the carnival season in Rabelais’ book.

Take, for example, “The Sadder But Wiser Girl” which occurs near the mid-point of the film and is sung by Hill in front of Hill’s associate Marcellus Washburn (Buddy Hackett) and an unnamed young girl who has come to view the horses that Washburn tends (Figure 2.2). Washburn suggests arranging a meeting of Hill and another “real nice girl” to which Hill balks and launches into the musical number. The number tells of Hill’s desire for a woman who is
more sexually liberated and the antithesis of the small-town innocence and maidenhood that many of the local River City women possess. Hill is not interested in being a husband tied down with roots and responsibilities but would prefer a woman “with a touch of sin” as the lyrics below describe:

Hill: No wide-eyed, eager, wholesome innocent Sunday school teacher for me./ That kinda girl spins webs no spider ever--Listen, boy--A girl who trades on all that purity,/ Merely wants to trade my independence for her security./ The only affirmative she will file refers to marching down the aisle./ No golden, glorious, gleaming pristine goddess--No sir!/ For no Diana do I play faun. I can tell you that right now./ I snarl, I hiss: How can ignorance be compared to bliss?/ I spark, I fizz for the lady who knows what time it is./ I cheer, I rave for the virtue I'm too late to save, the sadder-but-wiser girl for me… (Willson).

As the lyrics show, Hill’s desires are certainly lustful in nature, and despite that the song is laced with double-entendres (as was much of the comedy of the vaudeville era), the fact that he performs this particular number in front of an innocent young girl reinforces the carnivalesque nature of this particular sequence. The song is lighthearted and a bit flirtatious representing the period’s musical version of “guy talk” (it’s not a locker room, but a stable), yet it’s clear to audiences what exactly Hill is talking about.

Figure 2.2 Hill (Preston) and Washburn (Hackett) perform "The Sadder But Wiser Girl" from DaCosta's The Music Man.
Another example would be one of the film’s most elaborate dance numbers, “Shipoopi,” performed by Marcellus Washburn and the citizens of River City. The “Shipoopi” number comes near the end of the film as librarian Marian Paroo is starting to fall in love with Hill and represents the denizens of River City giving in to their more passionate desires. As a musical nod to this thesis, the number is performed in very fast, syncopated cut time (2/2) at a tempo that outpaces any other number in the film as the sheet music excerpt shown below (Figure 2.3) demonstrates:

![Sheet Music](image)

Figure 2.3 The opening bars of "Shipoopi" from DaCosta's The Music Man; Music and Lyrics by Meredith Willson.

As we see in the figure, the emphatic note in the musical introduction is on the downbeat, which gives the song a syncopated, frenetic feeling that can be compared with sexual lust and desire as further reinforced by the lyrics, which are shown below:

**Washburn:** Now, a woman who’ll kiss on the very first date is usually a hussy./ And a woman who’ll kiss on the second time out is anything but fussy./ But a woman who waits ‘til the third time around./ Head in the clouds./ feet on the ground!/ She’s the girl he’s glad he’s found- she’s his Shi-Poo-Pi!/ Shi-Poo-Pi! Shi-Poo-Pi! Shi-Poo-Pi!

**Company:** The girl who’s hard to get!

**Washburn:** Shi-Poo-Pi! Shi-Poo-Pi! Shi-Poo-Pi!

**Company:** But you can win her yet!

**Washburn:** Walk her once just to raise the curtain,/ Walk around twice and you make for certain./ Once more in the flower garden/ She will never get sore if you beg her pardon… (Willson)
Just like in “The Sadder But Wiser Girl,” the lyrics to “Shipoopi” are layered in double entendre as the song details the quest to find the type of girl who is ripe for sexual conquest. The number also includes a Busby Berkeley-esque dance number that uses many of the same geometrical formations that the choreographer utilized in his sequences. The number is also in stark contrast to the song sung by the River City citizens to Hill at the beginning of the film. In “Iowa Stubborn,” the residents inform Hill of their proud, stubborn, standoffish attitude. I am not claiming that The Music Man is a subversively sexual film that appeals to prurient interests, however I am saying that the film has elements of the carnivalesque that are not readily apparent to a casual viewing audience.

While the time span of my core analysis - 1974-2008 - may seem like a large interstice, two of the films have been made within the last ten years, the most recent being the rock opera Repo! (2008). It is clear then that this is a trend that is not disappearing from cinemas anytime soon. In fact, Repo! went on not one or two, but three road tours to fantasy and horror festivals to promote the film. The Rocky Horror Picture Show, despite being more than 35 years old as of this writing, still continues to play in cinemas across the country (especially at Halloween) to Brad and Janet-clad fans, and the stage production is constantly redone by community theaters. Additionally, the film was highlighted on an episode of the popular television program, Glee. In addition, over the course of the last decade, the live-action film musical has made a strong resurgence. Some of these productions have been original narratives (albeit with some prewritten musical material) such as Moulin Rouge! (2001), Idlewild (2006) and Across the Universe (2007), while others have been transliterations from the stage such as Rent (2005), Chicago (2002) and Mamma Mia! (2008). Disney has taken dead aim at drawing younger audiences to the musical with their High School Musical (2006-2008, respectively) trilogy. The year 2010 saw
the release of such musicals as the re-make of *Fame* and *Nine*, with more scheduled, including film versions of the Broadway shows *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Les Misérables* and *Rock of Ages*, leading Hugh Jackman to exclaim during the 2009 Academy Awards Presentation, “The musical is back!” The Hollywood musical is also gaining stronger representation in college courses, providing students with an in-depth examination of the genre. In the next two Chapters, I will discuss the context of each of the film’s creation and opening to illuminate this history further.

The musical is one of the oldest forms in entertainment history. While I have restricted my study to the film musical in America, it goes without saying that the genre has had a presence in other national cinemas, especially those of India, Great Britain, France and Denmark. With over two centuries of performance as support, I believe it is a cardinal desire to pair the music with drama and to use this form to express society’s most salient thoughts and desires. It is my hope that this (massively abbreviated!) history has helped lay the bedrock for my argument exploring the genesis and maturation of transgressive themes within a genre that has been oftentimes misunderstood by audiences, critics and scholars. Let me reiterate that it is not my intention to emplace the musical as a subversive text entirely laden with violence, sex and superficial niceties. However, I intend to demonstrate that we need to look below the surface to the subtext in many musicals to reveal that they are not always what they seem, and as much as they can evoke nostalgia and heteronormativity, they can simultaneously mock the hegemonic “motherhood and apple pie” of polite, conservative society.

**What is a Musical?**

The term “a musical” is thrown around by critics, audiences and even some scholars with such frequency that it has come to include just about any film or television program with extended musical sequences or songs regardless of whether or not they fit within the narrative.
To mention ‘a musical’ might immediately evoke thoughts of the Oscar-nominated Ron Moody crooning out “You’ve Got to Pick a Pocket or Two” as Fagan in Carol Reed’s *Oliver!* (1968) or, by stark contrast, John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John ascending to the heavens in Danny Zuko’s (Travolta) Ford Thunderbird in *Grease* (1978). It’s possible however, that such persons might forget to include films such as *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954), *That’s Entertainment* (1974) or *Dirty Dancing* (1987), which are all, in their own way, musicals. This of course goes to the heart of the issue that the musical is an amorphous genre that, unless one assigns exactly how they are looking at it, can cause much confusion when trying to devise a taxonomy. Throughout its history and development, many different performatives were considered musicals. The earliest producers and audiences during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries didn’t even distinguish between the different types of stage entertainment that incorporated music into the narrative or sketch.

It stands to reason then that I must delineate what types of musicals will be discussed in this study. The most fundamental structural aspect of the musical that separates it from other genres and even other films within is with regard to the musical numbers, namely how they are placed into the diegesis and how the resulting narrative is presented to us. Richard Dyer and Rick Altman, respectively, both take slightly different but relevant points of view on this, and I shall mention both. There are, for all intents and purposes, three ways of dealing with the diegetic songs in a film: to place them separated from and irrelevant to the plot to therefore enhance the realism of the picture (the songs are heard in the picture as in real life, in a cabaret, theater or on the radio. or are non-diegetic in nature); to give numbers musical cues such that they elevate the singers to a utopian level from the prosaic reality of everyday life (the songs are the culmination of efforts exercised by the plot and characters such as the numbers used in John Landis’ *The*
Blues Brothers); to completely integrate the numbers into the narrative, giving expository character information and moving forward the plot and acting as if it is completely natural to burst into song and therefore the world is already utopian (Dyer, 28). Thus we have nonintegrated musicals (the first example) and semi-integrated musicals (the second example) an integrated musicals (the third example).

Altman takes the stance of separating musicals by cultural meaning and means of historical influence and include: the palace, resort or aristocratic locale which strives to restore order to the couple in question and therefore restore order to the locale in which they’re situated (the fairy tale musical which suggests “to marry is to govern”); the New York theater milieu where the couple is working to create art (the show musical which suggests “to marry is to create”); and the America of yesteryear, be it small town or on the plains where the restoration of a couple at odds will subsequently maintain the town or land (the folk musical suggesting that “marriage is community”) (The American Film Musical 124-126). Altman takes a semantic/syntactic notion to approach to his genre analysis. He fully realizes the contentious and often contradictory nature of film genre studies and suggests that an alternative view be developed if we hope to develop notions of genre that are robust. He identifies three prevailing contradictions in film genre criticism:

1) that of the inclusive and exclusive lists of films; inclusive referring to a standard corpus and and exclusive referring to other fringe films which might be included - the issue lies in the fact that films may be on one list and not the other with little explanation as to why (“A Semantic/Syntactic Approach” 7).
2) the status of history and theory in genre studies; structuralism and semiotics were flawed in that there was no historical contextualization given to why genres appear, disappear and morph
into something else:

Because [semioticians] treated genres as the interpretive community, they were unable to perceive the important role of genres in exercising influence on the interpretive community. Instead of reflecting openly on the way in which Hollywood uses its genres to short-circuit the normal interpretive process, structuralist critics plunged headlong into the trap, taking Hollywood’s ideological effect for a natural ahistorical cause (“A Semantic/Syntactic Approach” 8).

3) the ‘ritual approach’ to moviegoing in that audiences actively participate in the sustained legacy of film genres and that Hollywood simply creates what they desire, as opposed to the ‘ideological approach’ in which moviegoing audiences are “duped” into agreeing to the hegemonic ideology put forth by the ‘culture industry’ of Hollywood (“A Semantic/Syntactic Approach” 9).

Ultimately, Altman doesn’t seek to dispense with or ignore these approaches but find a way in which they could work together and account for why there were problems in the first place. He arrived at that method with his semantic/syntactic proposal, which combined the semantic approach - the building blocks of genre whose definitions depend on a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, etc. - with the syntactic approach - generic definitions that play up certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders. The benefit of this approach would be that the semantic and syntactic work together in a complementary fashion to not only resolve the issues that were presented on the previous page but provide a strong theoretical framework.

Within the musical, the semantic approach identifies the component parts of the musical such as singing, dancing and the couple. The syntactic approach deals with the relationships between these components and their place in the narrative, which for the musical, traditionally, would entail a man versus woman, integrated versus non-integrated musical number and even
diegetic versus non-diegetic music. Thus, Altman arrives at his taxonomy of the three locales where the musical takes place with its respective goals for each locale. This summary of Dyer’s practical approach and Altman’s semantic and syntactic approach to generic classification gives us a useful methodology of gleaning meaning out of the films themselves and their historical context. While Altman’s theoretical stance has been the accepted, my intent throughout will be to challenge this narrow mode of analysis. In the postmodern Hollywood musical, the intent to marry may not figure into the plot at all. Films like Phantom of the Paradise and Repo! are devoid of marital plots or subplots and according to Altman, would not be considered real musicals. In Rocky Horror, while Brad and Janet are engaged, the plot involves them questioning their true feelings and desires for each other by the conclusion of the film. In Sweeney Todd, the goal of Todd is revenge for Judge Turpin’s transgressions against Todd’s wife (whom Todd inadvertently slays in the final set piece). My desires in this study are bold, but due to the musical’s ever-changing nature, it requires new inquiries into it.

With the exception of Phantom of the Paradise, the films that I discuss are all integrated musicals in which the musical numbers introduce characters, give the audience information about those characters and move the plot forward. To provide an example of this, I will briefly discuss the use of the major numbers in The Rocky Horror Picture Show, and how they are specifically used within the film. The following table shows the musical numbers, who performs them and what work they are doing within the film. As I am simply using this film as an example for this section’s discussion, I’ll reserve deeper textual and semiotic analysis on Rocky Horror for the next Chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Character (Actor)</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Science Fiction Double Feature”</td>
<td>-- (Richard O’Brien)</td>
<td>Overture/Opening Credits; acts as a prologue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene</td>
<td>Cast</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Dammit Janet”</td>
<td>Brad Majors (Barry Bostwick) Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon)</td>
<td>Brad proposes marriage; The pair declare their love and decide to visit their former tutor setting the plot in motion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Over at the Frankenstein Place”</td>
<td>Brad Majors (Barry Bostwick) Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon) Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien)</td>
<td>Brad and Janet decide to ask for help at a house after their car has blown a tire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Time Warp”</td>
<td>The Criminologist/Narrator (Charles Gray) Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien) Magenta (Patricia Quinn) Columbia (Nell Campbell) Ensemble</td>
<td>Introduces the coterie of bizarre characters visiting and living within the house; participation of audience (at film screenings and theatrical performances) in stated dance moves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sweet Transvestite”</td>
<td>Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry)</td>
<td>Introduces Dr. Frank-N-Furter to audience, Brad and Janet; gives his origins, what he is and does.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sword of Damacles”</td>
<td>Rocky (Peter Hinwood)</td>
<td>Introduces Rocky to audience and characters; gives his state of mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Can Make You A Man”</td>
<td>Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry)</td>
<td>Explains Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s motivations for creating Rocky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Whatever Happened to Saturday Night?”</td>
<td>Eddie (Meat Loaf)</td>
<td>Introduces Eddie to audience as Columbia’s lover; Dr. Frank-N-Furter kills Eddie in jealous rage at song’s conclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Toucha Toucha Touch me”</td>
<td>Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon) Magenta (Patricia Quinn) Columbia (Nell Campbell)</td>
<td>Shows Janet’s sexual repression and openness to raw lust (in particular, Rocky); gives mocking commentary by Magenta and Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Eddie”</td>
<td>Dr. Scott (Jonathan Adams) Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon) Magenta (Patricia Quinn) Columbia (Nell Campbell) Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry) Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien)</td>
<td>Gives background to Eddie’s character and origins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Number</td>
<td>Performers</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Floor Show”</td>
<td>Dr. Scott (Jonathan Adams) Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon) Columbia (Nell Campbell) Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry)</td>
<td>Made up of three numbers that give background and contemporary state of character’s relationships, all in the form of a drag cabaret floor show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m Going Home”</td>
<td>Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry)</td>
<td>Dr. Frank-N-Furter explains his motives and his desire to return and live on Earth in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Super Heroes”</td>
<td>Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien) Magenta (Patricia Quinn) Dr. Scott (Jonathan Adams) Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon)</td>
<td>Riff Raff kills Dr. Frank-N-Furter for his sociopathic behavior; gives background into Riff Raff’s character and motives; gives Janet’s final thoughts on events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Science Fiction Double Feature” (Reprise)</td>
<td>-- (Richard O’Brien)</td>
<td>End Credits; serves as epilogue.</td>
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</table>

These musical numbers added more than simply robustness to the film but also provide essential information about the characters from the characters and serve as vehicles to move the plot forward. I should also mention with reference to the unique cultish nature of the film that alternate lyrics were written by fans that were subsequently shouted out/sung along during screenings. These lyrics were usually sardonic and vulgar versions of the originals meant to poke greater fun at the characters while simultaneously maintaining the parodic spirit of the original text.

Fred Astaire’s last musical on Broadway was the show Gay Divorce (Astaire would later go on to star in the film version, The Gay Divorcee, in 1934 with Ginger Rogers) and during the run he quipped to a reporter: “If I may say it, the success of the majority of my dances has been due in great measure to the fact that I have introduced my numbers not only at the psychological moment but in a manner that would logically blend with the ideas of the play” (Mueller, 30).
This quote is illustrative that, especially in my current study, we must also examine not just the numbers themselves but how they fit in with the ideas of the musicals in question, specifically their styles of music and dance. Returning to the example of Rocky Horror, the song “The Time Warp” serves as both an example and satire of the instructional dance song style that also blends up-tempo rock, alternating versus sung by said characters and a tap dance routine performed by the character, Columbia. This number fits coherently with the entire aesthetic of the text. Whether it’s the 70’s disco and punk used in The Rocky Horror Picture Show, the intermingling of eighties rock, motown and Broadway numbers in Little Shop of Horrors, or the industrial and goth influences in Repo!, the lyrics, music and accompanying dance (if any) of the numbers in an integrated musical are just as essential to understanding the film as their placement within the narrative.

My intent in this chapter has been two-fold: to discuss the musical’s history and specifically examine how transgressive themes and the burlesquing of social norms has historically been a very common practice; and identify specifically which types of musicals I will be discussing herein. Now that we know where we have been and what we are talking about, it’s time to examine the films themselves that so gleefully flouted the norms of the genre to carve a groundbreaking new niche in musical cinema.

1 The only film in my dissertation to appear on the National Film Registry’s list of “films that are aesthetically, culturally or historically significant” is The Rocky Horror Picture Show.
3 The rating of PG-13 was adopted in 1984 as a bridge between PG and R for films with more violence, profanity and brief nudity/sexual content than the former rating would allow. The rating of X was dropped and changed to NC-17 in 1990.
4 While Greenspan is speaking of the Broadway musical and the dates given are their Broadway premieres, the plotlines remained the same in that the same characters who died in the stage productions did so in the film iterations.
5 One of the film’s most well-known numbers “The Wells Fargo Wagon” is a part of background
music medley that plays on Walt Disney World’s Main Street U.S.A. — a long boulevard at the front of The Magic Kingdom Theme Park. Main Street represents the quintessential attempt to recreate the feel and nostalgia of small-town America, specifically that of Marceline, Missouri where Disney grew up. Not surprisingly, “The Sadder But Wiser Girl For Me” is NOT included in the medley.

6 *Nine* was the film version of the stage show based on the play inspired by Fellini’s 8½ (1963).
CHAPTER 3:
THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES

This chapter examines the three films that I have identified as part of the corporeal modification cycle that premiered in the seventies and eighties: Phantom of the Paradise (1974), The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) and Little Shop of Horrors (1986). In this chapter, I will argue that these three films were the beginning of a trend that intermingled violence toward the body and identity, cloaked in musical numbers in ways that had never been experienced before.

Robert Stam argues that musicals do not overturn the oppressive structures of everyday life but “stylize, choreograph and mythically transcend” them (Subversive Pleasures 92). However, I argue, drawing on Bakhtin’s trope of the carnivalesque, that the corporeal modification films do indeed mock the hegemonic institutions of religion, bourgeois politics and patriarchal heterosexuality through their use of violence and transgressive themes and techniques. These are not simply musicals that are violent; there is a specific rationale for the violence.

Bakhtin draws upon the Menippean satire as a basis for his exploration of this mode, initially in his book Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. Of course, as we’ve already discussed, the carnivalesque is rooted in the classic Greek dramatists with one primary influence being Menippus of Gadara who proposed his style of satire as a genre that attacks ideals rather than specific persons as in Aristophanean satire. As Bakhtin states,

Menippean satire exercised a very great influence on old Christian literature and on Byzantine literature…This carnivalized genre, extraordinarily flexible and as changeable as Proteus, capable of penetrating other genres, has had an enormous and as yet insufficiently appreciated importance for the development of European literatures. Menippean satire became one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world in literature, and remains so to the present day (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 113).

In his study, Stam goes on to remark that the Menipea is rooted in Saturnalia, which is crucial
to the development of the carnivalesque. The Menippea has several “essential characteristics” that are highlighted in the texts that I am discussing and cause these films to be considered as part of this trend. These characteristics are present in both the narrative and the mise-en-scène and are very specific to the corporeal modification trend:

1. the constant presence of the comic element;
2. an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention;
3. the fusion of the fantastic, the symbolic and slum naturalism;
4. a fondness for the experimental and the fantastic;
5. a fondness for scandal and violations of decorum;
6. a love of sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations;
7. elements of social utopia;
8. the wide use of inserted genres;
9. overt and hidden polemics with various philosophical, religious and ideological schools and mockery of “masters of thought.” (Subversive Pleasures 98)

I do not want to be over-simplistic by applying a “plug and chug” methodology such that if a film fits a certain number of formulaic criteria that that automatically qualifies it as such. However, I argue that the presence of certain characteristics within a genre that originally was placed within a milieu of conservative heteronormativity strongly indicates a developing trend whence certain films exhibit said criteria amidst a certain cultural climate. As Richard Dyer states,

…it is important to grasp that modes of experiential art and entertainment correspond to different culturally and historically determined sensibilities. This becomes clear when one examines how entertainment forms come to have the emotional signification that they do, that is, by acquiring their signification in relation to the complex of meanings in the socio-cultural situation in which they are produced (21).

The fact that this trend shows no sign of ceasing - due to audience interest and the economics of predictability - points to this discussion as the bedrock for future scholarly inquiry into both corporeal modification and emerging trends within the musical film. It is also important to note that, especially with the second and third films considered in this chapter, the role of the comic
element played a strong role in audience reception and cinematic experience. As Robert McCulloch states, “comedy acts as the foundation for the audience to form temporary communities, with attendees collectively displaying a pedagogical imperative that works to delineate ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to behave during screenings.” (190). The fact is that these musicals were subversive in nature as compared to their predecessors; the formation of groups, due in part to the films’ rebellious nature, empowered their members with a type of cultural capital that helped the audiences connect strongly with the texts. Therefore, not only is Bakhtin useful for analysis of these texts, but his ideas, along with those of Gunning, provide an additional insight into audience, especially target audience, reception.

The seventies and eighties were interesting for the film musical as it began to wane in popularity (especially as compared to the previous decades). As Americans stood in the shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, cinema had moved away from the magical Golden Age to emerging trends like Blaxpoitation and more explicit depictions of violence and sexuality. As David Cook comments, “In a degree of self-examination extraordinary for this country in any medium at any time, the American commercial cinema was experimenting with social criticism and making money at it in the bargain” (xv). Add to this the birth of the blockbuster with Spielberg’s Jaws and Lucas’ Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope (1977), the entrenchment of a culturally conservative American audience (with the election of Reagan in 1980), and a fiscally greedy Hollywood, and serious ramifications for the film musical were afoot. The genre was about to push back, however, and the cinematically literate would be very anxious to receive it.
PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE (1974)

“This film is the story of that search, of that sound, of the man who made it, the girl who sang it, and the monster who stole it”
- Rod Serling’s introduction to Phantom of the Paradise

Brian de Palma’s Phantom of the Paradise is a hybrid narrative of horror film homage, backstage musical parody and, on the part of composer Paul Williams, rock and roll concept album. The film represents the most unusual of the corporeal modification trend, as it is a semi-integrated musical (in which the musical numbers, while still relevant to the narrative, are actual performances within the mise-en-scene), and, unlike the other two films in this chapter, wasn’t met with wide commercial and critical success. Nevertheless, the narrative wouldn’t make much sense without the numbers and, when released as an LP, Paul Williams’ songs worked both as numbers from the film and as a standalone rock and roll concept album.

Phantom of the Paradise premiered during an interesting time for the musical. As the genre started to die down in popularity on screen, the only major musical film releases during the first half of 1974 were Gene Saks’ Mame and MGM’s homage-documentary, That’s Entertainment!, audiences turned their attention toward works by Peckinpah (Bring Me The Head of Alfredo Garcia) and Coppola (The Conversation). By the time Halloween came and
Phantom opened, mass audiences had little interest in the film and its absence of major star power other than Williams. While The Rocky Horror Picture Show caught on with a larger audience over time, mainly due to its stars’ performances, target audience interactivity and melodious numbers that broke out of the film into popular culture, Phantom of the Paradise is, at least academically and historically, a more intricate text largely due to its strong use of allusion and de Palma’s awareness of history and cinephilia. This chapter marks one of the first serious academic inquiries into the film. Other sources have noted it in passing but have never given it any type of extended study. Also, Paul Williams, who wrote the songs and starred as the antagonist in the film, proved with this film that he could write outside of the Easy Listening genre (he also wrote for The Carpenters and The Muppets) penning solid multivalent rock and roll songs. Over the nearly four decades since the film’s release, it has grown into a cult text due in no small part to this fact:

…as indications of [historical, academic] knowledge surfaced in [directors like de Palma’s] works, each was recognized by the film-historically conscious audience as a secret sharer in movie mania…The proliferation of the film-history credo allowed emerging directors to presuppose that at least part of their audience was prepared to look for the allusions to film history and see in them signals of the expressive commitments of their films. (Carroll, 55)

While the acting in Phantom of the Paradise is often hyperbolic, the fact that it uses allusion so extensively “tells us that for this very reason it is to be regarded as intelligent and knowing, a film that demands that the associations which accrued its referents be attributed to it and that it be treated with the same degree of seriousness as they were” (Carroll, 52). While the film contains nods to other films and texts including Shelley’s Frankenstein, Hitchcock’s Psycho, Poe’s The Cask of Amontillado and Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, the main portion of the narrative heavily draws inspiration from Gaston Leroux’s The Phantom of the Opera and, self-reflexively, Faust. These allusions to darker material place the text as a seditious counterpoint to
one of the other main musicals of 1974, That’s Entertainment!, a nostalgic homage-compilation of the classic musical numbers from MGM releases of decades past. As discussed later in this chapter, Phantom of the Paradise, through its structure, its treatment of comedy, sexuality and horror, as well as its awareness of itself as a performance vis-à-vis the spoken introduction works as a contemporary manifestation of the Grand Guignol in musical cinema, a trope that will be repeated in later texts as well.

The basic plot of Phantom of the Paradise is an amalgamation of the texts mentioned earlier with a seventies twist. Before the film starts, it features a prologue narrated by Rod Serling with his signature “Twilight Zone” voice clearly identifying the film’s referent to that series’ content and significance while foreshadowing the music, the horror and the macabre. This is accentuated by the slow spinning image of a dead robin, which serves as the logo of the antagonist’s record label. Even the opening credits are presented as an event, in a “live” marquee-styled font that draws its audience in to the Guignol-esque production that is taking place. The opening scene starts with a performance (“Goodbye, Eddie, Goodbye”) by the latest pop fad “The Juicy Fruits” who are managed by an enigmatic man named Swan, himself an embodiment of Satan. After he hears the dramatic solo performance (“Faust”) of pianist/composer Winslow Leach, Swan informs his henchman/talent scout, Philbin, that he intends to use Leach’s music to open his newest concert venue, The Paradise. After Philbin dupes Leach into handing over some of his music, a cantata based on the story of Faust, in exchange for a record deal, Philbin and Swan disappear. One month later, Leach approaches Death Records, the production company that Swan owns, to inquire about his music. After being ejected, Leach breaks into Swan’s mansion (“Never Thought I’d Get to Meet the Devil” is performed non-diegetically by Leach but narrates on-screen action), and after meeting a talented
singer named Phoenix with whom he’s instantly smitten, Leach learns that Swan intends to steal his music without giving proper credit (“Faust” - First Reprise). Leach is repeatedly expelled from Swan’s home and is eventually framed and jailed by the police (under Swan’s influence). In jail, Leach slowly descends into madness as the guards mistreat him. Leach manages to escape from prison and breaks into Swan’s factory attempting sabotage. Unfortunately for him, a record press deforms his face and vocal chords (in a bitter twist of irony, the machine that deforms Leach is the one used to press copies of Leach’s stolen cantata). Leach subsequently invades The Paradise, assuming the new identity of the Phantom, complete with mask, black stylized suit (that resembles a modern bondage outfit) and flowing cape. After attempting to destroy “The Juicy Fruits” (who have been rechristened “The Beach Bums”) with a bomb (“Upholstery”) during a rehearsal, the Phantom confronts Swan, who makes him a Faustian deal to rewrite and perform his cantata with Phoenix in the lead role (“Special to Me”). The Phantom agrees (“Faust” - Second Reprise) and begins re-writing the cantata (“The Phantom’s Theme” is sung non-diegetically by Winslow/The Phantom during a montage).

Out of jealousy for Phoenix’s ability, however, Swan replaces her with an effeminate, flamboyant singer named “Beef”. Once the Phantom has completed the cantata, Swan steals it again and walls in the Phantom’s chamber with bricks (in a move reminiscent of The Cask of Amontillado). Enraged, the Phantom breaks out of his chambers and warns Beef not to perform (“Life At Last”). Against his better judgment and along with threats from Philbin, Beef performs anyway (“Somebody Super Like You”) and true to his word, the Phantom electrocutes him as he’s singing on stage. Phoenix takes his place (“Old Souls”) and is a sensation, but before she can be spirited off to Swan’s abode for a post-performance tête-à-tête, she is confronted by the Phantom who reveals himself as Winslow and implores her to leave the Paradise. She balks and
later that night is seduced by Swan ("Old Souls" – Reprise). As the Phantom watches in bitter jealousy, he attempts to commit suicide, but his deal with Swan binds them together and the Phantom cannot die unless Swan dies. Later, the Phantom learns about Swan’s own deal with the devil that can only be nullified if the videotape that recorded the pact is destroyed. He also learns of Swan’s plan to kill Phoenix and steal her voice (due to a pact between them) during a performance of Faust, which will also act as the pair’s wedding. The Phantom leaves the Paradise in a rage, simultaneously starting a fire that burns Swan’s videotape rendering him mortal.

At the performance, the Phantom interrupts the assassination of Phoenix, which results in the death of Philbin instead. Swan attempts to strangle Phoenix, but the Phantom stabs him, and thus his own self-inflicted wound from the suicide attempt reopens and both men die. The film ends with Phoenix, who now realizes the Phantom’s identity as Leach, lying next to him crying.

While the Faustian narrative has served as the backdrop for many films including musicals like Damn Yankees (the show opened on Broadway in 1955 and the film musical premiered in 1958) and The Band Wagon (1958), the primary element separating Phantom from these previous texts is the existence of corporeal modification and a macabre sense of the comedic rather than a buoyant one. One of the things that has set De Palma apart as an auteur is his distinctive stylized camera work and editing. I will argue here that corporeal modification can be understood not just in explicit terms such as in the content of the film (which this text has plenty of) but also in the technique of how the film is presented.

The stills in Figure 4.1 show Leach entering the offices of Death Records for the first time. The canted lines of the set along with the black and white coloring are a clear reference to Wiene’s 1920 horror film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and give the viewer indications of Swan’s
twisted persona. In addition, this adds to the Guignol-esque theatricality of the scene (and the film) given that German Expressionism was heavily influenced by theatre and was a dark representation of Wagner’s *gesamtkunstwerk*, or “unity in the arts,” which was one of his most potent theories and held serious influence in the development of film music composition and the development of the musical film.

This influence can be seen again twice later in the film both as Leach approaches Swan’s massive mansion and in the set design for Swan’s *Faust* in which Beef performs and is subsequently killed by the Phantom. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 on the following page highlight this particular example.
As Leach walks up to Swan’s imposing home (aka “The Swanage”), in a scene that is strikingly similar to the approach of Brad and Janet to Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s castle in The Rocky Horror Picture Show during a musical number that is also laced with trepidation, the dichotomy of the smiling Leach’s relative innocence and Swan’s demonic malevolence is reinforced in a shot-reverse shot series between the character and the setting. As opposed to the folksy homes that peppered the musicals of the Freed Unit, the Swanage is atypical of a musical’s up tempo style and is more representative of the decadent gluttony of rock and roll, which is, at least in this scene, a generic fissure rather than explicit corporeal modification.

Near the end of the film, when Swan puts on the production of Faust in which Beef will perform, the Frankensteinian tableau (the singers take mannequins from the audience, dismember them, and “create” Beef’s character) has a mise-en-scene that is directly inspired by Caligari, including one of the singers who is made up to resemble the silent film’s somnambulist, Cesare. In a periodic musical allusion, the other singers have make up design which appears to be inspired by that of the seventies rock group, Kiss⁶.
Even Beef’s glittery makeup and conspicuous homosexual coding add to the opulent excess of De Palma’s modern take on the Guignol. Bakhtin’s carnival is evident in this counterpoint to the traditional notion of the musical and the comically dark approaches that De Palma draws from German Expressionism.

When Leach invades the Paradise as the Phantom, the cinematography utilized is hand-held first person, which gives the sequence an ominous, uncomfortable sensation of dread. This style has become very popular within the horror film in recent years with such releases as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *REC* (2007). The restricted narration and erratic camera work add to the frenetic nature. De Palma’s execution was one of the first instances of this style of
cinematography used in a non-documentary film, and its use in a musical makes it even more jarring.

Figure 4.6 The Phantom approaches the Paradise threatening those he comes into contact with.

Another instance in the film of highly formalist cinematography occurs as Leach’s life is spiraling out of control at the hands of Swan. After Leach has had his music stolen by Swan and has been beat up and thrown out of Swan’s offices and home, he is subsequently framed for drug dealing and sentenced to life in prison. The exaggerated size of the judge, his gavel and the American flag place Leach in a position of weakness against Swan, the justice system and capitalism in general. Leach’s desires are simply to have his music heard, and this is juxtaposed against the consumerist desires of celebrity culture and the music industry that are so integral to American society.

Figure 4.7 Leach desperately professes his innocence and victimization before an exaggerated yet apathetic judge.
De Palma’s formalist editing throughout helps to further the text as a carnivalesque Guignol. He makes frequent use of the unorthodox (at least in the musical, but a De Palma standard otherwise) split-screen to show action as it is occurring in simultaneous places as well as an important and formalist montage near the end of the film as the Phantom writes his cantata.

Figure 4.8 "The Beach Bums" rehearse their latest number as a bomb placed by the Phantom waits to cause mayhem.

Figure 4.9 The montage scene where the Phantom writes his cantata.

In the montage depicted in Figure 4.9, De Palma shows us a blend of the Phantom slaving away on his cantata while the hours and days tick away. The montage also shows images of Phoenix and of Swan observing the Phantom work. The sequence is notable in being one of the few traditional musical numbers in terms of its character exposition. While “The Phantom’s Theme,” which is sung by Paul Williams, plays non-diegetically during this sequence (the musical notes...
are representative of the cantata being written, not that which is sung), the lyrics give greater insight into Swan’s character and how he and the Phantom are not so dissimilar after all:

To work it out I let them in/ All the good guys and the bad guys that I’ve been/
All the devils that disturbed me and the angels that defeated them somehow/
Come together in me now/ A tale of beauty and the beast/ I defend my soul from those who would accuse me/ I share the famine and the feast/ I have been the world and felt it turning seen the jester yearning to amuse me (Williams, “The Phantom’s Theme”)

Seemingly somewhat inspired by The Rolling Stones 1968 hit “Sympathy for the Devil,” the number gives further explication of the conflict that the characters deal with inside themselves and, particularly from Swan’s perspective, musings on the excesses and dichotomies of human nature and the possibility of overcoming those execrable desires.

For as much as this is inspiration from The Phantom of the Opera, the film has De Palma’s mark throughout, and his playful sense of rebellion seems to challenge the conventions of the genre directly. As Fernando Croce says in his discussion, “The film has the feeling of having been a liberating experience for the director, in allowing him to not only bring to the fore the referential facet that runs through his oeuvre from day one, but also to sustain for the entire 92 minutes the delirium of Sisters’ [de Palma’s thriller from 1973] transgressive concluding sequences” (Croce, “Phantom of the Paradise”). These instances that I’ve discussed place the film in a Bakhtinian construct that works far beyond simple modification of the body, as a direct challenge to the hegemony through a genre that had had the potential to be subversive (through gesamtkunstwerk) but never claimed it. One of the most important features of the Guignol was its avant-garde nature combined with social satire and comedy, the erotic and the macabre. One of the advantages that cinema holds as an art form is the ability to use a quickly variable mise-en-scène and the camera to directly comment on the subject matter. One of the reasons that
Berkeley was considered revolutionary was his cinematography of dance scenes, moving the camera from straight medium shots to overhead shots, geometric patterns and the crotch shot. I argue that this trend of musicals should be observed with the same level of respect and innovation for the genre.

As stated earlier, one of the most oft-used tropes in Phantom’s outrageous cinematic toolbox is De Palma’s execution of allusion. One instance of this that blends the comedic while referring to one of the most well-known scenes in horror film history occurs near the end of the film when the Phantom confronts and warns Beef against performing in Faust.

As Beef is singing an excerpt from Faust, the Phantom slices open the shower curtain with a large knife and then places a toilet plunger over Beef’s mouth to silence him while hissing, “Never sing my music again.” In a truly Guignol-esque maneuver, De Palma manages to refer to the shower scene in Hitchcock’s Psycho, while simultaneously creating one of the most comically significant moments in the entire film. Of course, as stated earlier, this meme only works among the cinematically literate, those who have seen the original film and understand both its context and significance. To return to Carroll’s analysis, “Hitchcock…employed certain shots, cuts, genres, or plots in a way that critics and aficionados came, over time, to isolate as crucial to the work of these directors…these devices were seen to function as parts of organic

Figure 4.10 In an allusion to Hitchcock’s Psycho, Beef showers while the Phantom creeps up to surprise him.
aesthetic wholes that communicated specific themes and expressive qualities” (55). The merging of the gothic with the comedic sets up a contemporary Guignol as an orgy of musical corporeal modification that was not just a film but also an experience for the audience. As the film moved into the midnight movie rotation of cult film status, its qualities placed it as rebellious anti-musical. This was not your grandmother’s The Sound of Music!

The physical modification of the body, the essence of the main characters creation, is portrayed with great detail as the film sets up its anti-hero.

When Leach breaks into the Death Records factory, he discovers that Swan is pressing copies of Leach’s cantata Faust and plans to blow up the building. His shirt gets caught on a record pressing machine and he falls inside of it as it closes, deforming him. Leach’s face is now a twisted wreck of a visage, and it acts as an external representation of his mania driven to the brink in his frustration at the injustices inflicted on him. As if De Palma wants us to feel the change of character, the cinematography becomes more erratic and agitated with Leach’s transformation. At first we only get glimpses of the Phantom in passing, but a full-mirror shot reveals him to the audience shortly before he confronts Swan.
Once the Phantom has been unmasked and is in the throes of imminent death, we are greeted with the full impact of his disfigurement.

In keeping with the time period, the film showed gore in more explicit detail than before, which was quite the generic anomaly. Of course, the Phantom is not the only one who undergoes bodily modification throughout the film. Near the climax of the film, we see Philbin, who has been shot in the head, and the now-mortal Swan as his face is melting away while the videotapes at the Swanage are burned in turn. The figures on the next page are representative of these scenes.
The use of explicit gore to horrify is a common theme used in the Guignol, and its use in a musical clearly exhibits the film as carnivalesque text. Since the seventies were the period of exploitation in cinema that saw the rise of explicit content that would likely make Will Hays roll in his grave, the scenes above are not out of turn for the time period, but certainly for the genre. Even the pillaging and crucifixion scenes in Jewison’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) refrained from such unambiguous detail.

Finally, I could not end without a comment about the music in the film. While we’ve already discussed the use of the musical numbers in the film, what also needs to be addressed, however, is George Tipton’s underscoring, which links together many of the scenes. This underscoring consists mainly of a chamber ensemble strongly emphasizing lower strings. In the earlier scenes as Leach is approaching the offices of Death Records, the music is played in a staccato pattern in a minor key, which gives the scene a tense, frenetic feeling that is reminiscent of the silent era.

Once the Phantom enters into the pact with Swan, the underscoring shifts to a more legato feel infused with electric organ and lower strings, but it is no less menacing and is still in minor keys and includes copious use of the tritone, or as it has come to be known (appropriate in the context of the film), the devil’s chord. The tritone, also known as an augmented fourth, is an
interval of three whole tones which when separated covers the span of six semitones or half steps between C and F sharp. As the main chord of dissonance, it was avoided in liturgical use during the baroque and classical periods due to its discordant quality. Due to this fact, it was originally given the ominous moniker of \textit{diabolus in musica}, which translates as “the devil in music,” by early music theorists. Since the name stuck, the chord has come to represent malevolence in musical compositions and has been used in contemporary film scoring specifically to suggest horror and evil. When this is contrasted against nearly any of the musicals of the golden age with their nostalgic, wistful and upbeat melodies and underscoring, the seeds were being sown for a new kind of musical for a new audience, a kind of musical making very specific social commentary.
THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW (1975)

This section discusses Jim Sharman’s film The Rocky Horror Picture Show, which premiered in the United States on 26 September 1975. Sharman had worked with the show’s original creator, Richard O’Brien on the theatrical version, The Rocky Horror Show, which had opened in London at the Theatre Upstairs on 19 June 1973. O’Brien had started working on the script for the show, originally titled They Came from Denton High, while living in London as an unemployed actor. O’Brien had spent his youth in New Zealand and there developed his love for science fiction and B-movies while working at his local cinema. After a string of acting failures, O’Brien played the role of King Herod once during a run of Lloyd-Webber’s Jesus Christ Superstar. While his performance in the show was abysmal, he met the director Jim Sharman and had the opportunity to discuss his idea of a play as a satirical mashup of fifties rock, B-grade horror and science fiction cinema and aberrant sexualities. Sharman accepted the project and the
pair brought on Michael White, fresh off of a production of the avant-garde hypersexualized *Oh Calcutta*! to produce. White would later recall: “After a couple of false starts, I went to Richard Hartley’s [Friend of Sharman and Rocky Horror’s Music Director] flat around tea time, and he and Richard O’Brien were sitting in the living room with a guitar. O’Brien told me the outline of the play and played me two songs on the guitar. I immediately loved the material and knew I wanted to be involved in this production” (“Notes on the Rocky Horror Picture Show”).

A brief synopsis of the original show’s plot, with the musical numbers in place, would be beneficial at this point. The story has a sung introduction (“Science Fiction/Double Feature”) and then presents the two young protagonists, Brad Majors (Barry Bostwick) and Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon), who are in love and decide to get engaged following a friend’s wedding (“Dammit, Janet”). Subsequently, they decide to visit their former science tutor, Dr. Everett Scott (Jonathan Adams). At this point, the film introduces a narrator of sorts known as “The Criminologist” (Charles Gray) who discusses the events as if they happened in the past and offers faux-serious commentary on the bizarre occurrences that Brad and Janet encounter. During the trip, the pair gets stuck in a rainstorm because of a flat tire and ends up seeking refuge at a Xanadu-like castle (“Over at the Frankenstein Place”). Upon entering, the pair encounters a handyman named Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien), his sister Magenta (Patricia Quinn) and groupie named Columbia (Nell Campbell) who, along with the castle’s other guests, dance the raucous “Time Warp.” At this point, Brad and Janet meet the owner of the castle, the eccentric transvestite Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry) who invites them to his laboratory (“Sweet Transvestite”) to show off his latest Frankensteinian creation, a well-toned, blond man named Rocky Horror (Peter Hinwood). Upon coming to life, Rocky contemplates his situation (“The Sword of Damacles”) and his creator’s motives. Frank sings about his intense lust for Rocky (“I
Can Make You A Man”) after which his former lover, the now-zombified Eddie (Meatloaf), bursts through a freezer and sings about his present and former life (“Hot Patootie – Bless My Soul”). An enraged Frank attacks and hacks Eddie to death after which he and Rocky, as well as Brad and Janet, are ushered to separate rooms for the night (“I Can Make You A Man” (Reprise)).

That night, Frank has sexual liaisons with both Janet and Brad in their separate rooms, but during the latter session, Riff Raff informs Frank that Rocky has escaped (after Riff Raff taunted and attacked Rocky). Janet, who went searching for Brad, discovers Rocky hiding in the laboratory and, upon seeing Frank and Brad in bed together on a television monitor, seduces Rocky (“Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me”). Upon discovering their coitus, Brad recoils in anger (“Once in a While”) while it is seen that Dr. Scott has arrived at Frank’s castle. Dr. Scott informs Rocky that he is there in search of his nephew Eddie (“Eddie’s Teddy”), after which Frank reveals Eddie’s mutilated cadaver. Frank then restrains his guests and reveals that the inhabitants of the castle are all aliens from the planet Transsexual whose goal on Earth was to engage the planets’ inhabitants in kinky sexual escapades (“Planet Shmanet Janet”). Despite Magenta’s pleas to return to their home planet, Frank decides to put on an elaborate floorshow. During said show, Columbia, Rocky, Brad and Janet perform in drag (“Rose Tint My World”) before giving in to their carnal desires and engaging in a large-scale orgy (“Don’t Dream It – Be It”). Frank concludes the event with two show-stopping numbers (“Wild and Untamed Thing”, “I’m Going Home”), but, along with Rocky and Columbia, is subsequently gunned down by a rebellious Riff Raff who then orders Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott to exit the castle. Riff Raff sings about his desire to do the Time Warp back home (“Spaceship”) and the house blasts off back into space leaving Brad and Janet to ruminate over the night’s events (“Super Heroes”). “Science
"Fiction/Double Feature" (Reprise) plays as an epilogue.

Once casting for the London project began, a young actor named Tim Curry had arrived to read for the role of Rocky, but his outrageous audition netted him the role of Frank-N-Furter. Curry, along with several of the original London cast members would go on to star in the film two years later. After a successful opening in London, which required the company to move to a larger theatre, the show moved to the United States where it inked a film deal with Twentieth Century Fox. Along with Curry, Barry Bostwick and Susan Sarandon filled the roles of Brad and Janet, respectively. Singer Meat Loaf, née Marvin Aday, was cast as Eddie and O’Brien cast himself as Riff Raff. Unlike the reaction to the London theatrical production, the film garnered an extremely negative response, doing well only in Westwood Village, California, which was due largely to its proximity to UCLA. While the film continued to bomb throughout the rest of the country, theatre owners noticed that there was a small contingency of viewers who were coming to the cinemas for repeated screenings of the film. The idea of a “midnight movie” was still in its relative infancy at this time; nevertheless Twentieth Century Fox thought that this might be a novel way of marketing to the intended, read niche, audience for the picture. Jeffrey Weinstock comments on this particular style of seeing a film:

Indeed, the ‘midnight movie’ phenomenon owes at least part of its success precisely to its temporal parameters - seeing a movie at 7pm is conventionally regarded as mundane; seeing a movie at midnight, on the other hand, marks one as rebellious and constructs a certain transgressive aura around the film (8).

Theatre owners and studio executives also noticed that as the audiences increased in the weeks following its first midnight opening at the Waverly Theatre in Greenwich Village, these fans were singing along with the soundtrack and yelling out additional comebacks between numbers and dialogue; thus, the first audience participation script was being born. These comebacks turned into all-out immersion into the world of the film as audience members attended in
outrageous costumes, often to mimic their favorite characters; danced in the aisles during “The Time Warp” number; and brought props to the screenings, including rice (for the wedding scene which opens the film) and water pistols (for the scene in which Brad and Janet run through the rain towards Frank-N-Furter’s mansion). The penultimate example of the film’s explosion out of the fourth wall was the introduction of the “Shadow Cast” in which fans would dress up as the characters and pantomime the action on screen in the space of the theatre, as the stills on the following page show. These Shadow Casts evolved into organized repertory companies holding auditions and rehearsals in an effort to put on the best “performance” possible. These casts have also kept the fervor for Rocky Horror alive, often working with theatres for regular screenings such as select (or every) Saturday nights around the country, and their study has made important contributions for cult film studies like Umberto Eco’s essay on Casablanca and the reception of other such films like Tommy Wisseau’s “so bad it’s good” independent release The Room (2003).

Figure 4.16 A Rocky Horror Shadow Cast performing in Orlando, Florida, one of several companies throughout the country. Most of these companies name themselves after a line from the film; the Orlando Company’s moniker is “The Rich Weirdoes”.

As can be seen from the above stills, the Shadow Casts do everything possible to mimic the action onscreen and get into the spirit of the film. These casts mix with the audience to provide an interactive experience rarely, if ever, seen in contemporary cinema (or theatre for that
I’d like to take moment and draw upon Eco’s aforementioned essay specifically to discuss my slightly modified approach to discussing *Rocky Horror*, especially with respect to the audience analysis that became such a strong part of the film’s aesthetic for the past few decades. In his essay, “Casablanca, or, The Clichés are Having a Ball,” Umberto Eco discusses his curiosity with young audiences’ reactions to *Casablanca*, “…when the film is shown in American universities, the boys and girls greet each scene and canonical line of dialogue with ovations usually reserved for football games. And I have seen the youthful audience in an Italian art cinema react in the same way. What then is the fascination of *Casablanca*?” (260). The answer to this question, and of course, to address that of *Rocky Horror*, lies in its intertextuality and its anthologized nature.

As stated early in the chapter, O’Brien wanted to do a mashup text that brought together several different genres including horror and science fiction, swathing them in musicality (that itself comprises several different styles) that exploited aberrant sexualities and featured character development that is not always consistent but is humorous and clearly identifies its target audience. *Rocky Horror* is irreverent, offensive and unorthodox, and those who embraced it were as well. They were the same youths who were also attending films of the above genres. The fact that O’Brien used a musical as his vehicle for delivery made it that much more salient for the audiences of the seventies and beyond; audiences who had grown up with and groaned at the utopic musicals of MGM and were listening to rock and roll and disco. These audiences were also experiencing sexual awakening, experimentation with drugs and a love of all things transgressive, which mimics the experiences of the characters.

Thus, a discussion of the audiences is essential to illustrate the extent to which this film sits
as the penultimate example of the classic carnivalesque text and “cinema of attractions”, but its many archetypes and clichés used (like in Casablanca) have made it a current favorite of fans of nearly every demographic. As Eco says near the end of his essay:

Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion. Just as the height of pain may encounter sensual pleasure, and the height of perversion borders on mystical energy, so too the height of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime. Something has spoken in place of the director. If nothing else, it is a phenomenon worthy of awe (264).

We can see then, that just as Bakhtin commented in the quote that begins Chapter Three, “Texts continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation…they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth” (“Discourse in the Novel” 422), a carnivalesque text, and by proxy, a corporeal modification musical can change to suit different needs to different audiences over time. This does not remove its original context but enhances it as it consumed by new spectators in new eras. Finally, to be frank, Rocky Horror, was the only film in my discussion that seemed to achieve such a connection to the audience to give birth to Shadow Casts and audience participation. While the other films certainly had intertextual references and allusions, they never achieved the level of participation as Sharman’s film.

One of the most important aspects that sets Rocky Horror apart from other texts is the cultural capital with which audiences bring to the cinematic (and theatrical performances). Scholar H.R. Jauss has postulated in his work on Reception Theory and Performance that “audiences bring a ‘horizon of expectations’ based on the familiar norms of a genre, the relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical surroundings and the opposition between fiction and reality” (Carlsson 1990:11, qtd. in Taylor, “Don’t Dream It, Be It” 58). Rocky Horror was intended for the outcasts, nonconformists and social misfits of the filmgoing public. The
characters all represented different variations, or carnivalizations, away from conventional social strata in both appearance and behavior. Whether it’s Frank-N-Furter’s blatantly aberrant sexuality and associated costuming in heavy makeup, a corset, and fishnet stockings, or Eddie’s black leather jacket, motorcycle and saxophone (signifying the nostalgic longing for the erstwhile musical era of early rock and roll) pegging him as a rebellious dissident, the opportunities for audience members to cathartically identify with the message that nonconformity is acceptable was plethoric. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque manifests itself in the very audience that Weinstock was speaking of. As Bakhtin discussed, participants in the carnival experienced a frisson of ecstasy at being free from and mocking the constraints of the ruling class, and participants in the Rocky Horror Picture Show had an outlet where, for the brief period in the cinema, they were not freaks, geeks, or the ostracized; but were all the same, all accepted and all lampooning the very institutions that had classified them as thus. There are, of course, other aspects of the text that exhibit this idea, but the audience aspect in the film, and the timing with which these audiences grew is critical to my argument about when the corporeal modification cycle started and why it continues. I also want to reiterate that while some of these ideas aren’t necessarily groundbreaking, using Bakhtin to look at The Rocky Horror Picture Show has not been studied. As examinations of the musical become more specialized and theoretical (like Cohan’s text or Amy Herzog’s recently published Deleuzian study of the genre, Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film (2010)), a Bakhtinian study into why these deviant musicals exist and continue to be popular is long overdue.

I do want to be very clear, however, about one element regarding the difference between camp and carnival that goes to the core of my argument and about why Bakhtin’s ideas are so
useful to us here. I’ve discussed camp before, in Chapter Two, within the context of Steve Cohan’s analysis of MGM musicals, and it’s very common for many authors, including the aforementioned Jeffrey Weinstock, to point to Rocky Horror as a camp text. It is also no secret that, generally speaking, the musical as a genre is one that is imbued with a camp aesthetic. Paul Roen says that “the genre’s orientation [is] toward excessive spectacle; musicals not only allow people suddenly to burst into song but they are ‘all awash with glitter, tinsel and garish artifice’” (qtd. in Cohan, Incongruous Entertainment 103). Camp is also about irony and sexual subversion. As Cohan goes on to say, “camp was the self-reflective style of gay men, passing as straight, who kept a ‘straight face’ in order not to let outsiders in on the joke, yet who simultaneously winked at the initiated in shared acknowledgement of the joke” (Incongruous Entertainment 103). The key here is the pretense of heteronormativity; that is the essence of camp. Judy Garland and Carmen Miranda (amongst others) are considered the penultimate icons of gay camp because they exhibited signs of difference within a greater milieu of ordinariness. They had the appearance of straight but also exhibited signs of excess (Garland’s ebullient singing and Miranda’s inassimilable exoticism). These qualities in particular appealed to gay audiences during the heyday of MGM’s Freed Unit due to the political and cultural climate of the time.

Now let us contrast this aesthetic with that of the carnival that we have discussed in this Chapter. Bakhtin’s carnivalesque is not about pretense but rather emphasizes the outright lampoon during a period of revelry. I argue that films like Rocky Horror do not have the false pretense of a heterosexual norm about them but rather gleefully mock the hegemonic status quo. Thus, I want to make it clear that the cultural climate along with other factors described here and in Chapter Two contributed to the lessening of the notion of camp within the musical and
allowed the corporeal modification cycle to begin to take hold and for audiences, albeit select ones, to embrace it.

In the opening scene of the film, Brad and Janet attend the wedding of their friends, Ralph Hapschatt and Betty Munroe which itself is a lampoon of the institution of marriage, albeit a subtle one.

In Figure 4.17, which shows the marriage of Brad and Janet’s friends in the opening scene, we observe that the minister is played by Tim Curry (who also plays Frank-N-Furter), the Chapel orderlies are played by Richard O’Brien and Patricia Quinn (Riff Raff and Magenta, respectively) and the majority of the wedding “guests” will later dance the Time Warp as visitors to Frank’s castle. I argue that the choice of actors also specifically comments on and lampoons the sanctity of the marriage as a religious ceremony, in particular Ralph and Betty’s current marriage and Brad and Janet’s upcoming one. The “traditional” marriage ceremony will be the subject of further mockery later in the film as Frank and Rocky are ushered to their “bridal suite” after Frank has hacked Eddie to death as shown in figures 4.18 and 4.19 on the next page.
Marriage and life-long commitment as portrayed in more traditional cinematic texts, especially musicals, has been turned on its head here and has been transformed into a panopticon that robs participants of their opportunity for sexual liberation and experimentation. Juxtapose this with the fact that the original play premiered only four short years after the Stonewall Riots in New York City effectively kicked off the gay rights movement, and you have a text that epitomizes the Bakhtinian trope of the carnivalesque.

While I have stated that one of the defining features of the musicals within my corpus that sets them apart from others is the modification or fragmentation of the literal body, these
musicals also splinter institutional bodies like religion, identity politics and art. An example of the tertiary item in the previous statement runs throughout the mise-en-scene of the film. During the opening scene, the orderlies are positioned in a parodic form of Grant Wood’s 1930 painting American Gothic, one of the most recognized works of American Art and one that represents domesticity, hard labor and traditional American values.

Figure 4.20 The figures in the background are mimicking Wood's famous painting. Note the use of the windows flanking the characters in same Carpenter Gothic (Revival) style as the original work.

In addition to the American Gothic example just discussed, Frank has various artistic works placed into the mise-en-scene of his castle including da Vinci’s Mona Lisa and Michelangelo’s The David (Figures 4.21 – 4.22).

Figure 4.21 The Mona Lisa in Frank-N-Furter's castle.
The motif of American Gothic is one that will recur again later in the film as Frank-N-Furter has a copy of the original painting hanging in his sitting room seen prior to “The Time Warp” number (Figure 4.23), and the some of the windows of his castle are similarly designed as such. Thus, the film works to lampoon one of the most well known examples of Americana and its associated values.
This is further reinforced late in the film when, in a fit of rage, Frank-N-Furter uses his “Medusa Transducer” to transform Brad, Janet, Rocky, Dr. Scott and Columbia into Renaissance-styled statues similar to that of The David that adorns his laboratory (Figure 4.24). Like The David, the characters lose their clothing in their ossified form and are in various nude positions of represented sexual ecstasy or robustness. This is, of course, the antithesis of the intentions through which The David was created, as the sculpture is a Renaissance interpretation of the Biblical hero David who slew the larger Goliath. While it could initially be argued that the placement of the statue into the mise-en-scene stands for the defense of sexual freedom against a Medicinian hegemony of heteronormativity, I argue that because the characters are themselves transformed into marble nudes and in the positions that they are in, and that the nudity in The David is not sexual but contextual, the film is intentionally creating a discourse that counters said nudity and the religious themes it represents.

The idea of lampooning the institution of religion will also be reinforced throughout the film, in particular, as Brad and Janet approach Frank-N-Furter’s large cathedral-like castle, complete with ornate windows and gargoyle (see Figure 4.25). During this scene, Brad and
Janet are seeking refuge from a heavy rainstorm and are singing the number “Over at the Frankenstein Place.” What are interesting about the musical characteristics of this particular number are the slower tempo and vocal modulation during the bridge (which Riff Raff himself sings) that gives it a hymn-like quality.

Figure 4.25 Dr. Frank-N-Furter's cathedral-like castle.

While this castle (which has been used in a number of other films, including several from the famous Hammer Studios in the UK) is actually an extra-terrestrial vehicle containing the alien inhabitants of Transsexual, as Brad and Janet approach the building, the various cuts emphasize its resemblance to a house of worship.

The irreligious theme most obviously manifests itself however much later in the film during the dinner/Rocky’s Birthday scene. As commented in the earlier footnote, there are relatively few differences between the original stage work and the film, however one of the most important changes goes directly to the corporeal modification argument being made. During the dinner scene and immediately following the “Eddie’s Teddy” number (which discusses Eddie’s troubled past and his knowledge of the insidious deeds of the castle’s inhabitants), Frank-N-Furter reveals Eddie’s mutilated corpse under the table directly implying that this entire time, the guests have been feasting upon Eddie, Figure 4.26. Upon this realization, the guests recoil in disgust. Janet immediately flees to the arms of Rocky but she is subsequently slapped and chased
by Frank. What is also particularly notable about this is that immediately prior to the scene, the Criminologist/Narrator character has an extended monologue, and the book behind him is turned to a page featuring a copy of da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper* (Figure 4.27). This serves to foreshadow the cannibalistic event that is about to occur.

![Figure 4.26 Eddie's mutilated corpse, which also served as dinner to Frank's guests.](image)

![Figure 4.27 The Criminologist introduces the dinner scene. Note da Vinci's "The Last Supper" in the book in the background.](image)

The use of this particular painting not only refers to my previous discussion of the use of classic art in the film but also serves as a commentary on the film’s sardonic view of mainstream religion and Christianity, in particular, given that the painting represents one of the central beliefs of the faith’s dogma. The idea of cannibalism is a common trope in horror but not one oft seen in the musical. It is typically considered taboo in cinema to represent human consumption
by fellow humans, and the inclusion of the practice has, in the past, resulted in a film being heavily criticized and, in some countries, banned, as in the case of Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). Cannibalism may be shown as a last resort in a desperate situation, as in 1993’s *Alive*, based on the true story of the Uruguayan Rugby team’s plane crash in the Andes and the measures that they resorted to to survive. The scene that we have just discussed in *Rocky Horror* is not *just* another instance of cannibalism, of oddly-placed corporeal modification and thus the carnivalization of a Hollywood musical. The use of *The Last Supper* as a motif in this instance places the scene directly lampooning the Christian Biblical story of Jesus and his followers figuratively (or in this case, literally) consuming his flesh prior to his execution. With Frank as the ceremonial head of the table, his guests mockingly consume his victim’s flesh shortly before Frank’s own demise at the hands of Riff Raff.

In 2005, the Library of Congress elected *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to the National Film Registry as a work that is “culturally, socially or aesthetically significant.” The film has been played on thousands of screens, written on by numerous scholars, been the focus of an episode of the television series *Glee* and had millions dance, sing and fuck to its various musical numbers “subject only to the laws of its own freedom.” The use of Bakhtin’s theories to discuss the film have helped to place it within a new context in discourse on the musical next to *Phantom of the Paradise* (albeit for different reasons) with several more to follow. In 1986, when Frank Oz, who had been most closely associated as the puppeteer and voice actor for Muppets Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, Grover and the *Star Wars* character Yoda, took on the project to direct a film musical adaptation of the stage musical *Little Shop of Horrors* (which was itself based on Roger Corman’s 1960 farcical comedy), he probably didn’t know that the film would go on to be a major success and provide a musical showing-of-talents for several members of its star-studded
cast. With its dark themes of class struggle and a return to the Faustian story, Little Shop of Horrors would continue the trend of corporeal modification into the eighties.

**LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS (1986)**

![Figure 4.28 The original theatrical release poster for Little Shop of Horrors.](image)

It is rarity for a text to have such staying power that it starts as a straight film, is transformed into a stage musical, then becomes a musical film based on that stage show with all three being well-received by critics and audiences and becoming cult favorites over a multi-decade lifespan. When this does happen, oftentimes one of the subsequent texts is a poor adaptation for the medium, there are problems with casting or the director of the musical film is a poor choice. Fortunately, none of these were the case for Frank Oz who, in 1986, was asked to direct the film version of a stage show based on another film about a strange plant with an unusual appetite and the bizarre cast of characters that surround it. As a text, (The) Little Shop of Horrors is at once a dark comedy, a horror film and a love story, and in the latter iterations, all of
this is wrapped in the music and lyrics of Broadway duo Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, respectively.

In 1960, Roger Corman directed *The Little Shop of Horrors*, a dark farce about an inept flower shop employee who attempts to raise an unusual plant, only, and to his chagrin, to realize that its appetite was not for plant food and water, but human flesh. Interestingly, the film originated as an off-the-cuff suggestion by Corman:

> The original *Little Shop of Horrors* began almost as a joke. I had some space at a small studio in Hollywood…and they had nothing coming in. I said ‘Look, leave the sets up and I’ll see if I can make something very inexpensive…I’ll tailor it to the existing sets…[It will take] two days. I just want to see if it can be done (Corman, *The Making of Little Shop of Horrors*)

With a script written in two weeks and his actors under a one-week contract, Corman shot the film in just over 48 hours. Despite its low-budget B-status and over-the-top performances, *Variety* commented that “*The Little Shop of Horrors* is kind of one big sick joke…the acting is pleasantly preposterous,” the film was received warmly by audiences who saw the dark comedy as a parody of horror films (“*The Little Shop of Horrors*”).

Figure 4.29 Seymour Krelboyne (Jonathan Haze) realizes his plant doesn’t want Miracle-Gro in Corman's original film.
Its distribution through television continued its popularity over the next two decades until David Geffen, who was in the midst of producing Krieger and Eyen’s *Dreamgirls* and Lloyd-Webber’s *Cats* on Broadway, decided to transform it into an off-Broadway stage musical. Menken and Ashman, fresh off their Vonnegut stage adaptation *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, teamed up to pen the lyrics and music to the show, utilizing a combination of traditional showtunes, rock and roll and Motown-influenced blues. Like the previous two films in this chapter, the presence of rock and roll as a device in the musical was still in its relative infancy and considered renegade for the genre. This is not to say that all films that used Rock were carnivalesque texts, but with the opening of Rock Musicals like *Bye Bye Birdy* (1960 on Broadway), *Hair* (1968 on Broadway) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970 on Broadway), the seeds were being planted for the marriage of the two styles. The stage version of *The Little Shop of Horrors* opened off-Broadway on May 6, 1982 at The Workshop of the Players Art Theatre and was immediately hailed a success. Garnering a number of awards including the 1982 New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Drama Desk Award for Best Musical, the show, with its quirky songs and irreverent spirit, would go on to an amazing run for another five and half years. As a buttress to the show’s success, Frank Oz directed the film version in 1986. Ashman’s screenplay (the only one he ever wrote) differed very little from the original stage play (other than the ending) and featured a star-heavy cast of talent for the era including Rick Moranis, Steve Martin, Bill Murray, John Candy and The Four Tops’ Levi Stubbs as the voice of the plant, Audrey II.

In a similar fashion to *Rocky Horror*, *Little Shop of Horrors* starts with an introduction by a Greek chorus-like Motown trio providing the early plot elements (“Skid Row”) and introducing the main character, Seymour Krelbourn (Rick Moranis), a young man who works in a flower shop in 1960 New York City. He purchases an unusual plant that he names Audrey II in
honor of his fellow flower-shop employee, Audrey Fulquard (Ellen Greene), on whom he has a strong but secret crush (“Da-Doo”). Krelbourn attempts to raise the plant using traditional methods but soon discovers that the plant responds strongest to human blood (“Grow For Me”). Using his own blood, Krelbourn feeds the plant while, due to the unusual flora’s presence in the front window, the ailing flower shop is now becoming more of a success (“Some Fun Now”). Simultaneously, we see that Audrey also has romantic feelings for Seymour (“Somewhere That’s Green”) but they are complicated by her relationship with an abusive, sadistic dentist, Orin Scrivello (Steve Martin) (“Dentist”). Eventually, the anthropomorphic Audrey II grows to a monstrous size and demands larger meals from Seymour offering him celebrity status in return (“Feed Me”). Once Seymour learns of Scrivello’s abuse of Audrey, and at the strong suggestion of the plant, he “kills” the dentist (by allowing him to asphyxiate on nitrous oxide) and feeds the mutilated corpse to Audrey II, which only increases its desire for human flesh. As Seymour’s guilt grows, his relationship with Audrey improves as they admit their feelings for one another (“Suddenly, Seymour”). Seymour’s difficulties grow however when he is confronted by the flower shop owner, Mr. Mushnik (Vincent Gardenia), who witnessed the feeding of Scrivello to the plant, which in turn, just wants to eat Mushnik (“Suppertime”). Before Mushnik can go to the police however, he attempts to bargain with Seymour to take care of the plant, realizing its financial value. The plant subsequently gobbles up Mushnik, and Seymour begins an astonishing rise to stardom (“The Meek Shall Inherit”). As Seymour’s fame grows, however, so does his love for Audrey, which the plant sees as a distraction. After a foiled plot on the part of the plant to eat Audrey, Seymour confronting it (“Mean Green Mother From Outer Space”) and after a lengthy struggle, successfully kills the enormous shrub by electrocution. Seymour and Audrey unite in
wedded bliss in their house “somewhere that’s green” while the camera pans down to a miniature Audrey II (or perhaps Audrey III?) which smiles as the credits begin to roll.

Politics and race both play a large part in the interpretation of Little Shop of Horrors. In his essay on the film, Marc Jensen states that one of the real, albeit subtle conflicts of the film is framed around implications of race-relations and the danger of integration as an “Other” with that other being personified in the form of Audrey II. Jensen states, “In the musical and the 1986 film, racial tension and anxiety in the 1950’s and 1960’s are the unspoken tools used to articulate the problem embodied by Audrey II…through the personification of the corrupting influence as insidiously African American” (54). He goes on to argue,

While Audrey II’s [black] racial identity is rendered clearly enough through the character of his speech alone, he is presented in a physical form that can readily be seen as a caricature of African American physiology...[and] the most important element defining Audrey II’s race: the musical style associate with him (55). Jensen goes on to use other evidence in the film and reviews to claim that the film’s racist aesthetic is one of its most provocative and disturbing features. I will certainly agree with him on part of this latter point that race in this film is an element of cultural underscoring that due to the time period of its setting cannot be overlooked. What I disagree with in Jensen’s analysis, and I think is relevant for this discussion, is that the use of such overt racial iconography in the character of Audrey II does not present a societal fear of racial integration but rather is one of the aspects that makes this a carnivalesque text. Considering the conservative time period in which the film was released, the mid-eighties and the height of the Reagan era, and the genre in which the film was set and an examination of other film musicals from the period like Annie (1982) and A Chorus Line (1985), I argue that the film (regardless of whether Oz intended this or not) irreverently creates caricatures in an effort to satirize their use. The “Other” that Jensen talks
about in his essay is not the fear of the African-American but a critique of the ignorance that accompanies virulent racism and by placing Audrey II as an obviously black-coded antagonist, something that Corman did not do in his original film, the text achieves a carnivalization. *Little Shop of Horrors* is no more racist in its portrayal of Audrey II than *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is homophobic in its portrayal of the flamboyant Dr. Frank-N-Furter. One of the hallmarks of the hegemonic conservative ideal is the embrace of a patriarchal, white, heteronormative society and the aim of the carnivalesque is to work against this.

My argument is bolstered by the fact that, upon examination, all of the principal characters in the musical film are satirized as a stereotype of one form or another. Seymour is the prototypical nerd, and this is enhanced by Moranis’ performance, fresh off his dweeby “Louis Tully” character that he portrayed two years earlier in *Ghostbusters* and would become so integral to his persona that it bordered on typecasting (“The Mackenzie Brothers” skit from *SCTV* and his “Wayne Szalinski” character from *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (1989) are prototypical examples). Ellen Page’s Audrey is a ditzy blonde burlesque with a faux high-pitched voice and constant cleavage-baring outfits. Even the flower shop owner, Mr. Mushnik, is coded as comically Jewish. These characters are exaggerated forms of culturally pervasive stereotypes and treating these with a comically irreverent and derisive spirit strives for the goal of a universe lacking in such formulas. This goal allows a society to experience the kind of freedom that carnival called for.

When Roger Corman himself saw Frank Oz’s film musical version, he praised the “irreverent spirit” that was present in the original. What separates the films that I am discussing and earlier musical texts is that sense of reverence and awareness of classicality. The films that make up this Bakhtinian trend in the musical are satirizing that spirit. Moreover, in *Little Shop,*
the film is commenting on conservative politics and the realization of the American dream. The film is set in a skid row tenement that, according to Geffen and Oz, was patterned after the skid row neighborhoods in New York City (even though the city is not specifically mentioned in the text). Usually, the first number (after the overture/prologue) in an integrated musical gives background on the protagonist(s), their life and dwelling and sets up their major desires that will be explored throughout the film. The Greek Chorus girls, Seymour and Audrey share in the number “Skid Row”. As miserable inhabitants of this area, the number sums up typical life and their respective desires, as the lyrics sample shows:

**Woman #1**: Alarm goes off at seven/ And you start uptown./ You put in your eight hours/ For the powers that have always been./ Till it’s five PM…

**Company**: Downtown/ Where the folks are broke./ Downtown/ Where your life’s a joke./ Downtown/ When you buy your token, you go/ Home to Skid Row…

**Audrey**: Downtown/ Where the guys are drips./ Downtown/ Where they rip your slips./ Downtown/ Where relationships are no go/ Down on skid row/…

**Seymour**: Poor! All my life I’ve always been poor./ I keep asking God what I’m for,/ and he tells me “Gee I’m not sure/ sweep that floor kid”…

**Company**: Someone show me a way to get outa here/ ‘Cause I constantly pray I’ll get outa here/ Please, won’t somebody say I’ll get outa here/ Someone gimme my shot or I’ll rot here… (Ashman)

![Figure 4.30 Seymour and Audrey sing of their desire to get out of the dumps in "Skid Row".](image)
Both Seymour and Audrey sing later in the film about their desires to realize the utopian community that was not only a hallmark of many early musicals (recall Altman’s paradigm for the folk musical) but also a continuation during the eighties of the de-urbanization that had started during fifties and sixties. This strong desire between Seymour and Audrey was not present in Corman’s original 1960 film. Of course, that desire is satirized during the number “Somewhere That’s Green”. Audrey yearns for coupledom with Seymour in a life that is straight out of an episode of *Leave It To Beaver* as the stills and lyrics below suggest:

![Figure 4.31 Audrey dreams of the 'good life' in "Somewhere That's Green".](image)

**Audrey**: He rakes and trims the grass/ He loves to mow and weed/ I cook like Betty Crocker/ And I look like Donna Reed/ There’s plastic on the furniture/ To keep it neat and clean/ In the Pine-Sol scented air,/ Somewhere that’s green…

(Ashman)

The quest for such a blissfully quotidian existence is eventually realized at the conclusion of the film when Krelbourn defeats the plant, and he and Audrey escape to their happy ending.

While the ending of the stage show and the film are different, both present an ultimate victory on the part of the plant, albeit in overt and ambiguous ways, respectively. In the stage show, immediately preceding Seymour’s demise, a businessman informs Krelbourn that his company wishes to sell leaf cuttings from Audrey II at a profit that will be shared. Balking at this, Krelbourn realizes the plant’s dastardly plan of world domination but his attempts to kill the
huge shrub are thwarted, and he’s eaten. The conclusion implies that the businessman indeed followed through with his plans, and throughout the country, unsuspecting consumers were eaten up by Audrey II’s “offspring” with the final number imploring the audience “Don’t Feed the Plants.” When Oz attempted to use this ending for the film, it proved to be very unpopular with test audiences:

Oz previewed the original ending to a test audience and they were shocked and horrified: “They hated us when the main characters died,” Oz quips. “In the play, they’re eaten by the puppet, but you know they’re coming out again for a curtain call. But the power of movies is different. They really believed in those characters and they were angry. (Oz, The Making of Little Shop of Horrors)

In the film, the climactic musical number comes immediately prior to Audrey II’s own demise. Seymour still realizes that the plant is an alien that wants to conquer the world, but Audrey II then launches into “Mean Green Mother from Outer Space” which netted an Oscar nomination for Best Original Song. The number is a humorous, irreverent song in which the plant exposes the dénouement and strongly advises Seymour not to interfere as the still on the next page demonstrates. However, even though Seymour is victorious in this version, we still see the smaller version of the smiling plant in the last frame, which undoubtedly gives a nod to the stage version’s ending but also opens up the possibility of the cycle continuing. This implied victory of the plant as antagonist helps to offset Hollywood’s need to pander to audiences thirsty for happy endings, especially in the case of the musical.
When speaking of this film as a member of the corporeal modification trend, we must not forget the actual violence that this film exercises upon several of its characters. Like *Rocky Horror*, there is human consumption in this story, and while not actual cannibalism per se, the idea of human death at the hands of the monster, or “Other” is one of the strongest and most classical tropes in the horror film. In this case, the fact that the killer is a plant, a seemingly innocuous creature that turns into a formidable opponent, helps to reinforce that this is, at least in part, a horror film.

Figure 4.32 Seymour realizes he's in way over his head when confronted by an angry and now huge Audrey II.

It is no secret that one of the primary aims of the monster movie is to articulate deeply rooted societal anxieties. In his essay “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” Wood discusses
the importance of Freud and Marx’s convergence in contemporary society and academic criticism, specifically the dominant ideology of the patriarchal nuclear (heteronormative) family that has propagated surplus repression to create a culture of “monogamous, heterosexual, bourgeois, patriarchal capitalists” (165). Perhaps to the chagrin of most of my readers, this hegemonic ideal, has, to a certain extent succeeded. American society remains one that offers, to use Wood’s words “an extreme example of surplus repression” and out of that is born the natural response to this, what Barthes calls “The Other:” that which is repressed and therefore ejected and disavowed (166). This concept of the other takes several forms in our society, which ranges from other cultures and races to religious and political differences to the dichotomy of genders.

The horror film is a particularly useful genre in discussing these ideas due to its embodiment of the repressed/the other in the figure of the Monster. If we accept Wood’s assertion that the basic formula for the horror film is that “normality is threatened by the Monster” with normality being the dominant social norms of the white heterosexual bourgeois family (especially during the film’s set time period of the sixties and the film’s release period of the eighties), Little Shop of Horrors presents a parodic challenge to that hegemony through its unorthodox hero structure (the sheepish and klutzy Krelbourn and his love interest, the ditzy floozy Audrey) and its use of musical numbers as a satirical catalyst to employ justifiable homicide as the accelerant to fortune and wealth. This idea is reinforced if we examine who the plant eats, Scrivello and Mushnik. Both characters are portrayed in their own respect as unsavory and, to use the plant’s words, “A lot of folks deserve to die.” Scrivello is a sadistic misogynist, while Mushnik is greedy, opportunistic and treats his employees, especially Seymour, poorly. Just as in the commentary on racial stereotyping, the film comically suggests that perhaps simply by feeding unsavory representatives of capitalism and malice to some carnivorous entity can
result in utopia. Of course, as both the stage production and film’s original endings suggest, such is not the case.

_**Little Shop of Horrors**_ used music and horror as the instrument for societal and racial commentary. The corporeal modification cycle was not an anomalous trend that grew out of a lack of new ideas, but, and when read through the carnivalesque lens of Bakhtin, upended conservatism by using one of the movement’s greatest cinematic tools, the Hollywood musical. The fact that it has now lasted for nearly four decades is a testament to its lasting power, and its producers and audiences desires to use the musical as a cathartic vehicle for expressing social frustrations.

One of Thomas Schatz’s most well known contributions to genre theory is his idea of the evolution of genres over time. While this theory has been contested by contemporary theorists on genre (which just goes to show that genre theory can be as fluid and volatile as genres themselves), I believe that it is particularly apt in discussing the lifecycle of the corporeal modification musical. Schatz appropriates Metz and Henri Focillon in his explication of the creation of an evolutionary paradigm with which to view genres:

…a form passes through an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their ‘equilibrium’ and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of *refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the ‘substance’ or the ‘content’ of the work (38).

Schatz goes on to say that the musical, with its long history and strong tie-ins with popular culture, is an appropriate genre through which to read this progression. I’ve stated earlier that the seeds for the creation of the corporeal modification musical were being planted long before the seventies with the abolishment of the Hayes code, the onset of new political movements and the
subtle insertion of sexual (both heterosexual and not) coding in song lyrics, but Schatz also points out that during the fifties we saw several musicals that were already “exhibiting signs of formal self-consciousness” (Schatz, 38). These films didn’t succumb to the frivolity of musical comedy but interrogated their place and value within the genre, oftentimes with a resolution that “apologized for the musical as popular art” (Schatz, 39). While this does not go the extremes of the modification musical, especially those that will be discussed in the next chapter, it certainly starts to question the genre’s conventions.

Furthermore, if we are to examine Schatz’s ideas with respect to the films studied in this chapter, Phantom of the Paradise, with its non-integrated style and embellished performances fits right into the experimental stage. As Schatz says, films at this stage are “exploit[ing] the cinematic medium as a medium,” and the corporeal modification musical is just getting its “sea legs” as it feels out what works and doesn’t and Phantom walks the line as both a horror film with musical numbers and musical film with a horror backbone (38). The Rocky Horror Picture Show’s integrated numbers and clear lampooning of religion, sex and the hegemonic power structure helped to solidify the modification musical into its classical stage. Little Shop of Horrors straddles the line between classical and refinement as it does many of the things that Rocky Horror did but appealed to a much larger audience’s understanding of what a modification musical could look like. Little Shop used humor and malevolent undertones to express exactly what the modification trend thought of Reagenomics.

One comment that Schatz makes near the end of his discussion that I disagree with is “The…musical seem[s] to represent [a] genre in which the evolutionary ‘cycle’ seems more or less complete” (40). The modification trend, and the musical itself, still has many more tricks up its sleeve in the twenty first century. As we will see in the next chapter, the corporeal
modification trend went through a period of hibernation during the nineties and re-flowered in the two thousands, influenced by changes in Rock music and the horror film, into the baroque stage, in which the violence escalated, the music intensified and the targets of the trend’s rage and derision were cemented.

1 One might initially make the argument that Brecht’s *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera) might fit into this paradigm. However, the violence and the “violence” in Brecht’s musical is far more muted than those in my discussion.

2 Saturnalia was the ancient Roman festival of Saturn held in December. It was a period of general merriment and was the predecessor of Christmas.

3 The film was a massive success in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. It played there for nearly five months and sold 20,000 copies of the soundtrack album in that city alone. While many have tried to explain why this city of all places, the evolution of the arts development in that city offers a possible solution, “international renown for [Winnipeg’s] ballet and symphony…immense pride in the British invasion…and shiny new arts facilities. This sudden concentration of artistic endeavors, combined with [the city’s] relative isolation both within the province and continent, meant that it was much easier to realize a cultural tipping point in Winnipeg” (Carlson, “Why Winnipeg? The 1975 Phantom Phenomenon”). This fact combined with a Paul Williams concert there in 1975 made this a hub for the film’s popularity.

4 I’m appropriating Noël Carroll’s use of “allusion” here as “an umbrella term covering a mixed lot of practices including quotations, the memorialization [and reworking] of past genres…homages, and the recreation of ‘classic’ scenes, shots, plot motifs…from film history…” (52). This trend was especially popular starting in the seventies and eighties and is particularly notable in de Palma’s film as well as *Rocky Horror*.

5 In Leroux’s original novel, the opera Faust is being performed at the Paris Opera House with the prima donna soprano La Carlotta singing the lead. When the Phantom’s normal Box 5 is not yielded to him to observe the performance, he causes Carlotta to lose her voice and drops a chandelier on the audience.

6 The reference to Kiss is notable and reinforces my discussion given that the immensely popular band was very controversial in the seventies due to their makeup and flamboyant stage show. Christian and conservative groups accused the band of Satanism (and many other things) so the tie in of a band such as this with a major film musical is notable.

7 I will note later the differences between the stage show and the film, which are, in actuality, quite few.

8 Although the stage production of the text *Cabaret*, both on Broadway and in many of the touring companies, had the seating set up as an actual cabaret theatre and the Emcee character would often interact with and dance with playgoers during the intermission and forms of dialogue to enhance the realism of the narrative.

9 Note that I’m summarizing the musical film – I will note differences in the plot from the stage show and the original film when relevant.

10 The time period notwithstanding, the problematic argument in Jensen’s text could be construed that using an African-American voice for an antagonist is cued as racist. Interestingly,
no one claimed this when Tim Burton cast black singer and actor Ken Page to play his imposing and demented antagonist Oogie-Boogie in The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993).

I should also note that the musical was no stranger to dark endings which were featured in films as diverse as West Side Story, Carousel and Jesus Christ Superstar, but these films lacked the other elements that would have made them part of the corporeal modification trend.
CHAPTER 4

NEO-MODIFICATION: THE MUSICAL AS THE VOICE OF THE SUBALTERN

“These are desperate times, Mrs. Lovett. Desperate measures are called for.”

While Chapter Four concentrated on films released during the seventies and eighties, this chapter will discuss the nineties and two thousands. Herein, I will discuss the relative latency period that the musical experienced from 1990 – 1999 and then will examine Tim Burton’s 2007 release, Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street and Darren Lynn Bousman’s 2008 film Repo! The Genetic Opera. These films represent a shift for the corporeal-modification musical due to a changing socio-cultural-entertainment landscape that included the September 11th Attacks, a frustrating war and a painful economic recession. In addition, part of these films’ foundation grew out of musical influences that were burgeoning in the nineties not only in theatre and film but in rock music as well.

These films share many of the same traits as those discussed in Chapter Four: violence against the body; dark, macabre musical numbers; cinematography, editing and a mise-en-scène that place it counter to the traditional Hollywood musical vis-à-vis malevolent themes; a comic element and a strong desire to lampoon and/or overturn the dominant ideology. As I discussed at the end of Chapter Four, the modification musical has experienced a Schatzian evolution in which the films that premiered during the seventies and eighties entered into the experimental and classical-refinement stages. As I will elaborate on shortly, the modification musical was rebirthed into the baroque stage of Schatz’s theory and, therefore, I term this the period of the neomodification musical characterized by darker aesthetics, more overt targets for carnivalization, more explicit gore and violence against victims and a greater sophistication in
musical presentation that tends toward classical and opera in structure and composition. But first, I will discuss the nineties.

While the film musical didn’t have many huge hits during the eighties, the nineties saw a resurgence of the genre, albeit in animated form. When Michael Eisner took over as CEO of Disney in 1984, the company was in dire straits, having failed to put out any recent blockbusters that matched those of earlier decades. Starting in 1989 with the release of The Little Mermaid, Eisner dedicated the company to one major animated musical film per year (usually released in the summer) bringing together major vocal stars (Jodi Benson and Robin Williams) and songwriting talent from Broadway (Alan Menken, Howard Ashman, Elton John and Tim Rice). The enormous success of Mermaid, as well as its subsequent releases, helped the Studio revive the film musical and managed to appeal to a fairly universal audience. In addition to the Disney films, there were a few other musical texts that are worthy of mention.

Tim Burton’s The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993), a stop-motion animated musical film, places the dark yet comical residents of “Halloweentown” in conflict with the cuddly, wide-eyed denizens of the adjoining “Christmastown.” While I do not believe that the film acts as a carnivalesque text, Tim Burton’s use of chiaroscuro lighting, sharp angles and the clear influences from German Expression place this more as a transitional text between the animated Disney musicals of the period and the upcoming modification musicals discussed in this Chapter. In addition, this dissertation has been exclusively dedicated to live-action musical films.

Trey Parker’s Cannibal! The Musical (1993), an independent release done by Parker and his later “South Park” co-creator Matthew Stone while they were students at the University of Colorado is a comedic biopic of 19th Century prospector Alfred Packer, who had been accused of cannibalism. Cannibal! incorporated several elements of the carnivalesque and Grand Guignol,
including subject matter that was contrarian to the traditional musical, humorous upbeat musical numbers and gore that was explicit yet did not strive for realistic representation. As a historical comedy film however, it does not fit within the parameters laid out for this dissertation but would certainly warrant future investigation, especially given its expansion into a theatrical milieu in small venues across the United States.

It might initially be regarded that John Cameron Mitchell’s *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) be included in this trend. While the musical is imbued with certain aspects of the carnivalesque and involves transgendered bodily modification, specifically the titular character’s botched sex change operation from a male to female (the aforementioned “Angry Inch”), in the films studied herein, the modification is voluntary and intentional. The violence has clear, purposeful goals; however in Hedwig, the modification is largely the result of societal pressures upon the main character. The external society and prejudices against same sex marriage are directly complicit in his desire to go under the knife and therefore wouldn’t necessarily fit into the paradigm laid out in this dissertation.

Another text worthy of mention (from 2001, but still several years before *Sweeney Todd*) is “Once More, with Feeling,” the musical episode of the television series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. “Once More, with Feeling” was the seventh episode during the sixth season of the program. The episode featured various styles of musical numbers (from Gilbert and Sullivan to rock opera) that were integrated into the plotline and yielded important character exposition. The characters used the numbers to experience catharsis and work through changes that would follow them through the remainder of the season and series. Interestingly, the numbers are referred to self-reflexively as it is revealed that a demon is causing everyone in the town of Sunnydale to spontaneously break into song to reveal inner thoughts and anxieties. While the episode features
its share of violence, I would not include it in the modification trend per se, as the musical numbers are not necessarily doing work to embrace the carnivalesque. However, I think that the episode is still quite important as it received some of the highest ratings in the entire series, spawned a successful soundtrack album and (before a copyright dispute) had cinemas playing the episode in a Rocky Horror-styled sing-a-long. For fans of the episode and series, “Once More, with Feeling” acted as both a contemporary text that utilized a pastiche of prior musical influences and a nice primer for the films that would come later in the decade.

Other films weren’t the only artistic products during the nineties that would influence the modification musical. The movies in this chapter, the mise-en-scène of both Sweeney Todd and Repo and the music of the latter were heavily impacted by developments in rock and music video aesthetics during the nineties, especially in the subgenres of industrial rock and its offshoots: industrial metal, gothic rock and grindcore/horrorcore. The seeds for these musical trends were being laid in the seventies but breakout acts like Ministry (who formed in 1981 as an electronic pop act but progressively got harder and 1989’s LP The Mind Is A Terrible Thing To Taste established them as an aggressive industrial rock group) and Trent Reznor’s solo act Nine Inch Nails (whose first LP Pretty Hate Machine (1989) was a blend of industrial pop but with subsequent releases such as The Downward Spiral (1994) and The Fragile (1999) became much harder and more musically complex) thrust the style to the forefront. Reznor’s protégé, the controversial Marilyn Manson, brought gothic rock into the mainstream with his releases Antichrist Superstar (1996) and Mechanical Animals (1998). Other musical acts that contributed to Rock’s increasingly harder sound included the gore-loving Cannibal Corpse (whose LP’s included Butchered at Birth (1991) and Tomb of the Mutilated (1992) and featured gruesome cover art that was censored by record stores and attracted the ire of Christian groups) and Pantera
(who moved from the arena rock-hair metal sound of the eighties into all out heavy metal with 1992’s *Vulgar Display of Power* and 1996’s *The Great Southern Trendkill*). While an extensive discussion of music video is outside the scope of this dissertation, the stylistics of music video certainly changed commensurate with the transformations in modern rock. Reznor’s performances in particular were notable with more aggressive rhythms, dystopian lyrics with harsh distorted vocals and harder, driving melodies than some of their contemporaries such as Nirvana. After *Pretty Hate Machine* gained wide commercial acclaim, Nine Inch Nails’ sophomore effort *The Downward Spiral* featured their most infamous single, “Closer” (1994). The video for “Closer” was controversial for its dark and disturbing imagery.

![Figure 4.1 Stills from the video for Nine Inch Nails' single "Closer". The video was directed by Mark Romanek.](image1)

![Figure 4.2 A shot of Pavi Largo from *Repo! The Genetic Opera*. Note the similarities to the still from the "Closer" video in Figure 4.24.](image2)
Figure 4.1 on the previous page shows two stills from the music video for “Closer” showing amongst other things, a pig’s head spinning on a mechanical device. It should be noted that the face of Trent Reznor is attached to the skull much in the same way that Pavi Largo’s was in Repo! as shown in Figure 4.2. Again, while this intertextuality may not be intentional, it demonstrates the stylistic influences between videos of this type of music and the neomodification musicals. Thus, the nineties yielded a fertile ground of material from which the neo-modification musical would be influenced.

There are several factors that I argue contributed to this new wave in the corporeal modification musical, not the least of which are the frustrations of post-September 11th audiences which yielded a new monstrous “other” and transitions being effected in other genres, notably the horror film (especially significant considering that Repo! was produced by the same team that brought the torture hit Saw (2004) to the screen). As stated, both films use violence against their victims, often during the act of a musical number, to make a carnivalized statement rooted in more insidious anxieties than the predecessors discussed in Chapter Four. In this manner, these films can be compared to the “torture porn” cycle in the horror film through a similar structure of violence. As Jason Middleton states, “…[these films] construct scenes of torture as elaborate set pieces, or ‘numbers’, intended to serve as focal points for the viewer’s visual pleasure…” (2). The setup for these scenes is usually long and arduous and the treatment inflicted upon victims ranges from standard horror fare like gradual disembowelment and slow removal of appendages to more creative sadism including nude freezing, forced self-surgery and scalping. An important point when considering both the torture cycle as well as the modification musical is brought up by Middleton,

The [torture] cycle’s popularity and visibility peaked…in 2005…aligning with the period of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the broader campaign Bush termed
the “war on terror”. During a time in which initially widespread support for the president’s policies...gave way to deep national divisions and conflicts over the idea of “preemptive” or “just” war...and the American use of torture, films such as Hostel presented a nightmarish vision of fears and anxieties rooted in realworld politics. (2)

While this subgenre of the horror film gained notoriety and had many passionate critics, the initial entries such as Saw, Hostel, and the 2006 Alexandre Aja ultra-gory remake of Wes Craven’s 1977 film The Hills Have Eyes saw much commercial success. As audiences were forced to come to grips with torture, not as an archaic device exercised by villainous Nazis, but as a reality entering the lexicon of American politics, the torture cycle in horror cinema cemented, and alongside it, the corporeal-musical reappeared in a new form. When coupled with statements against the hegemonic power structure, these musicals enter into a postmodern carnivalesque that shows little sign of decline and makes a powerful statement2.
Tim Burton’s *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007) is certainly the film with the longest history in the entire corporeal-modification cycle in terms of various iterations in print, in song, on stage and on screen. Burton, who has made a name for himself with an oeuvre that is macabre and twisted yet often blackly comedic, had been considering the possibility of a new film version since he saw the original performance twelve times in London’s West End when it premiered in 1980. The history of the story began with the character of Sweeney Todd who appeared in a penny dreadful (a pulpy British serial magazine that could be considered the precursor to the modern comic book) from 1846-1847 called *The String of Pearls* which was published by the renowned Edward Lloyd. Todd was the series’ antagonist as a vengeful barber who used his chair as a means to dispense of his clientele into the basement below (it was only if they hadn’t been killed by the fall did he slit their throats) after which
they’d be baked into the pies of his associate, Mrs. Lovett. An excerpt below is representative:

Sweeney Todd walked into the back parlour and closed the door. There was a strange sound suddenly compounded of a rushing noise and then a heavy blow, immediately after which Sweeney Todd emerged from his parlour, and, folding his arms, he looked upon the vacant chair where his customer had been seated, but the customer was gone, leaving not the slightest trace of his presence behind except his hat, and that Sweeney Todd immediately seized and thrust into a cupboard that was at one corner of the shop. (“The String of Pearls: The Original Penny Dreadful”)

While the story, which has become a staple of Victorian gothic fable, had fascinated audiences for generations, it was first made into a sound film in 1936 directed by George King and starring Tod Slaughter in the title role. There were two silent cinema versions of the story in 1926 and 1928. In 1973, Christopher Bond wrote a straight dramatic adaptation for the stage, on which Sondheim based his stage musical. While the story points most obviously to the motif of revenge, as I will argue shortly, the film works from several vantage points as an example of a carnivalesque text and stands as the corporeal-modification musical to gain the widest audience acceptance and critical acclaim.

Burton’s film starts as embittered barber Benjamin Barker, now rechristened as Sweeney Todd (Johnny Depp), is returning to London (“No Place Like London…”) from banishment on a bogus charge by the corrupt Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman). He arrives and meets Mrs. Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter), the owner of a failing pie shop (“The Worst Pies in London”), who informs him that his beloved wife, Lucy (Laura Michelle Kelly), was raped by Turpin and ingested poison (never actually mentioning that she expired as a result) and that Turpin raised the couple’s young daughter, Johanna (Jayne Wisener), as his ward (“Poor Thing”). Todd reclaims his old straight razors from Lovett (“My Friends”), who had always harbored romantic feelings for him, and promises vengeance upon Turpin.

We then meet a teenaged Johanna who sings from her window (“Green Finch and Linnet
Bird”) and catches the attention of Anthony (Jamie Campbell Bower), a sailor who assisted Todd with his return to London. Anthony learns her name from a beggar woman (“Alms! Alms!”) who reappears throughout the film, but his affections for Johanna are noted by Turpin who first invites him into his home but then threatens him and has his henchman, Beadle Bamford (Timothy Spall), beat him and toss him out (“Johanna”).

Later, in the presence of several townspeople, including Bamford, Todd publicly challenges (“Pirelli’s Miracle Elixer”) and humiliates a local Italian barber named Pirelli (Sacha Baron Cohen) in a shaving competition afterwards announcing the opening of his new shop (“The Contest”). As Todd awaits a visit from Bamford (“Wait”), Pirelli comes to see him with his young associate Toby (Ed Sanders). It is revealed that Pirelli is actually Barker’s former assistant and through this recognition intends to blackmail him. Todd responds by beating him and slitting his throat while Lovett hires Toby as local help in the pie shop.

Subsequently, Turpin visits Todd’s shop, having been told of his skill by Bamford (“Ladies In Their Sensitivities”) and wanting to look tidy in the hopes of proposing to Johanna (“Pretty Women”). Before Todd has a chance to exact his revenge, however, Anthony enters the shop, and the Judge storms off. Furious at the loss of his one chance to avenge his wife, Todd swears to kill everyone in London whom he encounters (specifically, his ruling-class clientele) until he destroys the Judge (“Epiphany”). Once Lovett presents Todd with the quandary of disposing of Pirelli’s body, they both decide to take advantage of the excess “meat” and cook Todd’s victims into pies (“A Little Priest”). Meanwhile, an indignant Turpin places Johanna into an insane asylum while Todd commences with the slaughter of his customers and Anthony searches for her (“Johanna” reprise). As business at the pie shop flourishes (“God, That’s Good!”), Lovett becomes bolder in expressing her feelings for Todd and sings of her longing to
move to the shore (“By The Sea”). Anthony learns of Johanna’s whereabouts and under Todd’s directive, enters the institution under false pretenses and rescues her.

As Toby confesses to Lovett his suspicions of Todd’s nature and pledges his devotion to Lovett (“Not While I’m Around”), Bamford enters the shop to investigate the stench produced by Lovett’s ovens and is killed by Todd. Toby, who while snacking on one of Lovett’s pies discovers (to his horror) a toe, witnesses Bamford’s lifeless body fall into the basement where he has been locked and hides in the sewers, out of sight from Todd and Lovett who have come to “find” him. Subsequently, Anthony arrives at Todd’s shop with Johanna and, upon not finding Todd present, he runs off to find a coach for their impending elopement while Johanna hides in a trunk. When Todd returns to his shop, he finds the beggar woman from earlier in the film and slits her throat, but not before she can utter “Don’t I know you, Mister?” Turpin enters and after Todd dupes him into thinking Johanna will return to him, offers him a shave (“Pretty Women” Reprise) and in the bloodiest scene in the film, repeatedly stabs his razor into Turpin’s throat. Upon hearing a scream from Lovett (as Turpin wasn’t dead when dumped into the basement and grabbed at her coat), Todd enters and notices the beggar woman’s corpse realizing that it was his presumed-dead wife Lucy that had been alive all along and now lays lifeless at his hands. Now aware that Lovett knew of Lucy’s existence, Todd feigns his forgiveness of her but then tosses her into the ovens where she burns to death. As Todd holds his late wife’s body, Toby returns and uses Todd’s discarded razor to slit his throat.

It should be evident at this point that Sondheim’s original stage production and Burton’s film by proxy drastically deviate from their lighthearted predecessors. As Charlotte Greenspan quips in her article on death in the Broadway Musical,

Someone once said that there are only two subjects worthy for a drama: love and
The Broadway musical celebrated love from its earliest days. Death, as part of the narrative or even as the central subject, arrived decades later to produce, by the end of the twentieth century, musicals showing a darker but also a richer and more sophisticated view of life. (159)

The deaths that occur in the story are bloody and violent, representing the darkest sides of the human condition and the various emotional responses that love and revenge can drive characters, and audiences, to. The use of cannibalism takes the phrase “eat the rich” to new levels and places the audience at a unique intersection on how to interpret the film’s antihero, especially in a period that is driven by rampant graft and greed amongst the wealthiest in American society and politics.

The discourses that are at work in *Sweeney Todd* are multivalent, and while the film initially seems to be a morality tale on the perils of vengeance, much of the subtextual commentary shares a common trait with *Little Shop of Horrors* in its discussion of the working poor and the upper class that exploits them. The majority of Todd’s victims are all members of the aristocracy, with Turpin and Bamford being the most egregiously venal - at one point, Turpin sentences a young boy to hang and then later asks Bamford “Was he guilty?” Bamford replies wryly “Well, if he didn’t do it, he’s surely done something to warrant a hanging.” Within the temporal context of the film’s release, I also argue that audience interpretations could compare Turpin’s actions and resultant offhand dialogue with Bamford with George W. Bush’s 2003 offhand attack of Iraq without full knowledge of the presence of an impending threat. While some of the most salient examples of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque occur in the musical numbers, Burton employs a wide variety of cinematic techniques that establish the film as corporeal modification text. As I’ve already made clear in earlier chapters, the modification of the body that I am arguing that is notable in these films occurs not just to the literal human body, but also to the body as a representative of the culture at large. I’ve alluded to this in part already.
as Todd’s summary execution of those in the upper class can certainly reveal a desire to slash the throat of the ruling class that mandates a specific hegemony. However, this modification also occurs in a manner similar to the techniques that De Palma used in *Phantom of the Paradise.* Thus, while there are Londoners getting their throats slit and washed down with a pint of ale at a frantic pace in this film, the modification is also generic, such that while audiences have come to expect certain tropes in the classic musical, the film fractures these through its use of cinematography, editing and mise-en-scene.

From a technical perspective, *Todd* bears the strong authorial mark of its director with a low-key mise-en-scène and set dressing and costuming (especially of Todd and Lovett) that strongly draws upon a neo-gothic interpretation of Victorian fashion and décor. There is, of course, a clear dichotomy between Todd and Lovett’s stark cadaverous pallor that sets them apart from the rest of the characters they encounter. Burton had specifically been aiming for this look based on early sketches that he had made of how he thought the lead characters should appear in the film and how Todd and Lovett work together to, using Burton’s own words, “have that quality of a weird couple.”

In his classic text *Ecrits,* Lacan elaborates on his re-interpretations of Freud with one being the idea of “the mirror stage” that he had first introduced in a paper in 1936 at the conference of the International Psychoanalytical Association. Lacanian psychoanalysis has had important ramifications for film theory and the mirror stage refers to that period in infancy when an infant sees itself in a mirror that creates a response in the child that helps in the formation of the ego. Upon seeing itself in the mirror, the infant is observing a stable autonomous self that does not correspond with its current perception of reality. Burton uses the device of the reflected image as a visual leitmotif especially during periods of intense psychosis for Todd. Barker has
returned to London spurned and distraught, but throughout the film, he is essentially undergoing a transformation as he is rebirthed as Todd, and this is first observed when he reclaims his razors, or as he calls them his “friends.” Burton continues to use this mirror device whenever Todd is experiencing a moment of vengeful jouissance⁶.

![Figure 4.4 Todd's reflection in his razors as he relishes his desire for blood.](image)

As an important connection to Todd’s state of mind with the use of the mirror, it should be noted that in his lecture “Encore,” Lacan comments that jouissance, which as an idea cannot be severed from its sexual overtones, is phallic in nature, and Todd proclaims victoriously upon holding his distended razor, “my arm is complete again!” As Lacan states, “phallic jouissance is the obstacle owing to which man does not come…to enjoy woman’s body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ…Jouissance, qua sexual, is phallic – in other words, it is not related to the Other as such” (7-8). Thus, Todd is using the razor as the organ, not to enjoy the woman’s body, but to claim vengeance on a judge (and a society) that has improperly used his wife and daughter, however with rather unexpected results (at least for Todd).
Thus the use of the mirror and reflected image acts as a device that not only displays Todd’s fractured and fragmented identity but also his quest to achieve that perfection that is unattainable. While he does indeed get revenge on Turpin through his murder, it is a Pyrrhic victory, for due to his mutation into a maniacal serial killer, he thoughtlessly dispatches his wife (unbeknownst to him) with his razor (his phallus) when he hears the Judge approaching his shop thus giving him one final opportunity to exact revenge. It is only moments later when he realizes what he has done that he gains cognizance of his own depravity and despair and allows his own throat to be slit at the hands of Toby.

Burton’s surreal editing and cinematography also contribute to the film’s fragmentation and position as a carnivalesque text. As Todd first enters London, he reprises “There’s a hole in
the world/ like a great black pit/ and it’s filled with people who are filled with shit/ and the vermin of the world inhabit it” (Sondheim) as a sweeping and fast-motion formalist sequence shows the slums of London’s East End and working poor who dwell there.

During the “Epiphany” number when Turpin has first escaped Todd’s blade and Todd has vowed revenge on everyone, he stalks the streets where he sings to the members of the aristocracy (who are oblivious to his presence) and invites them to stop in at his shop.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 4.7** In the surreal number "Epiphany", Todd sings to the oblivious aristocracy inviting them in for "a shave".

While this number obviously displays Todd’s quickly lessening grip on his sanity, it’s also one of the many elements in the film that uses both violence and satirical dark comedy to make a political statement regarding the class warfare of the text. As stated previously, the use of the comic element is very important for a carnivalesque text and its use in *Sweeney Todd* is abundant. The number “A Little Priest” is a glowing example of the use of gleeful tongue-in-cheek humor that reinforces the absurdly macabre plans of Todd and Lovett and, I argue, places the pair at an anti-hero status with the audience, especially with the succinct line, “that those above should serve those down below”. During the number, Todd and Lovett muse on different
occupations that are ripe for consumption singing about the nature and palatability of those various professionals. A sample of the lyrics helps clarify:

**Lovett:** It’s priest. Have a little priest
**Todd:** Is it really good?
**Lovett:** Sir it’s too good, at least!/ Then again, they don’t commit sins of the flesh/ So it’s pretty fresh
**Todd:** Awful lot of fat.
**Lovett:** Only where it sat…
**Todd:** Anything that’s lean
**Lovett:** Well, then if you’re British and loyal/ You might enjoy Royal Marine!/ Anyway, it’s clean/ Though of course, it tastes of where it’s been! (Sondheim)

The use of humor in a musical number with such sinister suggestions certainly clashes with the traditional aims of the musical. The use of the music for the corporeal modification musical is also significant. If we were to step away for a moment and just play *Sweeney Todd* through as a straight non-musical text, it would likely be classified as a (historical) horror film, bearing more similarity to Burton’s earlier film, *Sleepy Hollow*.

When you add the music it intensifies the moment for the audience. Burton himself discusses the connections between the horror film and the musical when making his movie in the documentary, *Burton + Depp + Carter = Todd*. 

Figure 4.8 Todd and Lovett sing the number "A Little Priest" contemplating which types of people would taste the best.
It felt like we were making kind of an old fashioned horror silent movie with music and, uh, kind of going back to the kind of performers like Boris Karloff or Peter Laurie or Lon Chaney...People that were very expressive in those old horror movies then just set to music...[Sweeney Todd] mixes horror movie and musical...humor, emotion, light dark, puts them all in there (Burton, Burton + Depp + Carter = Todd).

While the film doesn’t have the “break into song” moments like a traditional musical (Burton wanted to avoid that trope which is one of the reasons he omitted the chorus and “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” that played a large role in the stage version) and the numbers flow more naturally from rhythmic speech into song, they nevertheless add a deeper dimension to the mise-en-scene. As Raymond Knapp comments in his analysis of musical numbers in the Broadway musical with “the effect of adding music to a dramatic scene that might otherwise play naturalistically serves to exaggerate its content, adding a dimension of artificality at the same time that it often also strives to tap into a deeper kind of reality, one accessible only through music” (qtd. in Taylor, 78). Millie Taylor goes on explicate:

[Knapp] suggests that music pulls in two opposing directions so the audience simultaneously pays attention to the emotional realities of the music and the performance of that music...He argues that the effect of this dual attention of the audience to both the acted character and the musical emotion...is that the musical theatre song ‘imposes a kind of suspended animation so as to intensify selected emotional moments and through this dramatic hiatus directs us all the more urgently to see behind the mask...of the performer...’ (Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment 5).

For the audience of a musical, thus, the connection between the number’s content and character and the meanings behind what is sung are all intertwined. In “A Little Priest”, the spectator’s experience of humor in spite of the impending cannibalism, especially in a genre that normally eschews such matters is a moment of freedom wherein the audience can anticipate (and even
relate to the desires surrounding) the destruction of those who control the hegemonic power structure and safely project their feelings upon Todd and Lovett.

Perhaps one of the many possible reasons for the success of Burton’s film has been the specific use of the music and the fact that Sondheim was used as a consultant on the film. One of the striking elements about Todd (and Repo! as we’ll see shortly) is that there is actually relatively little dialogue as far as a musical film is concerned and the majority of the material is sung bearing far greater resemblance to an opera. As Burton discusses in an interview:

We didn’t want it to be what I’d say was a traditional musical, with a lot of dialogue and then singing. It felt like a silent movie with singing. That’s why we cut out a lot of choruses and things, and extras singing and dancing down the street. Each of the characters, because a lot of them are repressed and have their emotions inside, the music was a way to let them express their feelings. That was the structure we used for it. When I first saw the show the imagery, which is quite dark and harsh, set with the music, which is quite lush and beautiful, was something I’d never seen before and was the reason I wanted to do it (“Interview with Tim Burton”).

Often considered one of the most difficult musical texts period, let alone in Sondheim’s body of work, the numbers do not function as standalone hits (such as “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” from Lloyd Webber’s Jesus Christ Superstar which spent time on Billboard magazine’s Top 40 list) inasmuch as they serve as moments for the characters to ruminate on their situations and thoughts throughout the text. The music in Sweeney Todd also bears the intertextuality of Sondheim’s composition as he draws heavily on the “Dies Irae” requiem mass. While this is most evident in “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” that was cut from the film, it’s also seen during the “Epiphany” number. The Dies Irae (literally “Day of Wraith”) was an appropriate inspiration for Sondheim with its overtones of ecclesiastical judgment:

"What horror must invade the mind/ when the approaching Judge shall find/ and sift the deeds of all mankind/ The mighty trumpet’s wondrous tone/ shall rend
each tombs sepulchral stone/ and summon all before the Throne (Thomas of Celano).

Todd seems to be echoing not just the music but the spirit of the classic Latin hymn in “Epiphany” when he sings, “I will have vengeance, I will have my salvation!...Not one man, no, nor ten men, Nor a hundred can assuage me…And my Lucy lies in ashes, And I’ll never see my girl again, But the work waits, I’m alive at last…” (Sondheim). While the music in Sweeney Todd is presented in an operatic format, it draws heavily upon classical Romantic, especially Wagnerian, music in its constant pervasive use of the leitmotif. As Raymond Knapp points out,

Much of the leitmotivic work in Sweeney Todd is contained within the orchestra and so tends to operate, as it does in Wagner and in classic film scores, on less than a fully conscious level, intimately binding one scene to a related a scene without the audience’s really knowing how…Sondheim also incorporates his leitmotivs into his vocal lines (much more so than Wagner), which adds another dimension to the dramatic action (The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity 334).

This use of the leitmotif allows the audience to gain information about characters and themes even before a number begins.

Of course, one cannot discuss Sweeney Todd as a corporeal modification text without referring to the ample bloodletting that takes place in the film. The use of the violence works several ways. Of course, the slitting of the throat is Todd’s modus operandi but the excess of the violence and the style in which it is displayed bears a strong resemblance to the Grand Guignol that has been referenced throughout this dissertation. The stills on the following page are depictions of some of Todd’s more gruesome kills.
While the theatrical presentation has obvious limitations as to how Todd’s murders can be committed thusly relying more on implications (which in and of itself can be more terrifying), Burton takes full advantage of the cinematic medium staging death in sanguine opulence. Todd’s fiercest kills are reserved for those who have betrayed him the most severely, namely Turpin and Lovett, but as already discussed, his blade happily slashes many an aristocrat’s throat, after which they are dumped into the basement.

Another element surrounding the carnivalesque in this corporeal modification musical is the use of cannibalism.
Figure 4.11 Denizens of Londoners eagerly slurp up Lovett's protein-enriched meat pies.

Figure 4.12 At left, Toby discovers a toe in the meat pie he's been eating; at right, a mound of body parts ready to be ground up into pie filling causes Toby to suspect the worst.

As previously discussed, the consumption works both as a metaphorical device and a literal means of support for Lovett and Todd’s enterprises. While sardonically humorous, the explicit scenes invite the audience to share in a moment that is far-removed from the traditional norms of the genre. During the scene in which Toby eats a pie in the basement and discovers a toe, the setting is more reminiscent of a scene from *Hostel* than a musical as the still on the following page suggests.
While the intertextuality displayed between the films shown in Figures 4.12 and 4.13 was probably unintentional (perhaps if the thug could sing…), it goes to reinforce the cross-hybridity that exists in the corporeal modification musical and the modern horror film.

Despite its frequent violence and atypical musical numbers, *Sweeney Todd* became a critical and commercial success. As a carnivalesque construct, Burton’s film not only shares the same traits as the other films in this trend, its use of violence, music and postmodern interpretations of Sondheim’s material make it one of the most elegant and hypnotic of all of the corporeal modification texts.
“It’s not every day you get to disembowel somebody and sing about it,” quipped Anthony Stuart Head when speaking about his role in Darren Lynn Bousman’s film adaptation of Darren Smith and Terrance Zdunich’s stage musical, Repo! The Genetic Opera. As yet another neo-modification musical and like Burton’s film the year before, Repo! The Genetic Opera blends the old with the new; classical operatic structure that is nearly completely sung, fantastically staged numbers rife with blood and gore, strong sociopolitical themes, dissonant, anti-toe-tapping music numbers and a wickedly dark sense of humor. As Mr. Head continued, “Yes, it’s violent, but it’s violent in a mischievous, comic sense, not in a gore-out violent sense”.

Smith and Zdunich had long been collaborating on the pairing of rock to the musical as they played the Los Angeles club circuit in the nineties. They created small ten minute mini-musicals that told macabre stories, with their most popular being a piece called The
Necromerchant’s Debt which played with the idea of buying organs on credit and then having them repossessed like cars if the buyers fell behind on their payments. The pair decided to expand the segment into a longer production and young director Darren Lynn Bousman was all too eager to direct. As Smith says in the documentary Repo! The Genetic Opera: From Stage to Screen, "What we wanted to do was do this as an opera...not your parents opera but look at it as a twenty first century Wagnerian opera. We wanted to mix Blade Runner with The Rocky Horror Picture Show.” When the four-day stage run turned into four weeks, and after the success of Bousman’s Saw III (2006), he reapproached Smith and Zdunich about the possibility of turning the show into a film. As producers continually balked at the idea, Bousman created a ten-minute primer for the film that he eventually sold to the creative team that developed the original Saw.

Despite a fairly star-heavy (and eclectic) cast that includes Paul Sorvino, Anthony Stuart Head (from Joss Whedon’s Buffy the Vampire Slayer television series), classical-crossover singer Sara Brightman and Paris Hilton, Repo! maintained its grassroots roadshow aesthetic as it traveled to horror and fantasy conventions around the country building up interest through word-of-mouth via its horror, gothic and comic book fan base. Repo! is not a film for a mainstream audience but this smaller-scale level of interest was perfectly acceptable to the film’s production team and as Zdunich himself commented regarding the film, “I think it’s going to be the black nail-polish crowd that’s going to really eat us up in the long run.” The film did accumulate a strong cult following as it sold out at festivals and conventions throughout the country and in some international venues. Zdunich was probably more correct than he expected as many of the mainstream press reviews from outlets such as the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times lambasted the film with the latter calling it “just plain awful and nearly unwatchable” (Olsen), whereas many of the horror-affiliated organizations such as Bloodydisgusting.com praised the
film for its innovative uniqueness. As stated previously, rock music in musicals is nothing new, but the influence of industrial and gothic metal through the rise of artists like Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson is clearly the backbone of Repo’s musicality. The specific target audience is another aspect of commonality that the film has with Rocky Horror and Phantom of the Paradise insofar as its popularity was driven by those on the fringes of culture, rather than the mass consumer. While this does not hold true of all corporeal modification musicals, it is a detail worth mentioning.

As Repo! is an opera, it is sung throughout; however the synopsis will include significant musical numbers or arias. The film begins as a series of comic book panels explains that an epidemic of organ failures in the future has led to massive death. The corporation GeneCo – led by Rotti Largo (Paul Sorvino) and his children, Pavi (Nivek Ogre), Amber (Paris Hilton) and Luigi (Bill Moseley) - is created to offer “organ financing” to enable more people to afford lifesaving surgeries. This leads to massive interest in surgeries as a fashion statement and GeneCo’s development of a drug called “Zydrate,” which is an expensive and addictive painkiller. When GeneCo customers fall behind on their organ payments, Largo sends in repo men to repossess the organs while the victims are still conscious, leaving them for dead.

The comic book panel technique is used several times during the film to tell how the lives of Rotti, his chief repo man Nathan Wallace (Anthony Stewart Head), Nathan’s late wife Marni (Sarah Power) and Marni’s former friend and GeneCo’s resident opera singer Blind Mag (Sarah Brightman) are all intertwined. As the film shifts to live action, a narrator of sorts named GraveRobber (Terrance Zdunich) discusses the acts of the repo men (“Genetic Repo Man”). The scene then shifts to GeneCo headquarters where Rotti Largo receives information that he is dying, with only a short time left to live (“Things You See in A Graveyard Part 1”). We then
meet Shilo Wallace (Alexa Vega) who, while visiting her mother’s tomb, encounters GraveRobber stealing Zydrate from cadavers, which is then sold on the black market (“21st Century Cure”). The pair is pursued by law enforcement until Shilo passes out. She awakens in bed (“Shilo Wakes”) and we learn that she apparently has inherited a rare blood disorder from her mother and is nursed by her caring albeit overprotective father, Nathan (“Infected”).

Nathan is anguished over the loss of his beloved wife and struggles with the fact that his daughter knows not of his profession (“Legal Assassin”). Meanwhile, while cataloguing organs at the GeneCo storeroom (in a very unsanitary matter nonetheless), Rotti’s children argue over who should succeed their father as the leader of GeneCo (“Mark It Up”). Irritated at his children’s boorish behavior, Rotti then sets up a meeting with Shilo (“Limo Ride”), where he reveals that he could not only cure her blood disorder but that he wants her to run GeneCo upon his passing. He invites her to a benefit that evening where Blind Mag, also indebted to the company for her eyes, will be performing at the self-reflexive “genetic opera.” Upon revisiting Nathan at work and in a number similar to Sweeney Todd, his personality takes on an Edward Hyde quality as he gleefully sings about the trials and travails of organ repossession (“Thankless Job”) while slowly excising the intestines and heart from a doomed debtor.

The next scene, a very important one within the context of this dissertation, shifts to Mag’s post-performance festivities in the form of a literal carnival that features corporeal modification for those in attendance (“No Organs? No Problemo!”/ “Luigi, Pavi, Amber Harass Mag”). As Largo’s children cause general havoc and embarrassment, Largo introduces Shilo to Mag (“Seeing You Stirs Memories Part 1”) after which Mag cuts the ribbon at the opening of the new opera house. Stranded at the festivities, Shilo receives a call from her father as he repossesses a spinal cord, both unaware of the others’ activities (“Inopportune Telephone Call”).
GraveRobber appears and assists Shilo in her escape but not before exposing her to the community of Zydrate and surgery addicts, which includes Largo’s daughter Amber (“Zydrate Anatomy”).

Rotti then summons Nathan to his office (“Who Ordered Pizza?”) whereupon he orders the repossession of Mag’s eyes, a job that Nathan refuses. This prompts Rotti and his children to remind Nathan of his vocation (“Night Surgeon”) in a number which takes place in a large chamber that looks ripped straight out of a scene from Saw. Nathan still balks, however, prompting a furious Rotti to order his execution. Blind Mag then pays a visit to Shilo, revealing that she is the teen’s godmother (“Chase the Morning”). Rotti then summons Shilo to the opera for Mag’s last performance, but when Nathan learns of Rotti’s plan to leave GeneCo to her, he rushes there as well determined not to let Rotti claim his daughter (“At the Opera Tonight”). With the opera (which resembles a bizarre carnivalesque orgy) in full swing (“We Started this Opera Shit”/ “Blame Not My Cheeks”), Mag finally takes the stage to perform (“Chromaggia”) at the end of which she gouges out her GeneCo-owned eyes. An irritated Rotti cuts the cord suspending her in mid-air (a reference to Brightman’s real-life performances) dropping her on a fence and impaling her. Shilo then encounters her father in his GeneCo uniform, realizing his occupation and then bitterly denouncing him (“Let The Monster Rise”).

In the final climactic scene, all parties gather on the stage of the opera to confront each other. Rotti informs Shilo that her father was the one who poisoned her (“The Man Who Made You Sick”/ “Cut the Ties”), shoots Nathan, and then promptly dies. Shilo forgives her father who, before expiring in her arms, tells her that he only kept her dependent as he couldn’t bear the loss of her (“I Didn’t Know I’d Love You So Much”). Shilo then flees the opera. In the epilogue, GraveRobber muses on the previous night’s events then goes on with his normal duties as the
film closes (“Epitaph”).

Repo! seems to epitomize the definition of a carnivalesque text with its wry humor, scantily clad extras and extravagant gore. While the content is obviously the clearest reason for its inclusion within the corporeal modification paradigm, like the other films, there are several elements in which the modification is to the culture at large and the genre itself. One of the most noticeable of these is the trifecta of cinematography, costuming and art direction.

Figure 4.15 In a rapid flyover shot, we are introduced to the dystopian world of Repo, ruled by GeneCo, whose massive headquarters is at the top center of the frame and dominates the landscape.

Shot in a desaturated neo-noir style that is reminiscent of thrillers like Dark City (1998) and The Crow (1994), the heavy chiaroscuro lighting helps give the landscape the stark dystopian future in which the story takes place. The use of neutral greys and blacks throughout the set and wardrobe helped to achieve this washed-out effect that is used more commonly in horror and science fiction than in a musical. By positioning the camera and lighting apparatuses in a manner that only illuminates portions of characters and their surroundings, the film places you into a world where there is little hope or redemption; one completely overrun by corruption, vanity and filth. As many of the shots include high contrast lighting, there is a fragmented sensation that Bousman brings to the table for the audience, that is not unlike many of the set pieces in his Saw films. While it was Berkeley that introduced the moving camera to the musical, moving away
from the more theatrically-influenced dead-on full shot, such severe camera angles are not common in musicals.

![Image](image1.png)

Figure 4.16 Nathan Wallace (Anthony Stuart Head) in his repo garb stares down at Shilo in one of the more menacing low angle shots in the film.

Adding to the futuristic look of the film are various additional techniques that contribute to the element of the fantastic. The three-dimensional paintings of Marni that hang in Nathan’s home are good example of this. Especially during the “Legal Assassin” number where Nathan prowls about the mise-en-scene in anguish over the loss of his spouse and his double life, the paintings almost offer a response from the dead Marni due to their creepy realism.

![Image](image2.png)

Figure 4.17 Creepy ghost-like three dimensional paintings of Marni line the halls of Nathan's home and seem to torment him during the "Legal Assassin" number.
These bizarre paintings, which more resemble ghostly holograms of Nathan’s late wife, seem to interact with him and add to his torment during the number like a scene out of a twisted musical 

Harry Potter film.

Another interesting element to the film’s overall look is the use of comic book panels to tell different aspects of the story, specifically of how the main characters are intertwined. We learn through these panels that Nathan’s pregnant wife Marni fell severely ill and the antidote that Nathan attempted to use to save her forced her into labor and eventual death. Nathan spent the next seventeen years in anguished guilt over her death growing ever more dependent on his daughter as a replacement. We also learn that it was Rotti that caused the death of Marni, as she chose Nathan over him and his ego couldn’t stand the rejection. These comic panels add a post-modern touch to the opera, not only fracturing the film from other musicals but also clearly indicating knowledge of the film’s target audience. While the panels can be jarring and are even accompanied by a drastic change in musical style away from the industrial sound to a “silent film” amalgam of piano and chamber strings (that is strongly redolent of the intercut scenes in Phantom of the Paradise), their presentation is consistent with the use of the GraveRobber as a supplemental narrator and they assist in weaving together a very complex storyline. Additionally, their look is as grisly as the rest of Bousman’s mise-en-scène.
Like *Sweeney Todd*, *Repo!* has strong socio-political implications, and while the attacks in the former are aimed at the aristocracy, in the latter, it’s the GeneCo officials, who the film presents as the most powerful family in the world, that are rife with corruption and graft. In addition, the film comments on the obsession with bodily perfection through modification and plastic surgery that has become so en vogue in contemporary society. Yet, to echo the quote from Head that begins this section (“It’s not every day you get to disembowel somebody and sing about it”), the commentary is intended be wryly comedic and the film uses the carnival to turn the idea of carnival on its head. Instead of being freed from our frustrations and the dominating hegemony, the film suggests that we have become enslaved to our own vanity via sexuality, greed and addiction. For the audience, this works as a cautionary tale against such societal narcissism that
leaves us so blind to the power that we are handing over to the corrupt and amoral. So, while I argue that we can read Repo! through the work of Bakhtin, it must be emphasized that is at once an anti-Bakhtinian Bakhtinian text.

Another important element to note within Repo! is its strong self-reflexivity. Throughout the film, billboards and the narrative directly discuss the “genetic opera” (Blind Mag’s performances) that is happening within the genetic opera (the film itself). This idea is not at all uncommon. There are several operatic performances that occur in Lloyd-Webber’s The Phantom of the Opera, the character of La Musica expresses moments of self-reflexivity at the opening of Claudio Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo (1607), and Richard Strauss’ Ariadne auf Naxos (1912, 1916) is an opera about the composition of an opera! The use of this technique in opera and musicals has important implications, however, for the text and how it is to received. As Mauro Calcagno writes in his study on Monteverdi’s operas, the use of the “I”, (either literally or in the case of Repo!, the opera within the film is the figurative “I”), “represents an act of enunciation that blurs distinctions between the text and the performance” (52). As I’ve stated in earlier chapters, the musical by its very nature has long exploited reflexivity and its knowledge of the audience. As Robert Stam writes:

Since two of the constitutive elements of the musical – music and dance – share a relatively minor interest in conventional mimesis, it might be argued that the musical inclines more readily to self-conscious artifice than other genres…By their generic nature, musicals orchestrate everyday life into choreographed fantasy. Humbert Humbert in Lolita defines musicals as ‘an essentially griefproof sphere of existence wherefrom death and truth were banned.’ No audience literally believes that New York gangs actually pirouette down slum streets…The impossibly grandiose production numbers of a Busby Berkeley…owe scant allegiance to verisimilitude. (Reflexivity in Film and Literature 90)

As has been argued in this dissertation, obviously Mr. Humbert’s quote is quite antediluvian. Nevertheless, the use of self-reflexivity - or, in Brechtian terms, the Verfremdungseffekt, or
distancing effect - is crucial to the goals of the corporeal modification musical from a Bakhtinian stance. Jane Feuer famously coined the term “conservative reflexivity” in the musical to refer to how self-reflexivity in the musical rectifies itself not as a “violation of cinematic grammar as in Godard, [but] becomes merely an homage to the intimacy of live entertainment, a means of packaging third-person ‘history’ as reciprocal ‘discourse’” (91). Unlike the nostalgic use of the device in such films as Singin’ in the Rain or to paint a new media rival in television as in It’s Always Fair Weather, the modification trend uses the device along its more traditional Brechtian roots as an attempt to keep the audience aware of the need to intellectually analyze the arguments that the text is making, to experience the carnivalesque and thus to overturn the dominant ideology.

From a musical perspective, Repo! shares many similarities with Burton’s film. Both directors were not aiming to create the traditional integrated movie musical. As Bousman quipped in the New York Times, “Anything that breaks into song, where they’re talking, talking, talking, and then there’s a big show number…that I can’t handle.” (Itzkoff AR17) The music in Repo! is a fusion of various styles all with an industrial backbone. Both Smith and Bousman shared their vision for the music in the documentary, Repo! From Stage to Screen. Smith specifically references Sara Brightman’s performances in the film, which tap into her roots as a classical crossover artist. Her final performance, “Chromaggia” is highly characteristic of her usual mainstream performances.

**Smith:** It goes through jazz, it goes through classical, especially opera because we really wanted to have the legitimate opera sound with the industrial Nine Inch Nails sound buttied together.

**Bousman:** [The music producers] played our temp tracks to all these bands. The next thing we knew we had people like drummers from Jane’s Addiction, people from Guns N Roses, and producers from Tool and Bauhaus and all of these bands…I did not want this to look ‘Broadway’. If it looked like ‘Rent,’ I had failed. If it looked like ‘Dreamgirls’, I had failed (Repo! From Stage to Screen).
Many of the other numbers in the film such as “Thankless Job”, “At the Opera Tonight” and “Legal Assassin” play out like very typical industrial rock songs. As Bousman emphasizes, the production team wanted to stay away from hummable tunes and aimed for more discordant modern rock, especially during portions of the film where the singing isn’t a number per se but is sung dialogue.

As an example of the music and its influences, Figure 4.20 on the next page shows the opening bars of “Legal Assassin,” with a tempo marking of 150 beats per minute (a common rock tempo) and hard accented eighth notes on electric guitar that create a syncopated jarring rhythm. The effect is further bolstered by the minimalist use of lyrics. As opposed to lyric heavy numbers and ensemble pieces in standard musicals, Smith and Zdunich maintain a musical sparseness that contributes to the fragmented nature of the opera.
Figure 4.20 The opening bars of "Legal Assassin," music and lyrics by Smith and Zdunich
To demonstrate the similarity between "Legal Assassin" and its musical progenitors, I’ve included in Figure 4.21, the opening bars of the electric guitar part from “The Beautiful People,” one of the most well-known hits from the nineties gothic metal band Marilyn Manson. As can be seen in the sheet music excerpt, the opening bars consist of a fast triplet – two eighth note combo, which creates a syncopated style not unlike “Legal Assassin.” The repeated two bars prior to the first verse create a dissonant and frenetic introduction to the first verse. Much of the verses and chorus of “The Beautiful People” is delivered in the same menacing growl that
Nathan Wallace performs in portions of “Legal Assassin” and “Thankless Job.” While the music in Repo! could certainly take up many more pages, the goal of including this representative sample has been to demonstrate the sonic modification away from standard musical fare that Bousman, Smith and Zdunich all desired, a carnivalized pitchpole that had very different aims. The desire to veer away from a typical musical is also obviously present in the film’s content. As the choreographer, Tre Armstrong, stated in the documentary Repo!: From Stage to Screen,

This is not a dance movie. Therefore you can’t just have choreographed dancing. You have stylized movement; it’s choreographed…but little things that add more of a presence on screen, that’s what we’re focusing on (Repo!: From Stage to Screen).

Many of these stylized movements came from the bevy of dancing girls and bondage-attired Largo henchman that populate the film’s mise-en-scene. The playful use of the erotic and the taboo (you certainly wouldn’t see any bondage or sadomasochistic costuming in a musical from the Freed Unit!) also goes to the carnivalesque nature of a film such as this.

Figure 4.22 At left, Amber Sweet (Paris Hilton) enters with her sexualized henchmen; at right, the resident GeneCo dancing girls perform a clothed orgy at the genetic opera.
Figure 4.23 The cemeteries of Repo are large indoor caverns where the dead, too numerous to bury in-ground, are merely stacked into piles.

Figure 4.24 At left, Nathan prepares to become the "repo man"; at right, Nathan repossesses a debtor's intestines.

Figure 4.25 At left, Nathan and his "dummy" sing a grisly duet; at right, Nathan repossesses a spinal cord, note the barcode indicating GeneCo's property.
The stills on the preceding page give an indication as to the goriest element of the text, the use of the body as a disposable tool at the hands of the powerful and corrupt in the future. In Figure 4.21, the proliferation of disease and repossession is so expansive that the dead are simply stacked in indoor cemeteries. While Bousman wanted to give the look of a “gothic New Orleans” with bodies layered upon bodies, the scene is not only similar to that of Mrs. Lovett’s bakehouse in Sweeney Todd, several instances during Bousman’s Saw II-III and, of course, Roth’s Hostel, the image also is a disturbing reminder to scenes from Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993) of dead Holocaust victims piled up outside Auschwitz and Dachau. While this last reference was most likely unintentional, it, along with the commodification and modification of the body (both willing and unwilling) in the subsequent stills, points to the de-humanizing nature of the themes that I’ve already discussed.

With all of its wicked humor, and like the other corporeal modification musicals, Repo! has a serious undercurrent that runs through its blood-soaked mise-en-scene. As the real-life battles in the Middle East turned more and more grisly, and Americans were forced to deal with the loss of human dignity (through such incidents as the Abu Ghraib prisoner scandal and the videotaped beheadings of Nicholas Berg, Paul Johnson and Daniel Pearl) at the hands of both domestic and international parties, the film’s message of vanity and capitalism exploited by those in supreme power calls the audience to exercise actions to prevent the world of Repo! from coming to fruition. As the final film in my extended analysis, Repo!, while cloaked in sex, musical fusion and gallons of entrails, is appropriately the most serious and complex text, and the one that places politics and art in the crosshairs of the musical’s power to persuade, move, and, most importantly, contextualize our volatile times.

The two films discussed in this chapter exhibited a rebirthing of the modification trend
that, considering the evolutionary framework I laid out at the end of Chapter Four, are entering the baroque stage with forms and conventions that have matured beyond the earlier films. Just as Schatz comments that in baroque texts such as *Singin’ in the Rain* where the “‘unspoken’ conventions of the genre – the centrality of the courtship ritual...become narratively foregrounded,” the violence and modification in the two films discussed in this chapter have become focal points of the narrative (Langford, 23). These two films registered the changing times into which the musical was situated, and while there were certainly audiences for other more upbeat texts of the decade like *Hairspray* or *Mamma Mia!,* both *Sweeney Todd* and *Repo!* used the genre to attack the hegemonic status quo in ways unprecedented for the film musical.

Thus, while my formal analysis ends here, the modification musical is only getting warmed up.

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1 I use this term as an identifier only and with some trepidation as it was appropriated by the media to compare the lust of audiences to see gore with the desire for sexual gratification gained from pornography. Horror film scholars have largely seen it as a pejorative term.

2 I make this assertion based on the texts that are in development and slated for impending release as of this writing. This includes film versions of *Spring Awakening* and *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Re-Animator The Musical* on stage, which had long played in Los Angeles, opening at the New York Musical Theatre Festival in summer, 2012. This also includes *Repo!* Director Darren Lynn Bousman’s 2012 experimental horror-musical *The Devil’s Carnival* which reunites much of the cast and production team from *Repo!*

3 Up until this point, the most well known production to audiences had been the original 1979 Broadway version, directed by Hal Prince and starring Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury as Todd and Mrs. Lovett, respectively. A revival of the stage production in 2005 (amongst many others with opera companies, at Lincoln Center, etc.) directed by John Doyle and starring Broadway heavyweights Michael Cerveris and Patti LuPone in the lead roles was well received and likely started to “warm audiences up” for Burton’s iteration.

4 One of the primary differences between Burton’s film and the stage production (and the previous films discussed) is that the former omits the opening number “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” sung by the entire company (the entire story is told in flashback) and which acts as a Prologue to the piece.

5 It should be noted that while some scholars, including Raymond Knapp, claim that Todd kills indiscriminately without attention to his clients class, the opening number to the stage production, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” states in one line “Freely flows the blood of those who moralize” (Sondheim) which directly addresses the people who are the focus of Todd’s ire. While this number was omitted from the film, it was important to make this distinction for the purposes of my discussion.
The term jouissance translates from the French as enjoyment or pleasure but also has strong sexual overtones connecting it to the idea of orgasm.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I wanted to make people happy, if only for an hour
- Busby Berkeley

If Busby Berkeley or Arthur Freed had lived long enough to see any of the films discussed in this dissertation, one might wonder what their reaction would be. I imagine that both visionaries would be delighted. Berkeley might relish the use of sexuality and unique cinematography, and Freed would perhaps applaud the creative freedom given to the directors and the groundbreaking content that is present in the films. The Hollywood musical has certainly ridden the tide of popular culture in its nearly century-long history since the premier of The Jazz Singer. Most audiences of those early classic musicals (both stage and screen) probably never expected any of the films that I have discussed in this dissertation. Yet, nevertheless, these films appeared and while they initially had varying degrees of popularity, they have stood the test of time. But whether the musical is mocking the ruling class, rallying Americans to support the troops or touching the hearts of millions over and over again when the von Trapp family sings “Edelweiss,” it has the power to affect large audiences with musical numbers and stories that endure and help define us as a culture; it is “our” genre. As times changed, these stories no longer needed to exhibit a heterosexual coupling in a bright, cheery town that was awash with singing bluebirds and friendly cowhands.

The corporeal modification musical intentionally worked to subvert the communal and nostalgic utopia that earlier texts had striven for. Bakhtin’s work has allowed me to demonstrate that these films had qualities and characteristics that weren’t present before and unified all of the texts together towards a common goal. As illustrated by the history discussed in Chapter Two, we have a desire to pair our most passionate interests with music in the performative milieu. The
long tenure and lasting influence of the Grand Guignol on the films discussed here - as well as a multitude of horror films – is proof that as long as audiences have an insatiable thirst for blood, sex and a little bit of comedy wrapped up in aural ecstasy, directors will be happy to oblige.

Furthermore, while it might be argued that there are relatively few members in this exclusive club, I have demonstrated that this trend was not simply a one or two film anomaly but a bona fide cycle that not only was repeated, but was also able to be traced in an evolutionary form according to Schatz’s paradigm. This response indicates that the culture and audiences were receptive to this new trend. The economics of predictability states that the studios will tend to make genre films based on past economic successes. While the modification musical didn’t spawn numerous sequels like the Saw films, their continued development indicates interest in using the musical to express transgressive themes and ideas. This is evidenced by some of the current works in production both on the stage and in the cinema.

In 2003, a group of young theatre fans launched Evil Dead: The Musical in Toronto, which was based on the trilogy of low-budget horror films from Sam Raimi. The show quickly became a cult hit (like the series it was based on) and it moved to Montreal in 2004, followed by New York’s Off Broadway in 2006. Evil Dead was the first such work to employ a “splatter zone” in the first three rows in which audience members were sprayed by the blood and guts flying from the stage. The production garnered positive reviews from The New York Times and continues to play around the world to this day. During the summer of 2012, the Los Angeles production of Re-Animator The Musical moved to the New York Musical Theatre Festival for a limited engagement. The musical, which is based on Stuart Gordon’s 1985 horror film of the same name, won numerous LA Weekly Theatre Awards and also featured a splatter zone, albeit this time outfitting theatregoers with plastic ponchos.
Veteran television and film actor Vincent D’Onofrio made his directorial debut in 2010 with a little-known musical-slasher film called *Don’t Go Into the Woods*. In what can best be described as a musical version of *The Blair Witch Project*, the film used mainly unknown actors and was released initially on Video-On-Demand and subsequently in a few cities in early 2012. While the film garnered mainly negative reviews from critics due to its persistent use of clichés, the soundtrack was praised as being worthwhile. Furthermore, the fact that more directors and studios have an interest in producing such material is evidence of the trend’s lasting power. In April 2012, Darren Lynn Bousman brought back together much of the creative talent from *Repo!* for another foray into the marriage of horror and music with *The Devil’s Carnival*. Using Aesop’s Fable as its narrative backbone, the film tells the story of three dead people who are now in hell about to enter the Devil’s Carnival in a series of tests that will gauge whether they stay in hell or get a one-way ticket to heaven.

![Figure 5.1 Lucifer (Terrance Zdunich) strolls through the big top from hell in *The Devil's Carnival*.](image)

While the film is still in limited release as of this writing, the musical numbers feature the same menacing, driving force as those in *Repo!*, and the mise-en-scène has Bousman’s dark and satirical signature all over it.
Interestingly, while the trend of torture in the horror film has started to subside, the musical - and especially the modification musical - continues to live on. This does beg the question however, what else does the modification musical have in store? A March 2012 article in The New York Times discusses a recent production in development that showcases further evolution of the modification musical. New York composer Timothy Huang is currently workshopping a musical based on the true story of two Nepali cab drivers who came to America looking for opportunity, but ends in dissolution with one character hacking the other with a meat cleaver before leaping to a damp demise into the East River:

‘Costs of Living’…has been selected as a finalist for the American Harmony Prize, which celebrates new musical theater works that involve American ethnic, religious and gender issues. It was also one of four shows selected for the Ascap Musical Theater Workshop, which includes a staged reading of the piece for a panel of established composers…‘Costs of Living’ has plenty of jokes and quips but retains a dark depiction of the troubles immigrants can face in New York (Kilgannon, “Turning a Bloody Attack into a Musical”).

While Huang’s musical seems to tone down the gore (if one character hacking another with a cleaver is “toning down”) seen in many of the other texts in this dissertation, it represents a direction of maturity for the modification musical. The film still adheres to the characteristics of the carnivalesque but addresses the post-modern issues of ethnic and immigrant affairs. Given the recent trend against immigration in American politics with strong laws in Arizona, Utah and Alabama, a text such as this can be as much of a response to current events as Sweeney Todd and Repo! expressed post-9/11 frustrations. As more artists from diverse backgrounds get involved in the creation of musicals, the trend’s potential is only limited by imagination…and special effects.

My goal in this dissertation has been to call for a re-reading of the classical Hollywood musical through the lens of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. As a theroretical construct, the carnivalesque has come to wide acceptance by scholars and, considering the modification
musical’s desires to do cultural work with their audiences, is a very appropriate one through which to read this fascinating and oft misunderstood genre and its resultant trends. My goal as well was to address how these musicals exemplified a contemporary “cinema of attractions” to act as a cathartic experience for their audiences. Vis-à-vis the use of the carnivalesque, the modification musical’s desire to deride and overturn the patriarchal, phallocratic heritage so imbued in American cinema has birthed a participatory experience and fanbase unprecedented in modern movies. These spectators know the films, they know the songs and they appreciate the messages behind them. And, of course, like Astaire and Rogers who iconically danced the Carioca in *Flying Down to Rio*, they will do the Time Warp - again and again and agai
APPENDIX A

Select Filmography

The following is a list of selected films that are discussed or referenced in this Dissertation.


Brokeback Mountain, US, 2005, dir. Ang Lee


Carousel, US, 1956, dir. Henry King


Fame, US, 2009, dir. Kevin Tancharoen

Flying Down to Rio, US, 1933, dir. Thornton Freeland

Gay Divorcee, The, US, 1934, dir. Mark Sandrich

Gigi, US, 1958, dir. Vincente Minnelli


Hostel, US, 2005, dir. Eli Roth


I’m No Angel, US, 1933, dir. Wesley Ruggles

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, US, 1984, dir. Steven Spielberg

Jazz Singer, The, US, 1927, dir. Alan Crosland


King and I, The, US, 1956, dir. Walter Lang


Mamma Mia!, US, 2008, dir. Phyllida Lloyd


Moulin Rouge!, US, 2001, dir. Baz Luhrmann


Oklahoma!, US, 1955, dir. Fred Zinneman

Oliver!, US, 1968, dir. Carol Reed

Phantom of the Paradise, US, 1974, dir. Brian De Palma

Purple Rain, US, 1984, dir. Albert Magnoli

Rent, US, 2005, dir. Chris Columbus


South Pacific, US, 1958, dir. Joshua Logan

Star is Born, A, US, 1954, dir. George Cukor


Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, US, 2007, dir. Tim Burton


Top Hat, US, 1935, dir. Mark Sandrich


Yankee Doodle Dandy, US, 1942, dir. Michael Curtiz


Verlag, 2003.


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ABSTRACT

CORPOREAL MODIFICATION IN THE HOLLWOOD MUSICAL:
NEW PARADIGMS FOR GENRE ANALYSIS

by

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Major: Communication
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

This project explores the trend of bodily and identity modification in the contemporary Hollywood musical and calls for a re-reading of the genre away from the standard classification, that of one strictly imbued with wistful nostalgia and heteronormativity. This work argues that several films have abrogated these traditional ideals to create a carnivalesque representation of the societal norms through a genre, and a production code that sought to preserve them. Using the work of Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin, this project reveals that these films feature dark and satirical para-realities of murder, debauchery and cannibalism that act as a catharsis to their audiences’ most salient fantasies and desires.
Christopher T. Gullen was born October 22, 1976 in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He earned his BS from Lawrence Technological University and his MA and PhD from Wayne State University. Christopher conducts research on the film musical, film sound and genre theory with a special emphasis on the intersection between cinema and theatre. He enjoys travel and swimming.