CRAFTING UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA: FILM MUSICALS FROM 1970-2002

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ABSTRACT

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With the end of the Hollywood studio era, big budget blockbuster musicals had to find ways to compete in the economic and cultural marketplace. Historical events such as the rise of television, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal influenced the way American audiences saw, and continue to see, the world. Film, theatre, and other artistic disciplines helped audiences understand, cope, and criticize societal changes. As audience perceptions changed, the film musical faced a crisis. In an attempt to maximize profits, Hollywood business practices forced an evolutionary branch in the development of the musical. One fork took the genre towards the embodiment of capitalistic and cultural excess as pointed to by Altman, Dyer, and others. These film musicals attempt to present Utopia. Film musicals such as Grease (1978), Beauty and the Beast (1991), and Evita (1996) are large spectacles that utilize the high concept business model, as outlined by Justin Wyatt, to please audience expectations by managing conflict at the expense of presenting the story world as a utopia. The other branch of film musical exemplified in the films of Cabaret (1972) and All That Jazz (1979) criticize the price paid by an individual in pursuit of ideals that lie beyond dominant social values. The dystopic film musical connects with audiences and critics by drawing on the cynicism and skepticism of contemporary historic and cultural events to forward a clearly dystopic view of society.

This study utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to analyze the connection between selected film musicals and the American culture for which they were produced. The study shows that from 1970-2002 film musicals promoted and marketed visions of Utopia that were reflective of specific historical moments rather than ahistorical utopia ideals. While a film like Grease shows that Utopia is the ideal high school experience, later films like Moulin Rouge!
(2001) and *Chicago* (2002) depict imagination as a utopia to escape otherwise dystopic social realities. The interdisciplinary critical frames applied in this study allow scholars to examine the fluid nature of the boundaries between film, theatre, and mass entertainment.
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THE INTERDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF THE FILM MUSICAL

As a theatre practitioner and scholar, I am increasingly aware of how my own artistic work is shaped by history and society. As a theatrical director in a mediated society, I draw inspiration from many different places and not just theatre and film but television, music, novels, and historical events. However, as a former producer in a Hollywood post-production facility, I am extremely aware of how the industry shapes and, to some degree, dictates the construction and reception of its products. In part, this project serves as an opportunity to give scholarly credence to the relationship between the arts of theatre and film. In essence, the interdisciplinary approach creates a dialogue between two seemingly disparate disciplines with the hope of finding a connection between two halves of a fractured artistic/scholarly spirit.

These two seemingly disparate industries share similarities in approaches to analyzing the musical. Since the days of Boardwalk and Vaudeville theatres, musical theatre and film have shared common roots. In the same boardwalk show, one could hear the latest musical hits and see the latest one-reeler. When we talk about the disciplines of theatre and film as sharing similar roots in performance and exhibition, it seems only appropriate that the two might learn to speak with each other. Both film and theatre scholars struggle against the academic opinion that musicals, as popular entertainment, have little to do with the “Art” of their respective disciplines. As a form of mass entertainment, theatre and film have profited from the commercial success of the musical genre, but scholarship still fails to acknowledge its power to reflect, embody, and shape culture.

The main goal of this study is to find common ground from which film and theatre scholars can discuss a complex and culturally interrelated film musical genre. This project will explore the symbiotic cultural relationship between film and theatre as expressed in the film
musical. I will examine some of the gaps in the work of film scholars, such as Rick Altman and Richard Dyer. I will also explore how theatre scholars have criticized, often hypocritically, the film industry for sacrificing artistic expression for the sake of commercial success. While both areas of scholarship acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of musicals, they both criticize productions in the genre for catering to Utopian visions of capitalistic culture rather than exploring social conditions.

This project will challenge the idea that the film musical is merely a propagator of capitalistic Utopian ideals. Instead, the work will show that from 1970-2002 the complex relationship between business practices in film production, historical and cultural occurrences in society, and cultural receptions of films changed the production and reception of meaning within the film musical genre. In the case of some film musicals, these factors resulted in the development of musicals that promoted representations of Utopia or, in sharp contrast, provided contemporary critique of social conditions. On the one hand, contemporary film musicals such as *Grease* (1978), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Evita* (1996) often attempt to show the audience “how society should be.” On the other hand, contemporary film musicals like *Cabaret* (1972), *All That Jazz* (1979), *A Chorus Line* (1985), *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), and *Chicago* (2002) attempt to show the audience “how society is.” The significance of these two types of film musicals is that they serve as windows into American culture from 1970-2002, and they can be read as devices for coping with or exposing non-utopic social contexts.

In exploring the production and reception of meaning in the film musical genre, a second goal of this project is to show how film adaptations carry direct and often purposeful resonances of previous stage versions. These resonances display not only the interconnected nature of the adaptation process but also the interconnected nature of production on stage and screen. These
resonances represent a connection between the cultural reception of Broadway and Hollywood musicals. Some scholars, both in theatre and film, tend to dismiss the role that production practices play in cultural reception of musicals. By looking at recent and contemporary film musicals, I will outline the development and proliferation of Hollywood business practices to maximize box office profits while attempting to preserve audience expectations of the genre. The attempt by Hollywood to maximize profits in the unstable social and economic circumstances of the late twentieth-century directly affected the production and cultural reception of film musicals.

A third goal of this study is to describe the significant shift in the cultural context of film musicals. Specifically, the study will examine the production of films during certain historical and cultural events, such as the Vietnam War, Watergate, economic recession, “Reaganomics,” the Clinton Presidency, the rising popularity of cable and reality television, and the rise of celebrity culture. American audiences’ need to consume Utopian and dystopian works are a means of dealing with these complicated social issues. At the same time, the film industry began to explore blockbuster film production and, as a result, studios began to spend more money to produce fewer films. These events placed considerable demands on the film musical. One of the ways the genre responded was to produce musicals that helped to entertain through escaping into Utopia. At the same time, to reach more audience members, the film industry also produced musicals that capitalized on dystopic social milieus. Depending on the specific confluence of film production practices and audience expectations, sometimes the result was *Grease* and other times it was *All That Jazz*. However, this study does not attempt to directly link the depiction of Utopia with the commercial success of a given film musical.
This study will look at four primary developments in the film industry that helped to shape the development of the film musical from 1970-2002. The first development is the rise of the high concept business practices that continue to perpetuate visions of Utopia in film musicals of the 1970’s and 1980’s. Second, the study will examine the critical and commercial success of the low-concept films that promote visions of Dystopia. Third, the study will examine the self-perpetuating aspects of high concept business practices on the film musicals of the 1990’s. Finally, the study will explore the synthesis of high concept business practices with low-concept visions of Dystopia present in film musicals of the new millennium. As the study explores the historical and social factors that influenced these industry developments in production, it will also examine the role that these factors played in developing audience expectations of the film musical. In order to examine the development of film musicals, I will draw on the strengths of film and theatre scholarship to discuss how the creation and reception of film musical narratives are subject to influences from historical events, business practices, and audience reception contexts.

An interdisciplinary approach to reading film musicals requires a method based on four fundamental ideas. Each of these ideas allows for dialogue between theatre and film while helping to clarify the meanings and audience expectations of film musicals:

1. Musical films can be studied using both film and theatrical aesthetic criticism.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the relationship between theatre and film, it is necessary to define what constitutes the film musical for this project. Much of film genre criticism relies on a strict definition of the musical genre. According to Rick Altman, one of the foremost authorities on genre analysis, the musical genre is “a fascinating multimedia celebration constituting the world’s most complex art form” (Film Musical 2). Altman notes that as a
complex art form, the music in a film musical occurs within the film’s diegesis. For Altman, the music in a film musical is a fully integrated part of the narrative structure of the musical. While this is generally true about musicals onstage and onscreen, Altman’s basic argument, that the musical establishes narrative order by playing on a structural integration of gendered songs (i.e. songs that go back and forth between male and female characters), does not always apply to contemporary film musicals.

Contemporary film scholars such as Justin Wyatt, Bill Marshall, and Robynn Stilwell have argued that non-diegetic music in films, whether a score or a soundtrack, adds meaning to the narrative in the same fashion as diegetically integrated music. In essence, this approach makes all films with scores that are recorded and sold to the public musicals. It would be difficult to prove that “Eye of the Tiger” from Rocky III (1982) makes the film a musical. Oftentimes, the non-diegetic musical soundtrack does little to illuminate issues of characters or advance the narrative. Instead of the song conveying the action in the narrative, the accompanying montage of images portrays the action in the narrative. In films like Beverly Hills Cop (1984), Footloose (1984), and The Breakfast Club (1985) songs from popular music accompany image montages. In turn, the songs are made even more popular by their use in the film. However, “What a Feeling” from Flashdance (1983), which accompanies a montage of images of Alex Owens (Jennifer Beals) welding and dancing, is very different from Gene Kelly’s dancing and singing the lyrics to the title song from Singing in the Rain (1952).

While music from films can be a means to a specific end, the film musical is a part of a rich stage tradition. As the musical developed onstage, composers, lyricists, and book writers sought to integrate songs into the plot of the musical to give a coherent, and often linear, teleology to the musical work. On stage, the musical form changed from musical revues like the
Ziegfeld Follies (1910-1930’s) to fully integrated musicals like Showboat (1927). The popularity of Showboat’s integrated structure ushered in a new type of structure in the stage musical that moved beyond vaudeville and musical reviews to include extensive plots and strong character development. Showboat’s integrated structure would influence the dramatic structure of musicals for the next seventy years.

In integrated musicals, songs are no longer just renditions of popular music but they also move the plot along, illuminate issues of character, and have the potential to become a part of popular music. While film soundtracks enhance the mood of a film, music in the film musical not only enhances but also facilitates action in the narrative. In addition to formulating action, integrated musical numbers provide commentary on issues of character, the character’s social situation, and the reception context of the musical. For this project, the film musical is a film that contains diegetically integrated musical numbers to advance the narrative of the film either by illuminating character, propelling the main action, or both. As a result, both the songs and the performances (on film and soundtracks) become commodities to be marketed to and consumed by mass audiences.

The integration of songs into the structure of a musical has long defined what makes a musical. Since film and stage musicals draw from audience expectations born out of the integrated stage musical tradition, we can begin to look at the resonances and expectations that make up film musicals. In theatre and literature, Stephen Greenblatt uses the “a poetics of culture” as a model to chart the interrelations between a text and its original historical and social context. Greenblatt defines his model as a “study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices” (Shakespearean 5). While Greenblatt uses his model to examine potential cultural inspirations for Shakespeare’s writing,
this approach studies comparative texts throughout the historical, social, and cultural context to illustrate the inspirational links between the creation of a text and its historical context. While Greenblatt utilizes his study to discuss dramatic literature and Elizabethan performance, the model can be applied to the creation of film musicals. In other words, such a study would be concerned with the social energies at play in and around the production and reception of a film musical.

Noel King states that the goal of cultural poetics is “to relate the ‘wonder’ of a particular textual artifact – the capacity for an artwork to astonish or surprise its viewer or reader in a moment of ravishing arrest – to a sense of the artwork’s ‘resonance’ – the broader cultural-discursive framework which enabled it to be composed in the first place” (216). While this approach privileges the process of creating a text, it can also be applied to the inspiration for adapting works for a given audience. In other words, a work is adapted because it continues to mean something in its reception context. When applied to film musicals we can begin to see what is privileged and suppressed in the adaptation of stage musicals for the screen. When a text is adapted from one type of exhibition to another, the meanings discarded or added to the adaptation are made to resonate with the audience. When looking at the inspiration in adaptation, it becomes especially important to look at the social context of inspiration for the original work and the context of adaptation. The result is an understanding of the factors that control the adaptation of stage musicals for film and the development of new film musicals rooted in theatrical and film narrative traditions.

Noel King links Stephen Greenblatt to film theorist David Bordwell by acknowledging that both scholars attempt to “pin-down” meanings in a text that can be distorted in the process of reception. King concludes that “equally without fail, there will be generated an ongoing set of
critical perspectives seeking to explain the gap that opens between textual composition and origin and textual peregrination and appropriation” (King 221). Approaching the film musical as a combination of history, culture, and artistic innovation provides a way of reading the development of audience expectations for the reception of the musical genre. By looking at the aesthetic formations that evoke intertextual connections between a film musical and its cultural context, we gain insight into the society and culture that gave rise to both its creation and reception.

2. **The production of musical films is strongly influenced by industry practice.**

As I noted, my experience as a former producer of television commercials and trailers for Hollywood motion pictures made me an eyewitness to the influence of business practices on the creation of films. In fact, by making trailers and commercials for films, it was my job to create expectations for audiences. I am increasingly aware of how marketing affects both the creation and reception of films. From the subject of the script and the actors cast in the roles, to the creation of pre-release hype by skillful marketing executives, audience expectations are often created before the camera begins to roll and the audience members take seats in the theatre. Hollywood business practices have become a major influence in the production and reception of all films. The ability of an audience to connect immediately with the film increases the possibility of the audience’s willingness to pay to see it. While some scholars are quick to dismiss marketplace economics, practical experience, and recent scholarly work, chart the power of Hollywood business practice in the making of blockbuster feature films.

Justin Wyatt’s industry study, *High Concept*, outlines Hollywood’s attempt to capitalize on audience expectations through marketing and advertising by creating the “high concept” film. According to Wyatt, the high concept film relies on a narrative premise that can be boiled down
to its simplest terms. The goal of the high concept film must use the most recognizable elements of a film to connect to the broadest possible audience (Wyatt 7). From the 1970s to the present, high concept films revolutionized the star-system and continue to drive the construction of the American films. By knowing the genre of a film, the stars, and the general narrative structure (i.e. genre), audiences understand what to expect from a film before screening it. To market a high concept film, producers, directors, and studios use the most recognizable images or ideas of a film to represent the experience an audience might receive from consuming the film. The high concept film can be pitched, funded, produced, and distributed using a simple catch phrase.

Genre films are also promoted according to how well they fit or diverge from the expectations created within the genre. This fact is important to the film musical’s production and reception. The general term “musical” carries with it the near automatic expectations of song, dance, and spectacle. So, while it may be easy to explain the expectations for a film musical, it is difficult to explain the satisfaction some audiences receive from musicals that seek to deconstruct or challenge the conventions of the genre. For example, a difficult to encapsulate film such as *All That Jazz* is branded as a low concept film. Most low concept films carry with them the expectations of not conforming to generic conventions, being valorized by critics, and being hard to promote with audiences. In the case of *All That Jazz*, a film popular with the academy and critics, the studio’s approach to promoting the film failed to create sufficient audience expectations to result in the film’s commercial success (Wyatt *High Concept* 5).

Wyatt’s analysis of high concept business practices expose the influence that Hollywood studio marketing teams have on production and reception. High concept films are produced with the marketing and advertising in mind. Because the studio is often one of the largest financial contributors to a film, it influences the creative artists involved in the production to construct
meanings that allow for the widest acceptance and the smallest possible variation of interpretation by an audience. In constructing meaning in films, high concept practices dictate that intertextual meanings or commentaries be suppressed, or be so egregiously overt that every audience member can comprehend the cultural referent. When it comes to casting, high concept films and studios capitalize on what Richard DeCordova calls the star’s “picture personality,” or an intertextual personality of the star created by the star’s work on and off screen (20). Not unlike the film musicals of the Hollywood studio era, recent film musicals like Fame (1980), The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas (1982), Labyrinth (1988), and Evita (1996), all created under the auspices of high concept casting practices, become bound to and evocative of specific social milieus. Specific editing techniques, storylines, and casting choices cannot help but invoke direct and measurable historical referents to the film musical’s contemporary social context.

3. Musical Films are products of their cultural context.

Much like the need for a dual theatrical and film criticism, and tied directly to Hollywood and Broadway business practice, the interdisciplinary nature of the musical film necessitates a second layer of analysis that extrapolates imbedded cultural referents as evocative cultural context. Given films are not created in a vacuum, editing techniques, casting choices, and marketing goals give affirmation of and opposition to dominate social ideologies. Such an approach is in direct opposition to Thomas Schatz’s idea that a genre’s ideology is defined before the creation of a specific work (Genres 24). Looking at film musicals as commentary on social context challenges the assumptions of or descriptions made by Altman and Dyer, and it helps to explain how and why film musicals present visions of Utopia or Dystopia.

In examining the role film plays in the study of American history and culture, Vivian C. Sobchack writes:
American film does not merely have a history – it also is history. Movies are a continuous inscription and interpretation of American experience through time and in the world. Films are traces of specific moments in specific spaces mediated by human beings who are always culture-bound. (Sobchack 293)

Films, and film musicals, are works of a culture. No matter how one reads an individual film, the film itself cannot be divorced from its cultural context. In making connections between a film musical and its cultural context, we can begin to understand and articulate how low concept film musicals seek to challenge the conventional ideological perspective of studio era musicals. This approach provides a model for examining dystopic film musicals such as *Cabaret* and *Chicago* where the heroes are not typical representations of white hegemony and women are confronted with complex societal issues. In some post-studio era musicals, conflict is not always reconciled through song. In fact, the songs in these dystopic film musicals provide glimpses into characters that divide rather than connect the individual to the whole of society. No longer are the character’s ideals the shared ideals of faceless singing choral masses in the film. Instead, in dystopic musicals, characters are fragmented individuals in a fragmented capitalistic society.

4. *Musical films are sites of cultural critique.*

Christine Gledhill suggests that changes in the formation of a genre can be influenced by changes in the genre’s reception context (“Rethinking” 238). The constant changes in generic formations challenge the boundaries observed by film scholars. In the end, the constant renegotiation of boundaries by scholars “bring[s] into view previously unperceived configurations and patterns” (“Rethinking” 239). For Gledhill, the development of a genre is representative of “society talking to itself – the notion that film can provide an alternative public sphere…increasingly conscious of its own history, calling a range of new stakeholders into
implicit or explicit struggle for ownership” (“Rethinking” 241). While other film scholars seem to imply the musical genre remakes society in a Utopic image or gives an audience the “feeling” of Utopia, Gledhill and Kenneth MacKinnon show that the genre film and, by association the film musical, can provide critiques of society that are neither Utopic nor Universal. The shift in narrative conventions that will become clear in the study of film musicals from the 1970s to the new millennium prompts one to ask, what is American society saying to itself from 1970-2005? Likewise, given the changes in American society in the last thirty-five years we must be ready to anticipate an answer that is contextually specific to the given historical moment.

Despite the fact that both film and theatre scholars criticize the musical for its mass art underpinnings, the musical may be one of the best genres for understanding the connections between industry and culture. The final step in analyzing the film musical charts the critical discourse of a film’s reception to illuminate the connection of a film to its contemporary culture, particularly how the film provides historical commentary on societal events. This approach analyzes the ability of the film musical to speak to and about its historical context.

Jane M. Gaines notes that the business of “the dream factory” (e.g. Hollywood) “is to make the fantasy ‘work’ for everyone even though the fantasy may not speak to everyone”(111). Certainly, high concept films work to maximize profits by speaking to a wide variety of audiences. Even though it would be easy to dismiss the film industry because it is driven by profits, it is important to look at how film musicals inspire investment from their audiences by promoting specific points of view and marginalizing others. Thus, it becomes important to look at what film musicals said and continue to say to audiences that are separated from the original production context. In other words, it is as important to look at what the film musical says about its context as what it continues to say to audiences. By examining the film musical in this
fashion, we begin to understand some of the shared values of American culture from 1970-2002 as conveyed in the art it produces.

By looking at the relationship between social context, production creation, and the critical reception, we can begin to understand what musical films say about movie-going audiences from 1970-2002. More importantly, this study will illuminate a shift in audience reception context that necessitated a change in conventions of the genre. Following the events of the late twentieth-century, the musical genre changed its goal of meaning formation from a presentation of white-hegemonic Utopia to include a critique of white hegemonic Utopia. While films produced prior to these events continue to evoke Utopia, some films produced in the late twentieth-century began to connect to audiences by overtly commenting on the fantasies promoted by Utopia. The cynical views that arose in response to societal events subtly changed the genre and the expectations of the genre. This connection between the film musical and its audience arises from the commercial synthesis between production, creation, and reception.

By looking at film musicals in the last thirty-five years, this study reminds scholars that film musicals continue to be a part of popular American culture. By bringing two different disciplines to the same table, this study will seek to preserve the contribution of prominent films and historical events. Yet, as Taylor points out, this project must also be selective. This project relies on specific representative films such as *Cabaret* (1972), *Grease* (1978), *All That Jazz* (1979), *A Chorus Line* (1985), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Evita* (1996), *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), and *Chicago* (2002), but it will include brief analysis of other film musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Tommy* (1975) *Xanadu* (1980), *Popeye* (1980), *The Pirate Movie* (1982), *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992)
and *The Lion King* (1994) in so far as they relate to and serve to embody the principles of the representative films.

This study focuses on representative texts from the last thirty-two years. It is important for me to state that while aesthetics in musical films changed significantly to accommodate both changes in industry business practice and cultural reception, this study attempts to redefine the idea of the film musical, especially as it has developed at the end of the twentieth-century. I will be looking at films, business factors/conditions, and critical discourse to narrate contextual snapshots of the production and reception of film musicals from 1970-2005. These snapshots will illuminate larger issues of utopia and dystopia as presented in film musicals. While arguments made about some films can be applied to other aspects of film, theatre, and cultural analysis, this study seeks to promote contextual views of Utopia and Dystopia in contemporary film musicals rather than an essentialist position of “Utopia” present in “all” film musicals. Moreover, this study abides by the idea that utopias and dystopias in film musicals are not only readable but also temporally and culturally bound by issues of both production and reception.

Chapter Breakdown

This study can be broken down into several parts. Each chapter explores specific cultural aspects of crafting visions of Utopia and dystopia for audiences of late twentieth-century film musicals. While appendix A serves as a guide to the box office revenues of films referenced in the project, appendix B serves as a reader’s guide to the various depictions of Utopia and Dystopia present in the case study films of this work. Despite the succinct nature of the appendices, each chapter attempts look at specific films and cultural moments to clarify the connection between representations of Utopia and Dystopia to the processes of Hollywood filmmaking and contemporary audience reception.
The first part of the study includes chapters I-III and broadly outlines current scholarship trends in the film musical scholarship present in both film and theatre, examines the shift in American culture that fractured the generic development of the film musical, explores the development of the high concept business model in new Hollywood filmmaking, and defines the nature of Utopia and Dystopia in film musicals and how ideology of Utopia and Dystopia are conveyed in the film musical.

The second section covers chapters IV-VI explore the entrenchment of the high concept business model and the variety of utopias produced under its influence. The first musicals produced in the rise of high concept Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) and Tommy (1975) employ some aspects of the high concept model, but fail to secure the blockbuster status hoped for in the model, due to the inability of the films to serve up a Utopia that was broadly appealing to its audience. Having explicated how the reception of high concept film musicals is as much affected by reception context as its production context, chapter V examines how Grease (1978) gives audiences of the post-Vietnam and Watergate era an escape from dystopic reality through the consumption of Utopia. While the high concept film is made in the hopes of increasing the profitability and mass appeal of a film, I will show how other film musicals produced at the height of the high concept business practice, Xanadu (1980), Popeye (1980), The Pirate Movie (1982) The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas (1982) and A Chorus Line (1985), represent an attempt on the part of studios and filmmakers to combine high concept business practices with competing depictions of Utopia to gain mass appeal.

Chapter VII explores how Cabaret (1972) and All That Jazz (1979) promoted individual agency and the oppressive nature of Utopia. These films serve as the other branch of the film musical genre. Instead of focusing on strong communal Utopias like high concept film musicals,
dystopic musicals present visions of society that oppresses the individual with its own unattainable vision of Utopia. These dystopic musicals are not evocative of utopic visions of the Hollywood studio era nor do they fall into the guidelines of high concept blockbuster films. Instead of relying on new Hollywood business practices, these contrary, disparate visions of American culture in the 1970’s and 80’s are born out the unrest of 1970’s economic collapse, the rise of global media availability, and the failures of U.S. policy at home and abroad. While these films endured critical appeal, the films articulate an inability for the film to achieve mass appeal and high box office revenues.

Chapters VIII and IX scrutinize the legacy of the high concept business model as a cultural influence in the animated and live-action film musicals of the 1990s. This chapter will chronicle and comment on Disney’s propagation of the high concept business model in film musicals such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Newsies* (1991), and *Evita* (1996). In both the animated and live-action film musicals of the 1990’s, the performative contradiction between the film’s visual spectacle and intertextuality created by the Hollywood marketing machine, has the ability to render otherwise obvious didactic meanings relatively inert. These film musicals put forth a representation of Utopia that is nostalgic, dreamlike, and come to embody the excesses of 1990s American economic growth, politics, and cultural trends. The interdisciplinary nature of the film musical allowed the high concept aesthetic to change the way that Disney, and others, produced musicals for Broadway.

The final chapter focuses on the development of the film musical at the turn of the new millennium. By the mid-to late 1990s, film studios began to experiment with ways of constructing film musicals. The result marks yet another shift in the film musical genre. In millennial film musicals such as *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and *Chicago* (2002), changes in narrative
technique and song integration challenged audience’s expectations and, in turn, redefined the genre’s marketplace appeal. New millennial musicals build upon the subjective nature of spectacular Utopias. The results are depictions of Utopia that are ever-present in the imagination of the individual. The film musicals of the new millennium exploit editing and performance choices inspired by a variety of popular forms of entertainment including theatre, film, and popular music to challenge the very notion of the “integrated” film musical.

The conclusion recounts the findings of the study as well as to define future avenues for studying the film musical. This study’s interdisciplinary approach problematizes the boundaries created by scholars and artists. As more films become musicals, more musicals become films, and more theatre directors use film in their productions, theatre scholars can find ways to chart the influence of film and culture on their own artistic practice. This could challenge the “commercial” stereotype of theatre artists for some film and musicals. Ultimately, in dissolving boundaries between the discipline of theatre and film, we are left with more questions than answers. Regardless of how “pure” a work of theatre or film is, scholars in both disciplines need to pay more attention to the influences and innovation fueled by both industry and craft.
When *Chicago* won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2003, it signaled the end to a thirty-year drought for film musicals at the Oscars and led critics to announce that the genre was back. Despite the critics’ announcement, I wondered, “Had the musical really been out of the spotlight?” Between 1970 and 2005, Hollywood produced more than two-dozen musicals, and more than a quarter of these musicals received Best Picture nominations. While the production of film musicals slowed in the last decades of the twentieth-century, that does not mean the studios did not produce musicals. In fact, musicals such as *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), *Cabaret* (1972), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Tommy* (1975), *Grease* (1978), *Hair* (1979), *Annie* (1982), *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), and *Chicago* (2002) were produced after the Hollywood studio era. Therefore, it is misleading for critics to herald the return of a genre that never truly went away.

At the same time, Thomas Schatz’s observation that “The movie musical is one of our culture’s most widely loved yet least understood or appreciated popular forms” (*Genres* 186) deserves to be revisited. If the musical is so widely loved, why was the musical one of the least produced film genres of the last thirty-five years? The answer does not have to do with the popularity of the musical genre broadly defined. While production of musicals declined on screen, the production of musicals on stage actually increased. In the same thirty-five year span (1970-2005), the stage musical became one of the most widely produced and profitable styles of theatre on Broadway. With such long running musicals as *A Chorus Line* (1975), *Cats* (1982), and *Les Misérable* (1987), the stage musical gained far more financial and critical success than the film musical. Therefore, why is the most popular genre in contemporary theatre one of the least popular in contemporary film? Moreover, when we consider that film and stage musicals
draw from some of the same audience expectations, what is it about the audiences, and their reception contexts, that often made stage musicals more popular than film musicals during this period? Likewise, how did film musicals of the post-Vietnam era adapt to changing audience expectations? In the face of such cultural and political upheavals, how did new Hollywood industry practices transform the film musical in an attempt to maintain the genre’s profitability?

With the end of the Hollywood studio era, big budget blockbuster musicals had to find ways to compete in the economic and cultural marketplace. Historical events such as the rise of television, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal influenced the way audiences saw, and continue to see, the world. Film, theatre, and other artistic disciplines helped audiences understand, cope, and criticize societal changes. As audience perceptions changed, the film musical faced a crisis. In an attempt to maximize profits, Hollywood business practices forced an evolutionary branch in the development of the musical. One fork took the genre towards the embodiment of capitalistic and cultural excess as pointed to by Altman, Dyer, and others. These film musicals attempt to present Utopia. Film musicals such as *Grease* (1978), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Evita* (1996), and *Phantom of the Opera* (2004) are large-scale spectacles that work to please audience expectations by managing conflict at the expense of presenting a world that is anything less than utopic.

The other branch of film musical generic development connects with audiences and critics by drawing on the cynicism and skepticism of contemporary historic and cultural events to forward a clearly dystopic view of society. Where Altman and Dyer would have us believe the musical can only show Utopia, these musicals strive against Utopia to show the world not as it can be but as the world is. These representations of dystopia are in direct conflict to the ideas of Dyer and Altman, and provide the audience with considerable intertextual political and social
commentary. The commentaries present in films such as *Cabaret* (1972), *All That Jazz* (1979), *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), and *Chicago* (2002) move beyond Hollywood studio era conceptions of Utopia and towards an affirmation of individuality and a wry commentary on the elusive nature of Utopia. These film musicals require an approach not exclusively bound to film. Instead, we must look beyond contemporary film genre criticism and to other disciplines to elucidate this shift in the development of the film musical.

To explore critical and audience expectations for film musicals, we must first examine what film scholarship has to say about film musicals. Much of film musical scholarship revolves around a shared understanding of the musical form as an “integration” of music, dance, and dialogue (in many forms including recitatives) that illuminate issues of character and facilitate action. A majority of classical Hollywood film musicals such as *Anything Goes* (1936), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *Guys and Dolls* (1955), and *Sound of Music* (1965) fall into this “integrated musical” category. When I speak of the film musical, I am speaking broadly of musicals that follow this integrated musical tradition as discussed in the introduction.

**Film Studies and the Film Musical**

Much of the discourse around film musicals falls into two lines of scholarship. The first area focuses on the arrangement and placement of musical numbers in the film narrative to fulfill the audience’s expectations for the genre. Scholars such as Rick Altman and Thomas Schatz focus on the generic conventions of film musicals. Rick Altman’s ongoing work in genre theory positions the musical as a construction of three subgenres: the fairytale musical, the show musical, and the folk musical. Regardless of the subgenre, Altman argues that the film musical presents and resolves conflict based on classical visions of the American courtship ritual (*Film Musical* 27). For Altman, film musicals explore the give-and-take nature of male-female
relationships in light of character types and class relations. Altman argues that the narrative structure of the American film musical has a dual focus on sexuality and class. Altman’s rubric for understanding the film musical outlines the ways that film musical subgenres employ narrative techniques to resolve what he defines as male/female and high/low class binary issues.

Thomas Schatz shares Altman’s view of film musicals. In a case study of the Freed Unit of MGM studios, Schatz notes that its film musicals relied more and more on conventional notions of male-female relations and became increasingly more utopic (Genres 194). Schatz notes that the continued reliance on the integrated musical number set up an expectation where conflicts are resolved through communal musical expression. While the musical numbers may illuminate individual conflicts between male and female characters, the musical seeks to resolve these conflicts through a final communal musical number where man, woman, and community dance and sing in the same space. Schatz’s observes, “In its consummate expression of individual joy and community integration, the musical show not only resolves the cultural conflicts and contradictions of its narrative formula, but it proves to be that formula’s sole reason for existence” (Genres 202). For Schatz, the musical’s mass appeal seems to arise from its ability to resolve conflict and present the world of the film as Utopia. Schatz proposes that the Freed Unit’s contribution to film musicals lies in its continued efforts to erase the boundaries between songs and dialogue making the narrative increasingly naturalistic. Schatz also reminds scholars that this process mirrored stage musical traditions where songs are naturalistic modes of address (Genres 220). Schatz draws the conclusion that by creating narrative societies where it is appropriate for characters to burst into song, the Freed Unit’s film musicals portray utopic visions of society.
In looking at narrative conventions at work in film musicals, most film scholars tend to dismiss film and theatre musicals of the late twentieth-century. Altman himself notes that the main fault of genre analysis is that it has a tendency to rely on the same small canon of films. While both Altman and Schatz spend a large amount of time analyzing the MGM musicals, the two scholars spend very little time discussing musicals produced after the 1970’s. On a similar note, both scholars do little to explore the influence of theatre and film on each other. While existing rubrics in film studies have been useful for reading musicals of the Hollywood studio era, they fail to explain current trends in film musicals such as *Chicago* where leading characters search for understanding and societal recognition of their individuality rather than search for a mate. Therefore, ideas about the musical genre need to be revisited in light of the films themselves, and later I will discuss this idea in detail.

Another line of scholarship on film musicals, presented by Richard Dyer, builds on genre criticism and examines why musicals appeal to mass audiences. In agreement with Schatz and Altman, Dyer remarks on the genre’s tendency to resolve “contradictions at all levels in such a way as to ‘manage’ them, to make them seem to disappear” (*Entertainment* 26). Dyer argues that the film musical, as a form of escapist entertainment in the broadest sense, embodies and produces feelings of Utopia, contentment, and self-satisfaction. While the musical embodies feelings, it does not necessarily present the model of a utopic society (*Entertainment* 18). Using the musical as a model for entertainment in general, Dyer posits, “To be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience” (*Entertainment* 25). For Dyer, the film musical uses real experiences as springboard for producing feelings of Utopia in the audience. While this might prove true for some musicals, Dyer attempts to label all musicals as embodying these feelings of Utopia.
Barry Keith Grant seems to echo Dyer when he defines genres “as collective expressions of contemporary life that strike a particularly resonant chord with audiences” (116). For Grant, film genres rely on familiar conventions that embody mythic cultural expectations. More importantly, Grant proposes that a genre’s reliance on familiar conventions helps the audience to negotiate differences “between the world and self” (117). Grant draws a connection between George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. When considered in its historical context, the film becomes a representation of “the darkness of the human spirit brought about by the absence of compassion and understanding [where] the living dead really are…average folk” (125). While Grant does not address film musical genres or Utopia directly, he helps to posit films within genres as windows to understanding the shared values of a culture. While we might be able to look at film musicals as embodying feelings of Utopia, it may be more fruitful to look how the feelings embodied in a film musical demonstrate social pathos.

While both Grant and Dyer begin to illuminate the broad study of film musicals as a genre, the scholars fail to contextualize the role of the film industry in the process of producing and maintaining the expectations of film genres. Jane M. Gaines extends Dyer’s argument of Utopia in film musicals to a discussion of the film industry. Gaines writes that “because of its amazing technological capabilities, capabilities that are enhancements of the magical tale, it could be said to have a *utopianizing* effect, that is, whatever the subject receiving cinematic treatment can be produced as a ‘wishful landscape’” (emphasis in original, 109-110). In other words, Gaines suggests that mainstream cinematic visions of Utopia in film are because of dynamics in the mainstream Hollywood film industry. Gaines argues that since Hollywood’s livelihood depends on profits the industry must produce films that are palatable to the masses.
Therefore, the audience cannot help but see Utopia in films because, as Gaines notes, the film industry assumes that illusionist perfection is more palatable to the masses than imperfect reality.

The views propagated by scholars such as Richard Dyer and Jane Gaines may explain the popularity of some film musicals, but they do not attempt to distinguish the film musical genre from other Hollywood film genres. Both Gaines and Dyer assume that the film musical, like other mainstream Hollywood films, is made solely for the purpose of “entertainment.” Second, these views, which do not contextualize the audience and assume that all audiences experience the same sense of Utopia, do not explain the critical and commercial success of musicals like *Cabaret* and *Chicago* which depict a society and world that is not even close to utopic. Additionally, Dyer and Gaines do not explain the cynical representations of films in the post-Vietnam War era. The film musical genre itself shows some ambivalence towards an overarching ideology such as Utopia. In fact, musicals of the last thirty-five years represent both utopic and dystopic visions of society. They further prove Barry Grant’s understanding that filmic spaces created within a single film do not represent the entirety of filmic spaces within a single genre. The disparity of visions within a genre generates a complex and unstable ideological generic space that defies broad theoretical definitions, and therefore must rely on more contextualized and individualized analysis of specific films.

Some film scholars have attempted this more individualized approach to analyzing the development of the film musical genre, especially in addressing its appeal or displeasure with audiences. John Kenneth Muir’s *Singing a New Tune: The Rebirth of the Modern Film musical from Evita to De-Lovely and Beyond* is one such study. While Muir chronicles a more or less complete history of titles and the production background on contemporary film musicals, Muir does little to identify or present a model for reading musical films. Instead, Muir relies almost
exclusively on first-hand interviews of industry professionals, directors, screenwriters, and producers (including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon) to chart the creative influences that led to the production of contemporary film musicals. In looking at the process of production as part inspiration and part perspiration, Muir does little to craft a model of production that accepts the notion that film musicals, as a part of culture, are deliberately crafted for reasons outside of artistic will.

While the chronicling of such artistic influences on artists is not only impressive and important, Muir relies too heavily on these professionals and often fails to acknowledge the one-sided nature of his critique. Muir’s work has a tendency to become too much like insight through name-dropping than insight by analysis. Any analysis of the genre or the overarching implications of the genre by individual films is secondary to Muir’s need to prove that the film musical genre after the Hollywood studio era was far from “dead.” In fact, Muir does outline critical reviews in an attempt to show how or why some film musicals fared better at the box office than others. Despite the study’s relatively small “expert sampling,” the breadth of titles explored by Muir help to prove his point. Muir’s most important contribution to film musical genre analysis lies in the charting of contemporary influences on artistic representations, especially as these influences help the professionals to construct the generic traditions of the film musical’s performance space towards the end of the twentieth-century. It is a performance space that, for Muir, is influenced by historical works in the genre and changing audience expectations created in television and popular culture.

Historically, the film musical is and has been crafted by some of the most prolific performers and directors of popular culture. Thusly, the film musical genre has created an expectation of performance and a performance space that defies conventional, singular defining
terms. Even within a single film musical, there is a highly contested and competitive performance space, because as Kenneth Mackinnon points out, “there is another, more attractive, more perfectly realized, person waiting to burst out of the human limits imposed on the individual” (44). MacKinnon challenges Dyer’s notion that all musicals present an “overtly white-supremacist, heterosexual, and patriarchal” performance space (45). While Dyer reads musical utopias as oppressive to minorities because they continue to suppress marginalized people and ideologies, MacKinnon reads the displays of difference as an expression of longing for freedom. MacKinnon points out, “Some musical numbers threaten not just to disrupt the coherence and predictability of the narrative world, but to dislocate that world for the rest of the movie” (44). For film musicals, and integrated musicals at that, the singing of songs helps to define the narrative space, and the presentation of the musical numbers in the narrative can define or deconstruct the ideological space.

MacKinnon also raises an important question about the ideological nature of Utopia in the film musical. MacKinnon asks, “Can it really be the Munchkins that Dorothy dreams of when she yearns to go beyond the rainbow?” (46). In other words, when characters dream of Utopia they never truly achieve the Utopia of which they dream. In the Wizard of Oz (1939), Dorothy discovers “there’s no place like home,” but the home she has is not the dream she longs for in “Over the Rainbow.” The musical is heart wrenching for audiences because they understand that dreams do not match reality. Even while watching a lead character struggle to achieve Utopia, the audience knows that Utopia is a dream. For the audience, the true power of the narrative is the tension between a character’s action and the audience’s knowledge that Utopia is unattainable. MacKinnon’s study of film musicals shows that there needs to be a more
sophisticated way of discussing how a film musical embodies the tension between a character’s action and the audience’s understanding of their own world.

Even as MacKinnon exposes a major gap in the analysis of film musicals, MacKinnon fails to provide a methodology for exploring the reception of film musicals by their audiences. If an industry, whose existence relies on box office receipts, produces a work for consumers, we should conclude that the guiding influences in the production context matter as much as the reception context. Therefore, film musicals need to be examined within the contexts of both production and reception. Moreover, such a study needs to take into account the intentions of both the filmmakers and film industry to reaffirm or challenge visions of utopia. While some film musicals perpetuate ideals of Utopia, others represent negotiations between the individual and the world. Instead of attempting to help the individual change the world to what it should be, some film musicals like Cabaret (1972), All That Jazz (1979), and A Chorus Line (1985) help the individual understand the world as it really is. To gain a broader understanding of these ideas, it is important to look beyond existing genre criticism to aide in our understanding of contemporary film musicals.

In her essay “Rethinking Genre,” Christine Gledhill uses a study of melodrama on stage and screen to challenge the way film scholars approach the construction of genre. Gledhill notes that genre theory causes disputes in scholarship because it draws, contests, and redraws boundaries between formal and ideological systems (“Rethinking” 221-2, 237). While Gledhill cautions scholars against drawing a genre’s boundaries too tightly, she remarks that social and cultural conflict created by the construction and contesting of generic boundaries provides a repository of material for fueling the development of genre (“Rethinking” 222). Gledhill argues that disciplines outside of film scholarship can illuminate issues within the construction and
reception of films. However, Gledhill also notes, “we need to be sensitively attuned to what is being said in what arenas and for what purposes” (“Rethinking” 241). It is understandable that film scholars would be reluctant to look at theatre for approaches to film musicals. Nevertheless, given the fact that so many popular film musicals are adapted from stage versions, theatre can give some insight into the construction of the audience’s expectations.

In “Toward a New Media Economics,” Douglas Gomery challenges four “myths” of film scholarship: the film industry is best understood apart from other industries, the studio system of the 1930’s and 40’s offers the best site of historical critique, the capitalistic influence of wall street economics solely shapes the finances of the film industry, and Hollywood is the only place to study the film industry (Gomery “New Media” 407-11). When scholars look at the film musicals of the late twentieth-century, they struggle against these preconceived notions. On one hand, film musical scholarship has helped to clarify the narrative construction of the musical, but on the other hand, it has left us with noticeable aesthetic and historical gaps. First, whether or not a film musical is an adaptation of a stage musical, the film musical genre builds upon collective reading habits cultivated on the Broadway and global stages, and the success of the musical on stage has directly affected the contemporary reception of film musicals. Second, genre scholarship that focuses on the Hollywood studio era fails to provide tools to understand contemporary film musicals. In fact, changes in the industry following this era have given rise to specific business practices that shaped and continue to shape the development of film musicals. Third, throughout the studio era, the musical genre so solidified audience expectations that the industry was not sure that audiences would watch any film musical without integrated songs in its narrative structure. The development of the film musicals in recent history has challenged the structure of the integrated film musical. Finally, by following Gomery and Gledhill’s calls to
explore other arenas that discuss musicals, we may understand how the film industry draws on the expectations of audiences, created and sustained in other areas of culture, to shape the production and reception of the film musical.

The Roots of the Musical – Theatre Scholarship on Musicals

Given that film musicals are based on a rich theatrical tradition, theatre scholarship can give us some insight as to how the medium of theatre creates and maintains audience expectations of film and stage musicals. Musical theatre arose from a complex combination of songs, dances, and routines in vaudeville and boardwalk shows. Early twentieth-century Boardwalk and Vaudeville theatres treated audiences to the “best entertainment money could buy.” In the same show, one might see comics, jugglers, animal acts, scenes from famous plays, and even the newest technological advancement – like the motion picture. Linked from the beginning, it was only a matter of time before the musical became popular on both stage and screen. Since they share similar roots, it is also easy to see how each borrows from and inspires the other. Despite the cultural popularity of the musical genre, theatre and film scholars downplay the significance of the historical relationship between the two. While the connection between the exhibitions of musical theatre and film is an entire study unto itself, the shared roots help to breakdown the academic boundary between theatre and film. As a form of mass entertainment in two different mediums, the film musical almost requires a dual approach to its study.

Musical theatre scholars often point to opera and the theories of Richard Wagner as inspiring the development of early musical theatre (Flinn 64). Wagner’s theatre upheld the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk, or “Total Art,” as the integration music, theatre, movement, sculpture and other arts into a performance that was a communion of all performing arts. Wagner states that
music is integral to “Total Art” because it “dissolves the hard immobile ground of the actual scene into a fluent, elastic, impressionable ether, whose unmeasured bottom is the great sea of Feeling itself” (789). Wagner believed that the combination of music and spectacle at work in dramatic action could become a manifestation of the union between “Art and Nature.” For Wagner, the symbiotic union of Art and Nature gives the audience a glimpse of Truth. Originally, Wagner’s theories were applied to High Art operatic performances, but today musical theatre scholars have applied his ideas to the study of musical theatre. Wagner’s theories have provided the theoretical inspiration for the integrated musical and a means of legitimizing a cultural form that was considered to be little more than popular entertainment.

Wagner’s belief that Art is a combination of music, drama, and scenery has given many theatre scholars a historical basis for addressing the high art value of musicals. The overarching belief that “Total Art” is a constructed communion of arts also leads most musical theatre scholars to privilege the craft of creating musicals over the industry of producing musicals. While art cannot develop without an artist, musical theatre scholars often overlook the industry forces that influence reception contexts to create and maintain viable stage musical audiences. Yet, film scholars fail to acknowledge Wagner’s idea of “Total Art” as an interpretation of Utopia. If fully realized, “Total Art” produces a work by which the audience can experience the transcendent “union of the individual with the universal” (794). It is possible to see that there are echoes of Wagner’s theories in Richard Dyer’s writing on film musicals. Still, whereas Dyer’s Utopia in the film musical is a forward-looking capitalist Utopia, “Total Art” refers to Wagner’s ideals of art and not the dominant views in a capitalist society.

Denny Martin Flinn draws heavily upon Wagner to postulate his narrative history of musical theatre. In the highly opinionated and nostalgic *Musical: A Grand Tour*, Flinn traces the
evolution of the art form by explicating moments of historical importance. Flinn equates the confluence of artistic talents involved in the creation of musicals with High Art. Flinn’s work invokes, but never explicates, high art theory to validate the popular musical form. Whether it is the fortuitous production team behind *Oklahoma!* (1943) or the combination of Stephen Sondheim and Oscar Hammerstein in *West Side Story* (1957), Flinn treats the historical impact of artists on the genre as a whole with reverence.

Flinn exemplifies most musical theatre scholarship in that he holds the musicals of the 1940’s-1960’s in higher esteem than the musicals that follow. Flinn upholds the musicals of the 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s as the height of American artistic expression and sees that the rise of spectacle and commercialism in the genre as the end of musical theatre. Flinn even goes so far as to blame the stage musical *Annie* (1977) for the “Decline and Fall” of the American musical (445). Flinn dismisses the power of the musical to evolve in form, and he denounces the profound influence of the works of non-American artists such as Andrew Lloyd Webber on the industry. Like film scholars such as Altman and Dyer, Flinn fails to acknowledge the change in the production and reception context of musicals, especially since the 1970s. Flinn ultimately fails to ask or answer the question, why in some instances of the late twentieth-century does spectacle trump art. Furthermore, why do audiences of the late twentieth-century find entertainment, some might say art, in spectacle?

While Flinn’s work helped to validate the study of musical theatre history, other theatre scholars have looked at the musical in more sophisticated ways by examining the genre’s relationship to socio-historical context. John Bush Jones’s chronological history of musical theatre, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, moves musical theatre scholarship from the attempt to validate the genre as an artistic movement to the
analysis of the musical as an embodiment of social context. Relying heavily on the numbers of performances as a marker of cultural success, Jones ties themes, lyrics, and performers in musicals to their historical contexts. Jones writes that musicals “intended to transform, not just report, the tenor of the times” (1). Jones shows that the musical has the ability to confront and portray alternative solutions to oppressive social problems.

Jones makes a direct connection between a musical and its contemporary historical context. This is especially important when we consider that a musical can be constructed for a specific historical audience. Jones notes that as film musical popularity waned during the late 1970s, popular stage musicals began to display fragmented expressions, “reflecting in form and substance what was happening in American society” (271). In other words, during this historical moment, a trip to the theatre did not necessarily result in the unification of the audience behind a singular narrative ideal. Instead, musicals after 1970 became different things for different audiences. Jones uses musicals such as Hair (1968), Company (1975), A Chorus Line (1975), Working (1978), Nine (1982), and Assassins (1991), as examples of fragmented musicals. Jones proposes that one of the main tenets of the fragmented musical, especially from 1965-1990, is the musical’s focus on the introspection of the central characters. Jones writes, “In both the self-questioning and self-proclaiming, it’s the feelings of the individual as an individual that matter” (272). For Jones, fragmented musicals “catered to audience narcissism, since introspective people enjoy watching themselves” (270). In the shadow of the Cold War and the Vietnam War, fragmented musicals gave audiences the ability to explore their own self-doubt and self-questioning. Given the social instability of the late twentieth-century, fragmented musicals did not present the same utopic visions of American society as its predecessors in the “Golden Age” of stage musicals.
As one of the most recent histories of musical theatre, Jones examines the recent trend in producing musicals based on Hollywood films. While Hollywood adapted numerous stage musicals for the screen, it is not until the late twentieth-century that theatre began borrowing from film. Jones’s study concludes with an examination of late twentieth-century mega-musicals, revivals, and adaptations of films for the stage. According to Jones, film production and musical theatre productions are both popular cultural forms, and stage musical adaptations of films present a nostalgic combination of the familiar (Jones 355). While scholars like Denny Martin Flinn might be quick to condemn the Broadway theatre industry for unimaginatively “selling-out” to the commercial practices of Hollywood, Jones reminds them that audiences are consumers. If these works were not popular with audiences, Broadway would not produce them. Jones makes connections between the musical and its context but does not examine the artistic choices made to maximize the connection between musicals and their audiences.

While theatre scholars seem to concentrate on stage musicals, they often make passing references to film musicals. However, most musical theatre scholars are quick to deride film musicals for their commerciality. Theatre scholars often use the terms like “unfortunate,” “unfaithful,” and “commercial,” when criticizing film musicals. This criticism comes from an industry where its main production center on Broadway makes over 90% of its profits from stage musicals rather than other forms of theatre. In their introduction to The Cambridge Companion to the Musical, editors William Everett and Paul Laird note that despite scholars’ attempts to view the musical as high art, “No successful figure in the history of the musical worked for artistic reasons alone: a career is based on the ability to entertain” (xv). Yet the book fails to clarify the economic influences on the artistic production of musicals. The guide’s singular essay on film musicals, “Distant Cousin or Fraternal Twin? Analytical Approaches to the Film
Musical” by Graham Wood, presents a weak justification for theatre scholars to look at film musicals. Wood’s conclusion is that it is all right to look at film musicals so long as scholars remember that they are “films” and not theatre pieces. Wood’s essay is a cursory treatment of film musicals, and the author does not acknowledge the work accomplished by film scholars. The implications, intentional or not, of such a cursory approach to the film musical reinforces disciplinary divides between theatre and film scholarship. While Wood’s essay suggests a point of contact for the two disciplines (230), there are other ways in which film and theatre can begin a mutually beneficial dialogue.

Such a productive dialogue would include analysis of the two performance mediums as industries. One such approach to theatre as an economic industry is Steven Adler’s *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way*. While it is one of the only industry studies of the Broadway, Adler attempts to provide an objective approach to contemporary Broadway business practices. In doing so, Adler shows that the contemporary theatre and film industries have a lot in common. Adler’s study notes the potential pitfalls of producing art for Broadway. He writes:

> When popular entertainment and artistry marry, Broadway audiences are graced with exceptional productions. Broadway can survive economically on a diet of mostly populist fare, whereas its chances for financial solvency are minimal if it were to present only artistically challenging but inaccessible shows. (Adler 28)

Adler describes the complex nature of Broadway theatre as a mix of personality, creative genius, business savvy, and good timing. By looking at the economic stakes of doing business on the Great White Way, Adler shows that art is business, especially when it comes to Broadway.
In addition to showing how business is conducted on Broadway, Adler shows how Disney was able to use its corporate capital to secure profitable success in the volatile Times Square marketplace. While some scholars and theatre artists are quick to condemn companies like Disney for its use of art to promote consumerism, Adler reminds these detractors that Broadway has promoted consumerism through souvenirs and cast recordings since the 1930’s (69-70). Through Adler’s study of the industry, and Disney’s part in it, musical theatre scholars can begin to see how commerce and issues of mass appeal ultimately drive their “high art.”

While Adler’s work applies to the business end of producing on Broadway, he shows how commercial theatre works are shaped by marketplace economics and not simply isolated artistic ideals.

Adler is one of the few theatre scholars who applaud Disney’s Broadway production approach. Adler’s study implies that when Disney moved to Broadway in the 1990’s, the corporation brought with it a film industry business mentality to producing stage musicals. In other words, Disney operates on Broadway as it has operated in Hollywood over the past thirty-five years. The corporation’s business approach in Hollywood and on Broadway is identical. Like the film industry, where the studio develops multiple films simultaneously, Adler shows that Disney develops multiple musicals at the same time. With the corporate capital to let productions develop over time and release them “when they are ready,” Disney has the ability to generate a large number of productions that can help to make up for losses on other shows. In essence, Disney business practices rely heavily on developing products based on pre-sold commodities. Whether the musical is a previous Disney brand title or a musical spearheaded by a popular artist, Disney’s approach has changed the way productions are created for Broadway. No longer do composers, a director, and a couple stars hole themselves up in a rehearsal space...
for three months. Now, Broadway shows have the luxury of long pre-Broadway tours and development workshops (versus the out of town tryouts), profit sharing, and popular film texts for inspiration.

According to Adler, the reality of Broadway is that any one show can take years to turn a profit. Adler notes that, unlike the film industry that must pay up front for production costs, Broadway is a “back-end” business (155-7). In addition, while a film can make a lot of its money on opening weekend, a Broadway show has to have a long run to recoup production costs. The bigger the production, the longer it takes the show to make money. As production and run costs mount, it becomes increasingly necessary for independent producers on Broadway to make certain their productions make money. To accomplish this, producers turn to film and revivals of successful older productions in the hopes of maximizing the profit potential of the production. Professionals interviewed by Adler noted that the use of film as a springboard for “new” musicals is much like mounting a “revival.” With a film-based theatre production, audiences already know, to some degree, what to expect. In some ways, there is the expectation that audiences are seeing “the film on live on stage!” (213). Adler concludes that like film, Broadway also experiments with the narrative structure and generic development of the musical. Adler admits, “New forms may be in order, but the current incarnation has failed to find a worthy successor to the integrated musical” (216). In addition, integrated musicals continue to make money, and there has been little economic incentive to change the “formula.”

While musical theatre scholars decry the commerciality of film, they have had to come to grips with an ever-popular commercial Broadway trend – the adaptation of films to stage musicals. Since Disney began adapting film musicals like Beauty and the Beast (1991) and The Lion King (1994) for the stage, an increasingly large number of musicals on Broadway, including
the Tony award-winning musical *The Producers* (2001) have borrowed from commercially successful Hollywood films. The recycling of popular films into stage musicals like the *Full Monty* (2000), *The Producers* (2001), *Hairspray* (2002), and *Monty Python’s Spamalot* (2005) have challenged critics and scholars to re-think the process of inspiration-creation-reception. Moreover, the move by Hollywood to re-adapt stage musical adaptations of films to create new film musicals, such as *The Producers* (2005), have helped to dissolve the commercial boundaries between stage and screen.

Given theatre scholarship’s limited recognition of theatre’s industrial practices, film scholarship can provide valuable tools for analyzing contemporary audience expectations of film musicals. The root of the connection between the disciplines of theatre and film lies in the process of presentation and reception. In other words, both theatre and film require that a text be exhibited for an audience. For example, both theatre and film challenge the notion that the performance text is fixed. Theatre and film often start with a basic text, but the text changes when it moves into production. Whether the work is on film or in a theatre, different directors, designers, or actors will interpret this text differently. In theatre, and to some extent film, the performance of the text can change from night to night or take to take. The final connection lies in the exhibition of the theatrical or film work, for no matter how many times a work is displayed, each audience will consume the work differently. Film and theatre share a fundamental performance nature: the interface between theatre performance and audience, or screening and audience, is a specific and non-repeatable event. Whether the work is exhibited on stage or screen, the social and historical context influences its production and reception.

Given the shared nature of production and reception in theatre and film, both disciplines have a lot to say to each other especially when it comes to the interdisciplinary aesthetic structure
of the film musical. Musical theatre scholars show that the production of musicals relies heavily on the talents of many different artisans. Musical theatre scholarship privileges the production of the musical over the reception of the musical, and because of this, they fail to account for the business aspect of the musical. Film scholars can help theatre scholars to understand the implications of industry influences on artistic practice. At the same time, film scholars can help theatre scholars evaluate the intended audiences’ role in the creation of musicals and examine the choices producers make to maximize profits by appealing to the largest audience possible.

While musical theatre scholars may remind film scholars that artists can play an influential part in the creation of the musical genre, film scholars can remind theatre scholars that issues of commerce also factor into the production and reception process. To gain a better understanding of the relationship between industry practice and audience reception, we must examine what events helped to cultivate and change the way Hollywood business practices affected the production of films and film musicals.
The Sound of Music (1965) is the last commercially successful film musical of the Hollywood studio era. The Sound of Music earned more than $135 million dollars domestically (Cook Lost Allusions 9) and grossed more than $158 million dollars worldwide (Variety.com).\(^1\) Studios tried to copy Fox’s success. Despite its ability to be the top-genre draw at the box office by 1965, the majority of film musicals produced after 1965 were considered flops (Sedgwick 696).\(^2\) These musicals included: Doctor Dolittle (1967), Camelot (1967), Chitty Chitty Bang Bang (1968), Star! (1968), Sweet Charity (1969), and Hello Dolly! (1969) (Cook Lost Allusions 209). The musical was not the only genre failing at the box office. By 1969, David Cook writes that the entire film industry was experiencing a financial crisis due in part to over-production and national economic issues. In the wake of increased social strife stemming from America’s involvement in Vietnam, record high interest rates (reaching 10%), and a national recession, the film industry instituted a moratorium on film production that decreased production levels by 34% (Lost Allusions 9). While the state of California and the Federal Government instituted various tax incentives to spur production, the aftermath of over-production and near financial collapse forced the industry into an internal battle between studio era executives who favored the auteuristic vision of filmmakers, such as Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Altman, and emerging corporate studio executives who like the emerging styles of filmmakers, such as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg.

The leading cultural institutions showed outward signs of the internal struggles between classical and emerging corporate business practices. The Motion Picture Academy’s 1969 Awards ceremony serves as an excellent example of the internal divide of a country playing itself out in a cultural institution on a nationally mediated stage, television.\(^3\) The Academy’s
award ceremony experienced its first tie, with Barbra Streisand and Katherine Hepburn winning the Best Actress Oscar(s). The ceremony also signaled the real end of the Classical Hollywood film musical with Oliver! being awarded the Oscar for Best Picture.

With its elaborate settings, large chorus numbers, and relatively simple plot, Director Carol Reed’s Oliver! triumphed over fellow nominees Funny Girl, The Lion in Winter, Rachel, Rachel, and Romeo and Juliet. Director Stanley Kubrick’s critically acclaimed 2001: A Space Odyssey was noticeably absent from the Best Picture category. Kubrick’s film received awards for its special and technical advancements. Historically, this category awards commercially successful films for their technical achievements instead of having to give the film an “artistic” award. While this is not a discussion about why 2001 is or may be a better film than Oliver!, it is important to note that the same campaign plan that helped Barbra Streisand share the best actress Oscar with Katherine Hepburn also benefited first-time director Carol Reed (Brown 155).⁴ Peter H. Brown and Jim Pinkston explain that the veneration of the press towards the Academy helps to neutralize any formal critical scrutiny. They write: “The rest of the press swallows the Oscar decisions as if they were handed down by Moses on stone tablets. And this is why a turkey of a film like Oliver! can be named best picture of the year without worldwide laughter” (70). The awards in 1969 for performers and films from the film musical genre reaffirmed the Academy’s support of the genre that still emulated the classical aesthetics and narrative structure of studio era film musicals. The choices made by the academy in 1969 have drawn much critical scrutiny, but this illuminates a distinct shift in Hollywood business and cultural practices. While the Academy supported films reminiscent of an earlier period, that support gave rise to shifts in the film industry that would help to elevate emerging auteurs like Stanley Kubrick and Robert Altman to cultural and industrial prominence.
Since Oliver! and Funny Girl, the production of film musicals declined. The financial risks of producing musicals in the classical Hollywood tradition of Oliver! would prove too costly for most studios to invest. However, it is a myth to assume that studios were unwilling to invest in the production of film musicals. In order to continue the large-scale productions, studios and filmmakers had to find new ways of reaching potential audiences. With the unstable American economy, the new Hollywood executives struggled to find new genres and narrative formulas that would help audiences back to the movies. One business model, born out of corporate incentives and marketing, emerged to forever change the production and marketing of films. This chapter will show that in the wake of political, cultural, social, and economic upheavals, the development of the high concept business model significantly changed the development of the film musical genre. Drawing on Justin Wyatt’s explanations of the high concept film, I will show how the emerging teen audience demographic helped to give rise to high concept filmmaking. I will show how the high concept films, as a mostly back-end business model, changed the front-end production of films.

Hollywood Business Practice at the End of the Studio Era

The shift in cultural reception context and business practices has led film scholars such as Thomas Schatz and Douglas Gomery to label the industry that emerged after the relative demise of the classical Hollywood studio system as “new Hollywood.” There is some debate as to the nature of the term “new Hollywood.” New Hollywood sometimes is used to describe the rise of early 1970s auteur filmmaking present in the work of Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese. Other times “new Hollywood” is used to describe the rise of high concept and blockbuster filmmaking present in the work of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, especially the industry shift towards blockbuster filmmaking after the success of Jaws (1975). While each
infers different business and aesthetic practices, I will refer to new Hollywood as a combination of the two. This means that film industry searched in a wide variety of directions, artistic and business to find a way to connect to audiences.

While scholars debate and continue to illuminate the issues that surround this shift from classical Hollywood to new Hollywood, the one aspect that tends to rise out of the debate is the large shift in audience demographics and the acknowledgement by the studios of the need to understand their audience and develop products for that audience. Audience market analysis was very popular with studios in the 1950s, but it fell out of favor in the cultural revolution of the 1960s. As marketing and demographics began to permeate and consume the back-end distribution of films in the 1970s, it was only a matter of time before it began to influence the front-end production of big budget films aimed at connecting with specific types of audiences. While marketing to specific demographics was in favor during the late 1970s and early 80s, it shifted again in 2000. This is not to say that studio-marketing divisions in the new millennium abandoned demographic studies. In fact, it was quiet the contrary. New millennial demographics became increasingly specialized. These new models broke down generalized demographic groups, such as mothers, fathers, grandparents, teens, and adults into mothers with children three to seven years of age, parents of teenagers, young adults nineteen to twenty-five years of age, and baby boomers. The increased breakdown helps marketers to tailor-make promotions for specific audiences without abandoning broad audience appeal.

As early as the 1950s, film studios were increasingly concerned with identifying their audiences and producing products aimed at the largest possible audiences. Thomas Doherty remarks that throughout the 1950s studios worked to court what they identified in their demographic studies as the largest film audience, teenagers. Doherty writes:
By 1955, they [teenagers] were hard to ignore: a statistical anomaly in population
distribution had converged with unparalleled economic prosperity to produce the
nation’s first generation of true teenagers. They were distinct from previous
generations of America’s young people in numbers, affluence and self-
consciousness: there were more of them, they had more money, and they were
more aware of their unique status. (Doherty 299)

The ability for teenagers, baby boomers, to exercise their power at the box office forced the
studios to find an entirely new way of looking at film audiences. In tapping into a younger base,
studios could shape audience consumption practices as the teenagers moved into aging
demographics. While continuing to acknowledge teenagers, studios realized they had a market
that was always going to be present. Doherty concludes, “Successive generations of teenagers
have demanded – and received – the kind of motion pictures that satisfy their special needs and
tastes and reflect their distinctive styles” (313). The population numbers of this growing
demographic were hard to ignore. According to the Census Bureau, this demographic (five to
fourteen years of age) was the largest single demographic in the US from 1950 to 1970 (qtd. in
Sedgwick 680). If exploited, this new demographic of moviegoers would single handedly
reshape audience viewing habits for the next fifty years. This new demographic, with disposable
time and money to spend in the theater, would not only profoundly effect the film production in
the 1950s but form an audience reception context that shaped film viewing well into the 1960s
and 1970s.

The challenge that studios faced in marketing directly to teens throughout the 1950s and
60s is, of course, the by-product of having to market to their parents who may object to images
and ideas that countermand their values. One way of accomplishing this task for Hollywood
marketers was to neutralize political overtones in advertising. What better way to market possibly didactic issues, then to offer up vague insinuations instead of hard political messages. Marketers at Warner Brothers went so far as to market the film *Woodstock* (1970), a three-hour documentary of the outdoor celebration, with a picture of a young naked couple having a playful romp in a pond and the superimposed statement “Love” (Bodroghkozy 49-50). By marketing the film as celebration of love, rather than sex, and effectively neutralizing the counterculture ideologies present in the concert event, Warner Bros. hoped to make the film more “acceptable” for parents to allow their teenagers to see the film.

Studios that marketed by vague concepts often drew harsh criticism. Aniko Bodroghkozy illustrates how deliberate changes in the marketing strategies of films such as *The Graduate*, *Easy Rider*, *The Strawberry Statement*, and *Woodstock* skewed the audience and critical expectations for the films. Bodroghkozy underscores the resentment and critical views expressed by underground newspapers towards these overt attempts to market counterculture films based on themes of love rather than the inherent political ideologies of the film (41, 51). While these marketing campaigns neutralized explicit political ideologies, the marketing ads drew resentment from critics for manipulating audiences and subverting the films’ messages. The critical resentment illuminates the studios’ problem of distributing independently-produced features. The audience expectations for a film must be invented by the industry’s marketing machine in the hopes of creating an audience. If a distributor wants to attempt to expand the profit potential of a film, then the distributor will set about manufacturing false expectations to enhance potential audience appeal for a film.

While some independently-produced films became back-end marketing nightmares, studios created films for specific audience demographic groups. In “From Roadshowing to
Saturation Release: Majors, Independents, and Marketing/Distribution Innovations,” Justin Wyatt outlines how independent filmmakers were able to capitalize on profits by making pictures aimed at specific audiences largely ignored by major studio releases (“Roadshowing” 67). The change in Hollywood business practices led to significant increases in television marketing budgets and product tie-ins by studio distributors. Like other film scholars, Wyatt labels Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* as the first breakout film to combine independent film production with a major studio financing and marketing machine in Universal (“Roadshowing” 78). When scholars discuss the development of the film industry at the end of the twentieth-century, they agree that the 1975 release of *Jaws* single-handedly marked the change from classical Hollywood to new Hollywood filmmaking. Now this is not to say that *Jaws* was the biggest budget commercial film made for its time, because Hollywood has always, at least since the 1920s, embarked on big budget films (Schatz “New Hollywood” 25). What this does mark is the financial rebirth of the film industry in the wake of economic and political crises of the 1970s. Thomas Schatz’s work on the rise of new Hollywood outlines the shift in studio business focus from being one-stop production/exhibition entities to being primarily financiers and distributors of independently-produced films.

The change studios made from making and marketing their own products to financing and marketing films made by independent producers led to profound changes within the industry. Economist John Sedgwick’s analysis of major studio releases shows that from 1946-1965 the number of in-studio productions decreased. While studios began distributing less in-house products, the amount of films produced independently and then distributed by major studios actually increased. Of the major studios Sedgwick studied (Columbia, Disney, Loews-MGM, Paramount, RKO, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal, and Warner Bros.), Disney was the only
studio to continue to produce and distribute its own films. By 1965, the other major studios were producing an average of twenty percent of the films they were distributing (Sedgwick 687). With the decrease of in-house productions, studios were no longer required to employ large workforces of diverse artistic talents. Instead, studio lots and sound stages became rental properties, where the talent would be hired and brought in from the outside. While a studio might bear the burden of financing films, the studios streamlined their costly salary budgets (686). The resulting focus on investing in products for an expected return, coupled with the cost-cutting measures of independent producing, helped the major studios from succumbing to the industry recession of the early 1970s.

Sedgwick’s industry analysis shows that the change by studios to financing and distributing more independent productions than in-house productions occurred over the course of a decade. Sedgwick shows that from 1956-1965 studios that distributed films targeted for growing markets profited more than films that could not find an audience. Sedgwick also notes that in order to position a film for a specific market, studios had to show how a particular film was worthy of time and consideration. Studios accomplished this task through product differentiation according to genre and the artistic talents. While this marketing technique was standard practice during the studio era, Sedgwick concludes that, “Such films, in providing extraordinary levels of utility, transcended traditional patterns of genre loyalty and achieved very high levels of market penetration” (702). In other words, while some scholars, like Schatz and Altman, might have one believe that genre was the main component driving the reception of films, Sedgwick points out that it was perhaps not only genre but also attention to audience demographics that drove the reception of films at the classical Hollywood studio era.
In addition to the changes in financing and distribution, Schatz observes that television also played an important role in redefining of Hollywood business practices. Schatz discusses the relationship of film studios and television culture in 1970s in relation to three factors: television advertising, the explosive popularity of the cable television industry, and the home-video revolution (“New Hollywood” 27-8). These three factors, all of which helped change the film industry and American culture itself, made it possible for Hollywood studios to streamline and change the focus of their business practice in fundamental ways. The products that resulted from this remarkable change sparked a renewed interest for studios in maximizing profits by insuring investment returns. In order to maximize returns, studio had to make sure that any products they released hit their target audiences as defined by market research and current cultural trends on television. The marketing strategy that has dominated much of the late twentieth-century was born out of an evolving corporate conglomerate environment that redefined how Hollywood approached big-budget filmmaking.

Defining the High Concept Film Musical

As I outlined in the introduction, an understanding that film industry practices (specifically marketing films) have a direct influence on the creation of films, especially during the late twentieth-century, is central to any analysis of genre development. It is especially important when examining the film musical. Justin Wyatt charts one, and arguably the most important, aspect of Hollywood production and marketing, the high concept business model. In his book *High Concept*, Wyatt observes that the marketability of a film in the new Hollywood environment of audience demographics relies on the labeling of the film by its “concept.”

According to Wyatt, the concept of the film “can be considered as a form of product differentiation within the mainstream film industry. This differentiation occurs in two major
ways: through an emphasis on style within the films, and through an integration with marketing
and merchandising" (Wyatt High Concept 7). Wyatt asserts that under this business model films
can be labeled as high concept or low concept. For example, a high concept film is a film that
marketers can boil down to very simple set of images or ideas for promoting to an audience. In
contrast, the low concept film is often times harder to explain and, by extension, harder to sell.
This process of producing high concept films culminates in three distinct phases of film
production that Wyatt calls: “the look, the hook, and the book” (High Concept 20-22). Simply
put by Wyatt, the high concept film is defined by “The look of the images, the marketing hooks,
and the reduced narratives [that] form the cornerstones of high concept” (High Concept 22). The
high concept film contains a specific aesthetic style that is a distilled set of images or ideas (such
as taglines or marketing tags) that create audience expectations for the entire film.

The look and book are the two most revolutionary models of the high concept model.
While studios have always sold films to audiences through unique “hooks,” it is up to the
filmmaker to deliver the “look” of the film to make the formulaic and truncated narrative seem
interesting. Wyatt explains that high concept films can be identified by the “style in the
production, narrative, and use of genre” (High Concept 105). The aesthetic style in a film’s
production generates images that in turn are used to market the film. According to Wyatt, the
high concept style relies on a set of production techniques composed of extreme backlighting, a
minimal (often almost black-and-white) color scheme, a predominance of reflected images, and a
tendency toward settings of high technology and industrial design” (High Concept 28). The goal
of the aesthetic style is to emphasize wealth and the latest technology. The more excessive and
lavish the lifestyle emulated in the film makes it easier to differentiate from its competition.
The high concept style employs an emphasis on intertextuality as a means of helping the audience gain entry into the film. The intertextuality of high concept films occurs in the invocation generic formations of narrative that simultaneously connect the film to other bits of popular culture and differentiate the film from other films. In order to be a film musical, the film must fulfill the expectations of the genre with music, song, and dance, but the high concept film musical must also find a way to be different from other musicals. These films often rely on intertextual references, called aspects of market differentiation by Sedgwick, and include references to popular contemporary culture, the use of stars and celebrities, and the application of mass media techniques from television and music videos. While celebrities and technological aspects help to solidify audience expectations of character and genre, the mediated integration of popular culture elements into film narrative changes narrative framing and editing. By including references to contemporary culture, the film is automatically “dated,” tied to a specific historical moment. These high concept films become historical artifacts somewhat losing the ability to speak and make meaning to audiences outside of its original context.

The rise of television directly affected the construction of film narratives in high concept films and the effect can be seen in changes in both editing and framing techniques. David Bordwell notes that most seventies films were edited with average shot lengths (ASL) in the double digits (ten seconds or more). Yet by the end of the 1970s, a large number of Hollywood films, in particular high concept films, had “ASLs between 4.3 and 4.9 seconds” (“Continuity” 17). Bordwell sees this shift in editing rhythm as both a product of technological advances, such as rack-focus smoothing and the non-classical integration of telephoto shots, and a shift in audience viewing habits as constructed by television. Bordwell is quick to privilege the technological innovations, but he gives another good reason for the cultural permutations of
television viewing habits by noting that directors and producers were encouraged by studios to move back and forth between mediums. The fluidity of professionals’ working environments helped bring television’s quicker ASLs (television programs, live and taped, often shared average ASLs of 5 seconds or less since the late 1950s), and television’s privileging of the medium and close shots to crystallize atmosphere and emotion on a smaller screen size (“Continuity” 22). As television matured, and as the two mediums competed for the same leisure time with their audiences, it was important to find ways in which viewing habits could be appealed to by both viewing mediums. By combining shortened shot-lengths with the introduction of Dolby optical sound (stereo sound on film), the rise of cable television and music television, the film industry attempted to keep up with the swiftly changing audience viewing habits created by broadcast television, cable television, and music television.8

With the increased amount and duration of shots, it became increasingly for high concept films to privilege visuals. In privileging a visual style through fast-paced editing, the high concept style relies on a simplified narrative to hook audiences and keep them involved throughout the film. These simplified narratives rely on affect to keep audiences invested in the film and the high concept style. Robert Baird writes, “I see in successful blockbusters a thoughtful anticipation of human cognition and emotion” (88). Drawing on the work of David Bordwell’s construction of hermeneutics, Baird proposes, “Blockbusters are artful, intelligent, and globally successful when they make a spectacle of cognition” (88). In other words, by anticipating and capitalizing on potential audience responses in the production of a blockbuster, the filmmaker not only narrows the gap of interpretation but also allows the audience to identify with the character or film’s emotional moments. This idea places the ability (or sometimes inability) to connect with an audience on the shoulders of the filmmaker. Baird implicitly agrees
upon what is expressly stated in Wyatt, namely that high concept and blockbuster films capitalize on emotion by helping the audience to easily identify with the visuals, emotion, and style of the film.  

Baird’s use of cognitive psychology as it relates to the construction of schemata in film narrative marks a departure from cultural studies analysis of blockbuster films. Baird’s work is significant in that he applies high film theory to the criticism of mass marketed (and often considered low art) films to show how blockbuster films do not rely solely on marketing to reach their audiences. While Baird applies his model to the films of Steven Spielberg, his work is applicable to the larger body of high concept films. Baird also provides a unique link between industry studies (in the work of Thomas Schatz and Justin Wyatt) and film theory. Baird’s analysis of *Jurassic Park* reveals a narrative schemata (noted by Bordwell to be signs in narrative construction) that capitalizes on the fears and threats of a mediated society. Baird notes that the deliberate attempt of Spielberg’s special effects animators to make the dinosaurs in the park resemble contemporary global animals gave the audience an immediate connection, regardless if the connection was conscious or subconscious (92). The deliberate narrative construction of *Jurassic Park* explicitly capitalizes on wildlife documentaries to set up curiosity in the audience and then delivers a payoff that not only reveals the creatures, but also makes them active in the forwarding of the plot. Boiling down the film to a style or set of images to capitalize on audience expectations relates more to the viewing of television than high art films.

Baird’s model helps to explain how the blockbuster film reaches its audience in the act of reception, but the author fails to explicate fully the anticipation created by the Hollywood marketing machine, especially as it relates to *Jurassic Park*. While it is extremely important to note that artists can anticipate audience expectations for a film, high concept films have shown
that schemata (as Bordwell describes it) are created not only in works of contemporary culture but also by the marketers, who work to insure the anticipation and subsequent successful reception of the film. Moreover, the high concept style produces in the audience patterns of reading influenced by prior high concept films. At the simplest level, one could explain *Jurassic Park*’s success by calling it by its hook “*Jaws* with dinosaurs.” The hook recalls past audience experience but differentiates it by adding the qualifier “dinosaurs.”

Along with the narrative conventions of genre, music serves an explicit function in the in the high concept film. It is useful to remember that for Wyatt the high concept style relies on “a simplification of character and narrative, and a strong match between image and music soundtrack throughout the film” ([High Concept](#) 16). Simplification of genre and reliance on music, especially using popular music, is a convention on which the film musical, and musicals in general, have relied from their very inception. The generic formation that draws upon music becomes a key selling point in the high concept film and the use of stars or “unique” vision becomes a site for product differentiation inside and outside of the genre.

Differentiation becomes increasingly difficult for the film musical genre. While everyone may have an idea of what they consider a musical, the question becomes how to differentiate one musical from another, especially if it is an integrated musical. This may be one of the reasons that musicals were often not as successful at the box office as other genres. By the late 1960s, onstage and onscreen, the stock characters and plots (boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy and girl sing about how much they are in pain over the loss, and then through some miraculous dues-ex-machina boy and girl are reunited with the community in song) had really run their course. At the very least, audiences had run out of patience for completely predictable structure and characters. As noted in the introduction, by the late 1960s musical theatre,
especially the work of Bob Fosse, Michael Bennett, and Stephen Sondheim, began to look critically on itself and the audience. While Jane Feuer and Thomas Schatz note that self-reflexive approach to narrative structure is a natural progression of genre, self-reflexivity is too complex for a high concept film. At the same time, the high concept film’s reliance on illusion, glossy images, and formulaic narratives over-accentuates the simplicity of the film musical genre. In the 1970s, audiences were fickle and not interested in seeing musicals that seemed to be pale imitations of musicals in the classical studio era.

With a heavy reliance on stock characters and action that moves smoothly from song to song, it would seem that the high concept model easily applies to the production of film musicals. In fact, many high concept films have a tendency to be called musicals because they rely so heavily on a combination of image and popular music. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Flashdance* (1983), *Staying Alive* (1984), and *Purple Rain* (1984) are four films that rely on musical soundtracks, but they do not feature the true integration of songs, as defined by classical film musicals. It is true that some of high concept films share some prominent features with film musicals. While both may occasionally feature characters singing and/or dancing within the diegesis, more often than not the films fail to share the “integrated” nature of songs in the film’s narrative. That is, these films fail to utilize songs consistently as integrated action in the film’s narrative.

The songs in non-musical high concept films serve as an outward expression of internal narrative emotional states, but they do not draw on the musical convention of characters’ self-expression. Instead, performative moments in high concept films often serve to fill out the environment of the film by attaching music to visuals. For example, in *Flashdance* Irene Cara’s “What a Feeling” accompanies a montage of shots that includes Alex (Jennifer Beals) welding
and dancing. Wyatt argues that imagery set to music establishes the hope in the audience that Alex is dancing to escape the “industrial wasteland” (High Concept 17). While the match between image and song expresses release for Alex from the role of oppressed worker, the lyrics of the song do little to move the action forward. The song sells a specific lifestyle. Wyatt writes:

    The cumulative effect of the films’ physical look, stars, music, and devalued characters is to offer the viewer an entry point into a lifestyle, in much the same way as lifestyles are suggested by advertising. Indeed, high concept’s basis in advertising fosters this suggestion of a method of living for the viewer. (High Concept 60)

The same could apply to a song like “Singin’ in the Rain.” The musical and dance interlude in both films are just that, interludes. Yet while “Singing in the Rain” is an outward expression of Don Lockwood’s emotions as expressed through Gene Kelly’s singing and dancing, “What a Feeling” replaces Beals’ potential singing voice with an external voice of another singer. The result is an incongruous match between Beals’ performance and external soundtrack. Beals is performing to a soundtrack that is not present in the world of the film. What is internal and personal in “Singin’ in the Rain” becomes external, alienating and only accessible through the audience’s personal re-enactment. While at home, it would be nearly impossible for me to replicate the soundstage rainstorm, much less the dancing steps of Gene Kelly, it would not be impossible to dance to Irene Cara. In other words, Flashdance is designed so that audience members can rise above the industrial wasteland created by the mediated lifestyle of the late twentieth-century by dancing out their frustrations at home.
While songs in film musicals share the integrated tradition of stage musicals, songs in most high concept films share the narrative and montage aspects of music videos and music television. While the song in a musical, especially the integrated musical, seeks to sell the action of the musical, the high concept song sells the lifestyle that audiences can share if they enter into the world of the film and/or purchase the product linked to the film. Songs in high concept films carve out a niche in the marketplace for the film and its soundtrack, two of the most directly linked products of the film. While a connection between the audience and the song is important to an understanding of plot and character in the film musical, it is economically integral to high concept film. Certainly and pessimistically, one could argue that all musicals are written to sell songs. Since the rise of the music publishing industry at the turn of the twentieth-century, musicals have featured songs that were also popular music. As the integrated musical became the prominent narrative mode in musical theatre, it became harder to separate the songs from their place in the narrative and sell them as stand-alone hits. Therefore, it would seem that the high concept film soundtrack functions much in the same way that songs in early vaudeville and musical revues functioned, to sell popular music to the audience rather than fully integrate action and character into a coherent narrative.

The use of integrated songs in a film musicals functions as a form of direct address to the audience. This is accentuated and altered in the high concept film musical. As integrated songs are composed to explicitly express specific issues of character or plot, the songs themselves narrow the interpretations of the audience to its simplest and most accessible. While low concept films often challenge the breadth of interpretation for a song, the high concept film has a marketable need to narrow the interpretation gap to simple, consumable emotions, lyrics, and song style. The easier the songs fit in the narrative, and the easier it is to divorce the song from
its integrated aspects, the easier a high concept song will be to sell to an audience. If audience members want to buy the single, they will probably want to buy the entire album because the album is the shortened version of the audience’s film experience. The continued experiencing of the film through the soundtrack requires that the album deliver the same messages and emotional content of the film experience. The narrowing of the interpretation gap in the high concept film relies on the conscious construction of narrative by the filmmakers, composers, producers, and marketers to convey a specific set of closed information to a culturally mediated audience.

Very few scholars are willing to acknowledge the direct affect that marketing and promotion have in the narrative construction of films. However, the marketing is often the first and last stop in creating audience expectations for an individual film. Wyatt notes that the high concept film relies as heavily, if not more heavily, on marketing to generate the box office revenue expected by the distributors than any other aspect of film production. John Sedgwick notes that the general approach of horizontal marketing, as seen in the use of genre or stars to promote a film, was particularly effective for films during the classical studio era (685-7).

The shift made by distributors during the 1960s and 1970s to a “vertical” marketing approach helped make the difference between modest earnings and blockbuster earnings. A “vertical” marketing approach necessitates that a film be promoted on a variety of aspects simultaneously. In other words, marketers look to tie all products (soundtrack, technology, product placement, toys, food goods, and virtually any other way a product ties itself to a film) together and promote them at the same time. Instead of trying to promote a film, and then after its release promote the film’s products, the vertical marketing approach requires that everything saturate the marketplace at relatively the same time, leading to a simultaneous saturation rather than a causal product relationship. The goal of vertical marketing is brand identification through
ad recognition. For example, Hershey’s paid Universal a reported one million dollars for an alien to eat their new candy. The new candy was Reese’s Pieces, and the alien was E.T.¹⁰

Vertical marketing becomes even more important as a way of reaching audiences at home. Instead of seeing commercials about a film, television viewers might see commercials that feature the film and the product, so that when they see the product again they are reminded of the film. The goal of vertical marketing ties the film to all of its ancillary products. Until high concept and blockbuster filmmaking, film-marketing tie-ins were conceived as secondary products to a film. A successful vertically marketing campaign for a film is going to provide revenue to all the product tie-ins. The success of a vertically marketed film can be measured, to some degree, by the revenues of its product tie-ins.¹¹ However as Sedgwick points out, in economics the success of a vertically marketed product is measured by the consumer’s ability to choose the originating product over its subsequent tie-ins (Sedgwick 689). Wyatt notes that the high concept film’s use of vertical marketing seeks equal success on all levels, such as seen in the production of *Star Wars* licensed merchandise. However, this is heavily dependent on availability of the first tier product (i.e. the film) to audiences. As far as film goes, the home-video revolution would make the first tier film product available to consumers in such a way as to help the audience gain all aspects of the film from the comfort of their couch. This implies that in a vertically marketed film, the more vertically diversified the marketing scheme and its product tie-ins, the more likely it is that a film will be successful. However, the film *Dick Tracy* (1990) showed Disney and the toy industry that this is not always the case. What this does show is that distributors attempt to control the reception of films through a complex relationship between product marketing and placement.¹²
For Wyatt, the vertical marketing schemes for high concept films rely on “packaging, rather than product design” (High Concept 105). Wyatt contends that all films are made with some segment of an audience in mind. If a film is made for a specific audience, then the marketing of the film must be focused towards getting that audience into the theater (High Concept 105). This is far from film as art for art’s sake and expresses an economic focus on the part of the studio. With the renewed economic focus playing out in the production of the film, the film is marketed on images from the film that signify style, attitude, and a lifestyle to which the audience can identify and aspire. The results are “designed to target a specific audience and to convey a strong image carrying the film through all the release windows” (High Concept 108). Strong images from the high concept aesthetic of the film are turned into marketable images that signify the entirety of the film experience to the audience. The images can then be combined with the other marketable aspects of the film, such as soundtrack, stars, and other products to further fuel audience expectations.

Wyatt writes, “the method of marketing films through music is based on integrating one medium (music) with another medium (film), while exploiting the market opportunities made possible through this intersection” (High Concept 139). Wyatt uses producer Robert Stigwood as an example of a producer who was able to capitalize on this intersection. Stigwood was the producing force behind Jesus Christ Superstar (1973), Tommy (1975), Saturday Night Fever (1977), and Grease (1978). Wyatt shows how Stigwood was able to insure stage success for Superstar, an idea echoed in theatre scholarship by Denny Martin Flinn, by releasing the soundtrack prior to the stage version. The buzz created in the popular music scene led potential audiences to the theatre. Instead of upper- and upper-middle class adults attending the theatre, musicals like Superstar, Hair, and in the 1990s stage musical Rent, appealed to the hard-to-reach
teens and young adult theatre audience. While film scholars like Wyatt and Schatz are quick to credit film studios with generating buzz and vertical marketing deployment, the musical and theatre producers have used the technique with success. However, with the market permeability of film, vertical marketing achieved much greater market saturation for film industry products that Broadway theatre has sought to equal with stage musicals and their product tie-ins.

The function of the soundtrack in high concept films also plays an important role in marketing the film to the public. Whereas classical cinema film score often played a subservient role to the visual imagery of film, the high concept and new Hollywood models raise the level of emphasis in the film soundtrack, especially in diegetic music (music within the scene and story world). Robert Shumway notes that in blockbusters like American Graffiti “popular music was used without a clear distinction between diegetic and extradiegetic origin” (42). However, in Flashdance, Top Gun (1986), and other high concept films, music is often non-diegetic and emphasized by its ties to the onscreen imagery. Not only is the style of matching music and imagery at play in the production of the high concept film, the combination of music and imagery looks more like a music video than integral part of the film narrative. Whether the audience has seen, plans to see, or never plans to see the film, the music video and songs of popular culture are important product tie-ins that inevitably become signs of the film. The result is a sign marketed to the audience that will “always” be inextricably bound to signify the film and their historical context.

Reni Celeste, Wyatt and others, have pointed out that use of Simon and Garfunkel songs in The Graduate (1967) “embodies a precise moment in time and space. The ennui and emergence of this one particular summer, its texture, its sensations, its memory, adheres to the song for an individual, community, or an entire generation” (Celeste 116). While The Graduate
predates high concept filmmaking, *The Graduate* taught Hollywood and high concept films that a strong tie between images and music could historicize a lifestyle. The popularity of *The Graduate* has led the film, and Simon and Garfunkle’s music, to be an example of American culture and life in late 1960s. High concept films would take this a step further by boiling down images and sounds to be signifiers of culture and life fashionable during the film’s release. As audiences leave the theatre, the lingering phrases or melodies of a song evoke the film’s striking images, and thus the lifestyle they should seek to live outside of the theatre. In broadcasting the songs on radio or television, the hope is that the song may draw some audiences to a film, but more even more so the repeated sounds, experienced after viewing, will evoke the initial pleasures of seeing the film and the continued perpetuation of the high concept lifestyle. This allows audiences the continual experience the pleasures of viewing the film, but they could do so from the comfort of their own home. As the popularity of home video rentals rose in the 1980s, audiences could continue to experience the film at home, in the car, and virtually everywhere available to the growing technology.

The continued consumption of a film at home or in the theater is tied to the ability of the film and its music to transcend its cultural temporality. Celeste notes that because of the temporality of popular music, a vast majority of scholars argue that the use of the popular is “too steeped in complicity with market forces and fashions of the moment” (118). Celeste implies that popular music limits the ability of film to serve up immediate and cogent ahistorical meanings. In drawing on the work of Francois Lyotard and Frederick Nietzsche, Celeste argues that the immediacy of the mediated presence of popular music evokes a biological response in the listener. In other words, popular culture has the potential to provide more immediately accessible and meaningful to mass audiences. Popular music is more closely tied to the everyday
act of living more so than a non-descript classical soundtrack. The immediate tie to day-to-day living has the potential to create visceral and concrete memories in the audience members. Celeste equates the Nietzschean idea of music as a representation of the Dionysian and Lyotardian idea of breath as the music of rhythm/life to connect the work of music’s ability to create a response in the listener. The author then draws upon the idea on animality as a means of cementing the memory in the biological being. The result is visceral memory relived and reinforced in every viewing, and reinforcement of memory becomes a source of pleasure for the audience. The marketers of the products create an expectation, false or otherwise, that the consumption of the film and the film’s music, and by extension product tie-ins, will reify the same visceral memories experienced while watching the film.

Wyatt’s work on high concept shows the capitalistic potential, and the ideological danger, in high concept films in that “the cross-fertilization of marketing efforts and their inseparability from the film – encourage an endless consumption of the high concept films” (High Concept 145). If there is a strong enough tie between the film and the music, the audience will want to buy the soundtrack. To some degree, film marketers are selling hope for the audience that they can experience the same feelings of the film while consuming the products. In other words, everyone can turn his or her 1979 Plymouth Horizon into Stallone’s Lamborghini from Rocky IV or Tom Cruise’s F-16 from Top Gun. By getting the audience to invest at all levels of the marketing plan, the studio conglomerates, and the corporate partners who pay to have their products represented in high concept films hope the renewed interest in the soundtrack will lead the audience members to the theater or, even better, back to the theater to experience the combination of music and images. Marketing lifestyle to consumers distinguished the high concept model from other marketing strategies employed by the film industry. While classical
Hollywood films had some tie-ins such as sheet music, recordings, books, lunch boxes, posters, high concept film marketing has a tendency to homogenize and repeat the visual and aural memories of the film at all levels of a vertical marketing brand. This entire scheme is commiserate and contingent on clear and defining images from the film regardless of how different individual films actually are.

Based on the explication of high concept film as both a model for production and marketing, it would be easy for me to propose a model of the high concept film musical as a musical that draws on the aspects of high concept style (monochromatic color schemes coupled with backlighting and visions of high technology), simplifies narrative conventions through stock characters and the stars that fill the roles, and deploys a vertical marketing technique to ensure a profitable return at the box office. This one-sided view of the film musical as a product produced to an audience fails to account for the reception of messages of high and low concept film musicals. While the lack of a vertical marketing approach in films like Fame (1980) or Newsies (1992) might explain why they failed to connect with their targeted teen audiences, it certainly does not explain how or why audiences connect or fail to connect with a specific film musical. In other words, product tie-ins and marketing are just one part of the equation. The meanings produced to and received by the audience are the other part. So what is it about some high concept films and high concept film musicals that reaches, touches, and continues to speak to audiences? Aside from the toys and product tie-ins, what ideas are produced and promoted to audiences that entice them to invest in the subsequent product tie-ins? What hopes or feelings can the audience experience by consuming every potential aspect promoted and tied to a film?
Scholars and critics are particularly hard on high concept films. As creations of capitalistic excess, high concept films often represent everything that is wrong with Hollywood. Chris Rojek writes:

High concept is the apotheosis of the cultural impresario’s art. It reduces aesthetic and narrative concept to the lowest economic denominator of the marketplace. The ramifications of a single sensational idea are worked out obsessively, but without interest in commenting on, or reforming, culture or society. High concept might be defined as mass entertainment without reflection.

(140)

Despite the ideological trappings of high concept films, audiences continue to invest in the film and their product tie-ins. It seems possible that there is something about high concept films, an ideological precept outside of the need to “consume,” that entices audience investment. This becomes even more important as we begin to look at the difference in narrative structure created by high concept and low concept film musicals.

Stephen Greenblatt notes that William Shakespeare’s plays were not the only discourses of power present in Elizabethan England. Greenblatt writes, “For if at moments we can convince ourselves that Shakespeare is the discourse of power, we should remind ourselves that there are usually other discourses more powerful…that are instrumentally far more important” (Shakespearean 163). While high concept was and continues to be influential in the process of Hollywood filmmaking, it was not the only way of making films in Hollywood from 1970-2002. However, it was an extremely powerful and prominent business model. What is especially important about high concept is that it offered an ideology of capitalist consumption that was wildly popular with audiences. It changed the way audiences viewed films by blurring the
boundaries between image and music, film and popular culture. When we begin to examine these issues as they influenced the production and reception of film musicals, we must remind ourselves that high concept was a way of delivering product and ideology to American audiences. The issue becomes what products and ideologies are being promoted and delivered to audiences of films and the film musicals in the high concept business model? What does this tell us about audiences who invest or fail to invest in high concept film musicals?
Obviously, Utopia is not present in all musicals. In fact, there are musicals in which the individual begins to take precedence over the communal whole. In productions like *A Chorus Line* or *All That Jazz*, the individual characters seek their own needs within the same dystopic social context over which they have little control. For all the numerous personal reasons, producers and artists collaborate to bring about a good, profitable film musical. However, the reception of the production is not only marked by the production values but also the audience’s reception context. In certain contexts, the audience’s ability to invest in the film musical is contingent on their ability to identify with the community of characters onscreen. Therefore in the production of musicals, it is not only popular but also extremely important for utopic film musical choruses to sing and dance in harmony. This does not explain the popularity of dystopic musicals where community is shown to be neither harmonious nor communal. In fact, the tension created between the individual and the community in dystopic musicals can also provide a site of identification for audiences. In a film musical, the individual is at odds with the larger society, and this proves popular at times when individuals in a society are taught to recognize the “dystopic” events in the society. These dystopic musicals represent a society not built on equality and order but inequality and chaos. The same could be said for any representation that is not wholly utopic or dystopic. Dystopic film musicals that challenge the construction and ideologies of utopia will be examined at length in chapters IV and VII.

To broaden our understanding of why, how, and what messages and feelings are promoted by or can be read by an audience in high concept film musicals, we must examine what can be read into certain film musicals produced in the last thirty years. Specifically, we need to understand how high concept film musicals allowed American audience to experience feelings of
Utopia and manage feelings of anxiety. By facilitating utopic experiences of upscale lifestyles, high concept film musicals in the late twentieth-century continued to engage audiences in ways that were similar to studio era musicals.

The Precepts of Utopia

Historically, the idea of Utopia has its roots in Plato’s Republic, Sir Thomas More’s Utopia, some of the precepts of Francois Diderot, some conventions of the nineteenth-century novel, and even more recently in some of the writings of Twentieth-century science fiction novelists. Whether Utopia is the Republic or More’s island, the fundamental notion of Utopia is tied to the metaphoric, allegoric, or direct representation of space. David Harvey declares that Utopia is a spatial form that “controls temporality, an imagined geography [that] controls the possibility of social change and history” (Harvey 160). In essence, Utopia is a place, but as More noted, Utopia, like the film musical, is literally and figuratively “no where.” Regardless of the geographic setting, representations of Utopia carefully and deliberately manage social evolution and history. In such a controlled setting, subjects of the Utopia not only have to strive to maintain the system but also have to be willing to subject themselves to the system and sacrifice the possibility of individual change. The individual is integral to the achievement of Utopia, but Utopia is achieved, managed, and maintained socially, not individually. From such a simple idea of contained space, we can begin to see how Utopia is not only a powerful and potentially dangerous tool for the society and the individual but the film musical.

Yet how is there power in something that does not and cannot exist in any real world sense? The power of Utopia lies in the often misunderstood function of Utopia as an ideal place. Throughout history, Utopia has been characterized as an ideal, a place that represents the height of human development. Yet, how many in today’s technologically advanced world would wish
for Plato’s Republic or More’s Island of Utopia? In fact, More’s Utopia was not an ideal place, nor did it attempt to portray an ideal solution for English society in the early 1500s (Donner 59). Instead, Utopia was More’s solution of how to incorporate Christian ideology into a disparate and divided contemporary society. As More would set the prime example for Utopia, the utopias that followed would also portray a society already in progress, a wishful vision for a future without showing its contemporary society a way of achieving it.

Regardless if it can be achieved, Utopia can represent for the audience something for which to guard against or strive to achieve. Yet, how does the film musical play upon this notion? Granted, it would be a special place for people to burst into song to express their emotions, emotions that when joined by the chorus enforces the ideal of communal understanding (but certainly not equality). What is important about Utopias and film musicals is that both are carefully crafted narrative spaces with conventions and understandings that allow the audience glimpses of ideas applicable to their reception context. Film musicals may represent visions of an ideal world, but they are a crafted and unattainable set of ideals that are just as reliant on the creation context of the musical as the setting of the musical.¹

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Whether on stage or screen the convention of song in the utopic film musical is an outward expression of community, a momentary connection between the individual and the community around a shared set of lyrics, orchestrations, and dance steps. Fredric Jameson notes that Utopia, regardless of hegemony or Marxism, is itself an “affirmation of collective solidarity” (Unconscious 291). Utopia expresses a community that, for the most part, willingly concedes individuality towards the larger social ideals. This becomes especially important when looking at the individual members of the chorus. The individual becomes subservient to the ideals of the lead often singing harmony with and dancing back up for the leads.
While the sacrifice of the individual to the larger communal goals opens the Utopia to critique, Jameson points out that Utopia in and of itself is a politically inert idea because it does not and cannot exist. If that is the case, then Utopia becomes an ideological vehicle for the process of representation and reading. While bursting into song may seem more of an expression of madness than an ideological act, how the film depicts the unfolding of song, the reasons behind a character breaking into song, and what and how the character sings, represents the ideological power of Utopia in high concept film musicals. However as I noted in the introduction, there are crises and problems in the depiction of solidarity because solidarity in Utopia, and to some degree community, implies a community free from difference. In reality, solidarity is a force of revolution, which rises to overthrow based on the repression of opposition and difference. This idea does not explain the alienation created in dystopic film musicals, such as *Cabaret* and *All that Jazz*. In these dystopic film musicals, the solidarity of the community is put into question by the actions or inability of the individual to conform to an enforced community.

If utopias express solidarity they must simultaneously manage and/or repress any appearance of difference. Those characters that are allowed to burst forth from the community in song, do so only because the community allows them to. What does the Utopia say about those who are happy to be belting out the chorus roles with glee and gratitude (aside from the happiness of performing and being paid to perform thus allowing the actor to eat)? Moreover, why should audiences be glad to consume the ideals presented by performers whose talent levels most could never achieve? To have solidarity in a community, those in the community must buy into or be willing to invest their lives in service to the ideals of the communal whole. Jameson postulates, “To rewrite the concept of a management of desire in social terms now allows us to
think repression and wish-fulfillment together within the unity of a single mechanism, which
gives and takes alike in a kind of psychic compromise or horse-trading” (Reader 138). Utopia
serves a binary function that upholds and represses the desire for difference. At the same time,
repression occurs not only in the community but also in the mind of the individual.

The individual in the community achieves the ideal community by repressing his or own
individuality in favor of the communal goals. An individual must have a specific purpose within
the collective, but they cannot seem or assume to be better than anyone else in the collective. In
order to be truly utopic individuals bursting forth from the mass of the chorus must ultimately be
serving the ideals of the community. If they do not, the individual runs the risk of being pushed
out of the Utopia. The role of the individual in forwarding the communal Utopia works in
classical Hollywood film musicals because the community serves to back up a highly talented
star with greater cultural capital than the average chorus person. In Grease, a whole chorus of
high school-looking students backs up Sandy and Danny’s love story. The chorus of high
schoolers serves the leading love story and the rules established by the film’s high school setting.
While some may be just as talented or even more talented than the leads, they give up their
individuality to fulfill the hormonally crazed choral mass. In contrast, we could look at how the
Master of Ceremonies in Cabaret retains his individuality in the face of the Nazi’s rise to power.
Instead of becoming a faceless member of the Fascist masses, the film shows the compromise the
Emcee and Sally must make to continue to keep their individuality.

Tension is a part of Utopia. Kenneth MacKinnon writes about the tension between the
leading performer and the chorus. Mackinnon points out “there is another, more attractive, more
perfectly realized, person waiting to burst out of the human limits imposed on the individual”
(44). As Utopia requires individuals to repress their individuality in favor of the community,
leads can only lead if the choruses allow them to. In fact, the classical Hollywood structure promotes an ideal that the community is there to serve the needs of the individual star whom the community, studio, or audience sees as worthy of leading (by talent, stardom, or otherwise). Thus, the individual star comes to embody the mood, attitude, style, and/or ideological messages of the Utopia in the high concept film musical. Therefore, any depiction of Utopia in the film musical has tension, but implies a strict social and unclear political order. This says more about audiences willing to consume representations of Utopia than the willingness of performers to create Utopia. After all, producers and artists have to eat, and the willingness of the chorus to sing, smile, and dance in unison while wearing often identical costumes helps to promote a feeling of Utopia is a result of production practices more than inherent ideological readings. Since the process of creating Utopia can be read as a combination of production and reception, the question then becomes how do filmmakers, producers, and marketers transmit the ideology of Utopia to the consumers of film musicals through the process of its production and reception.

Performance and Utopia in the Film Musical

As established in our interdisciplinary model of the musical, it becomes important for us to examine how musical theatrical performance affects the audience’s ability to identify with and become a willing part of Utopia in the process of reception. Since Utopia results from the process of creation of a space that manages difference, it is beneficial for us to look at how the performative act can facilitate the reception of Utopia, especially in film musicals. As Utopia is a crafted space, in the case of the musical the transaction between performer and audience can produce an atmosphere of community. Writing on the popularity of musical theatre, David Savran states:
No theatre form [outside of the musical] is as single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away. This utopian - and mimetic – dimension of the musical (linked to its relentless reflexivity) makes it into a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced. (Savran 216)

While Savran is writing about the stage musical, the argument applies to the film musical in the abstract sense, which has historically relied on reading formations created by stage musicals to facilitate audience expectations. The fact that the musical presents a world where the community and the individual sing in multiple harmonies free from individual restraint, can be extremely seductive to audience’s who are restrained by their social, political, and economic contexts. This is important because as stage musicals are adapted for the screen, the audiences carry with them some of the expectations of the musical created in the theatre. Just as theatre audiences are willing to suspend their disbelief, classical film musical audiences were just as willing to their disbelief, despite the naturalistic aspects of the medium. As audiences in the 1970s came to see their social and political realities as unbelievable, studios relied on high concept practices to make the suspension of disbelief an appealing idea, again.

Utopian philosopher, George Kateb postulates, “utopian life can be defined as a condition of the largest number of pleasurable sensations, or pleasurable sensations of the greatest intensity, or some compromise of the two” (Kateb 242). Perhaps it would be beneficial for us to look at Utopia, especially in the reception of an artistic performance, as a carefully crafted system that uses the hope of experiencing these “pleasurable sensations” as the means by which audiences are seduced. In watching the musical, the music and performance combine to present
worlds that beg the audience to become involved. There is a biological and almost spiritual (certainly in a humanistic sense) experience of feeling promoted, and often achieved, by the presentation and consumption of Utopia in the musical. As the high concept business model builds pleasure out of consumption, the high concept film musical crafts a Utopia based on classical musical expectations, but it also depicts a vision of contemporary life that can be consumed rather than believed. In other words, high concept film musicals as sights of pleasure and consumption, audiences can literally buy into the idea of musical. Just as one might believe in the consumption of Utopia, audiences were willing to buy into dystopic musicals that were realistic because they depicted the alienation and problems of a contemporary society. Dystopic film musicals succeeded to some degree because audiences were not asked to suspend their disbelief.

As utopias in musicals rely on the performance of feelings of Utopia by the community, it is important for us to consider the role performance plays in conveying aspects of Utopia and dystopia. In her most recent work on theatre and Utopia, Jill Dolan explicates the interaction between performer and audience to chart how performance can create feelings of communal Utopia. Dolan notes, largely through personal reflection and experience, that the process of performing and viewing achieves full facilitation of meaning and power when it achieves a moment of collective Utopia. Yet unlike Altman, Schatz, and Richard Dyer, Dolan believes that the Utopic desires can only be achieved if the audience desires to be an integral part of the performance. Dolan states that “the desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us, if not expressly political then usefully emotional, expression of what utopia might feel like” (456). While Dolan centers the facilitation of Utopia in the willingness of the audience to go with the performance, other scholars like Dyer and Schatz will center the production of utopia in
the text of the performance itself. I agree with Dolan that Utopia in live performance is reliant on both the process of production and the process of reception. However, Dolan is too quick to privilege the process of reception over the process of performance. In order to fully understand the relationship of meaning creation and reception in the film musical, we must look at how film musicals are created to contain meanings and how an audience can read those meanings.

The problem with privileging either side in the relationship between production and reception suppresses the true power and collaborative nature of the performative process. Just as utopias are communities, the process of production and reception is part of a communal context influenced by the events in history and society. Audiences during the early 1970s are going to read different meanings in film musicals than audiences in the 1990s. Audiences are seduced by performance in different ways and at different times. While the dystopic *Cabaret* was one of the top ten grossing films of 1972, the dystopia gave way to *Grease*’s high concept Utopia which would earn nearly five times more at the box office just six years later. If we only use Dolan’s audience-centered reception of Utopia in performance, we will fail to account for the production’s ability to seduce an audience, especially through high concept. In other words, the feelings of utopia and the utopian performative can reach the willing audience only if the performer provides access to the Utopia. For performers in film musicals it is more than being “on” and for audiences it is more than just watching a “good film,” it is a complex combination of both that produces powerful and engaging performance experiences.

The momentary feelings of Utopia and the hope of consumers to be involved in such feelings grow exponentially when placed under the auspices of high concept vertical marketing. By controlling production and reception of at all levels, the high concept model provides the hope of achieving Utopia in nearly every aspect of life. This is increasingly intriguing when we
begin to consider how, and more importantly, why the audience is so willing to find these feelings of Utopia in everyday life. In other words, high concept film musicals and high concept marketing give the audience hope of re-experiencing Utopic feelings, and they can entice them to suspend disbelief by spending hard-earned money and time. Likewise, the reception context can help to influence audiences to spend their hard-earned money and time re-experiencing or coping with dystopic times or aspects of society. This becomes even more complicated in a musical such as Chicago where Utopia is centered in the imagination of the individual thus giving the individual the means for coping and celebrating in a contemporary, yet dystopic society.

With Utopia being communal by its very nature, this experience must also be communal in its production. Therefore, a strong connection to the Utopia is something to strive for in the preparation of a production, not just its reception. While an audience member may identify an individual, it is important to remember that in Utopia, the individual is a member of a social collective. In the high concept and classical film musical, the collective is often the chorus, and the more the audience identifies with the individual at the head of the collective, the easier it is for the audience member to experience the feelings of Utopia. The desire for the masses to lead gives the utopian structure of classical Hollywood and high concept film musicals their power. For instance, in accentuating the communal aspects of Utopia present in the chorus singing with the lead, the audience can project themselves into the role of lead with a community singing and dancing with them. Moreover, in the process of reception, the audience who watches and sings together stays together. The high concept film musical gives the audience the false hope that those who consume together stay together. When in reality, those with the capital to place themselves at the head of the masses have little reason to consume hope of leading the chorus.
To understand this, it is appropriate to look at Adam Roberts’ critique of Jameson’s philosophy of Utopia and the inherent fallacies implied in communal order. Roberts remarks:

For Jameson, the danger with Utopian thinking is that it assumes a uniformity, a conformity: it has often been imagined as a place where everybody is happy in the same way, where people miraculously fit harmoniously with other people because nobody sticks awkwardly out from the whole. (108)

Such is the danger of the high concept film musical. Rarely is the performer at odds with the chorus. Instead, the chorus often serves as a sounding board for the ideas of the main character. Thus, these musicals give the illusion that everyone is striving for the same goal as the lead character. Because, in identifying with the lead, the individual audience member gets hopes they can escape or replace, if only for a moment, their own personal feelings of disillusionment and or alienation by consuming the high concept lifestyle. In consuming, the audience member dances and sings with a community based on a culture of consumption given by the false hope of Utopia present in the high concept musical.

The film musical is not always a representation of Utopia, but it has a tendency to produce of feelings of Utopia, as observed by Richard Dyer in classical Hollywood film musicals and confirmed by Dolan in analyzing theatrical performance. In becoming a part of a collective, or sharing the feelings of the collective, the audience can share or identify with the feelings portrayed. These feelings arise out of the audience’s “need” to be a part of the collective, and the hope that the community will share their values. Aurel Kolnai defines Utopia “as life without alienation” (176). Kolnai goes on to define alienation as the process by which the audience is “confronted with what it is not [themselves]: the landscape of alerity which constitutes [their] world – indeed, defines [their] world as such” (176). In other words, alienation occurs when a
person is confronted with the inability to or lack of control of money, values, ethics, cultural representations, harmony between individuals, construction of consciousness, dependence of social progress and process on “tests of justice and rational order” (Kolnai 176). While utopic film musicals tie the community together in performative expression, dystopic film musicals depict a lifestyle that alienates the individual from the community. In *All that Jazz*, Joe Gideon is cut off from society by his compulsive obsessions and the community’s inability to help him feel an integral part. Instead, business and art runs Gideon’s life until his body and spirit literally give out. Kolnai states simply “Alienation is reality: *selfhood in its limitation*” (emphasis in original, 176). Such alienation, Kolnai argues, breed isolationism and is the force that inspires the masses to react to their limitations (177). The fear of alienation and the undeniable acceptance into the community by being able to sing and dance along with the chorus may be the shred of inspiration the audience needs to invest. In *Cabaret*, Sally Bowles is confronted with her need to perform and her unwillingness to conform to gendered societal roles.

According to Kolnai, the final product of Utopia is a sense of super-alienation where “all domination of reality by the utopian idol places man in a medium utterly divorced from (though, in its contents, not altogether unrelated to) his everyday concerns, traditional categories and spontaneous self-activity” (179). In becoming a part of the utopian world, the utopian is held hostage by an entirely ethereal idea that is not concerned with the day-to-day activities of living. Utopia, Kolnai concludes, “converts the world into ‘one house’, if not ‘one hall’” (180). This is no more apparent than in the film musical where audience, singer, dancer, orchestra, and mise-en-scène come together for the showstopper number. In the showstopper, the ballad, or even the curtain call, the audience has the power to sing and dance in the same hall, under the same feelings of Utopia, and ultimately portraying, promoting, and consuming the same ideologies.
For Kolnai, Utopia’s displace undesirable people to the outside of the collective. So depending on whose perspective from which one examines the utopia, Utopia can be equal to winning the lottery or being forced to live outside of communal happiness. From the inside, Utopia is living the ideal dream, but from the outside, the Utopia can be a dystopic hell. Commercial success is not wholly dependent on how well a film musical depicts Utopia or Dystopia. It depends on how well the individual film conveys its message and how willing an audience is to its reception. Moreover, Utopia itself is not a singular ideal. In fact, Utopia is a spectrum of ideals based on perspective. For Hitler, Nazism was his Utopia. For death camp inhabitants, Nazism was a Dystopia. I make this point not to downplay the realities of that dichotomy, but I use it illustrate simply how Utopia and Dystopia is a matter of perspective. As film musicals of the studio era tended to promote the world of the musical as utopic, contemporary film musicals rely on perspective. The ability of the film musical to position itself with a depiction that closely related to the social context of the audience had a better chance at commercial success (Cabaret and Grease) than those film musicals that failed to connect with any audiences (A Chorus Line).

The notion that the performer/audience dynamic helps to create utopic moments is not only contained to live performance in the theatre. The idea of Utopia applies to other methods of musical performance, including opera, and the expectations created in their reception. Dragan Klaic notes that opera, like musical theatre, is a genre with utopian tendencies in which the director's work “not just for prestige, power, or narcissistic satisfaction, but to satisfy their own utopian aspirations” (“Sustained” 64). In Klaic, we find a connection between the performative Utopia and its conscious creation by artists. For Klaic, there is something, conscious or unconscious, in the artist that fuels the desire to achieve communal Utopia in performance and
reception. The act of creation for Klaic in opera is rooted in Wagner’s ideals of gesamtkunstwerk, of which I have already discussed, but it reaffirms Harvey’s notion of utopic space. Opera, especially as Wagner perceived it, and music performance that implies a singular creative head attempts to portray the world as one unifying voice can see it. Through rehearsal and performance of the musical, the cast, designers, and crew, willingly commit to the portrayal, in essence enacting the Utopia. Regardless, of any conflict, the ultimate hope of the production is that “the show must go on,” especially with the appearance of external perfection. Therefore, production process itself is a type of utopic enactment that seeks to create meanings that provoke feelings from the audience. Again, depending on the perspective, performance can be utopic or dystopic. Either way, the performance can be read as an ideology created by the process of production and reception. When you apply this idea to our model of the film musical, the film musical becomes a carefully crafted transaction whose representations enable audience investment. The easier the entrance into the world of the musical for the audience, the easier it becomes to facilitate the reception of the ideologies present in the performance text.

Utopia as Ideology in the Film Musical

Utopia is not only pleasurably crafted and communal but, as Frederic Jameson shows, Utopia is also ideological. In building on the communal aspects of Utopia, Jameson shows how Utopia contains an inherent ideological reading. Jameson points out that “works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated” (Reader 142). Even though Jameson applies his work to mass culture, of which theatre and the musical are a part, Jameson seems to agree with Savran’s view of Utopia in theatre that there must be something present in the work that entices
audience investment. Therefore, the ideological function of Utopia in the film musical, as a work of mass entertainment, occurs in the process of reception. By seducing the audience with the expectation of a return on their investment, there must be something in the work, or expectation of the work, that facilitates the reception of ideology built into the film. Likewise, there must be something in the reception context that prepares the audience’s reading of ideology in the work. To understand the ideologies contained and produced in works of mass culture, of which film musicals are a part, we can look at how the work produces utopic feelings through production and reception. More importantly, we should begin to look at the feelings produced in the consumption of Utopia and Dystopia present in specific film musicals from the last thirty-years.

While the performance reception theory helps to describe how audience is expected to invest in reading film musicals, it does not completely explain how producers craft or entice audiences to invest in utopic representations of high concept film musicals. This becomes increasingly complex when we begin to look at the medium of film. In theatre, the process of transmission and reception is a live performative dynamic. In film, the performance context is fixed, and the reception context becomes the changing dynamic. The interchange between audience and reception context affects the audience’s ability to make meaning of the film. In theater, the audience can directly influence the performance with laughter, applause, and tomatoes. However, if someone throws a tomato at Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney performing onscreen in a movie theater, Judy and Mickey will continue to dance unphased by the social outburst. The framing and representation of Utopia of “putting on a show that always goes perfectly” is forever captured on the medium of film.
As a work engineered and marketed for consumption by a mass audience, the high concept film musical, as an evocation of Utopia, serves much of the same ideological ends of mass culture as identified by Jameson:

[Mass culture] allows us to grasp mass culture not as empty distraction or ‘mere’ false consciousness, but rather as a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be ‘managed’ or repressed. …mass culture entertain[s] relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are their raw material; …mass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony. (Reader 138)

For Jameson, works of mass culture draw upon real-world material and provide the audience with the appearance of managing the material. This often appears in the happy ending of most works that cater to mass culture. For film musicals, this is usually present in the eleven o’clock number (“Oklahoma”) or the finale (“Lady is a Tramp” or “Guys and Dolls”). Jameson further shows that in utopian and ideological representations, “anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness” (Reader 142). If both hope and anxiety are at work in the same collective consciousness, then works of Utopia present hope by managing anxiety. The illusion and transformational power of managing real-world anxiety through hope is a powerful tool of seduction at play in representations of Utopia.

In his critical reading of Jameson’s writings, Adam Roberts writes that for Jameson “the Utopian imagination has often worked by a process of exclusion and pushing away. In other
words, Utopias have often not solved the problems of society but just expelled them outside their boundaries” (108). Therefore, the Utopia achieves social harmony by pushing difference outside the actual setting. In naturalistic representations of film, the narrative space is a fictitious world that implies a presence of a world that exists beyond the borders of the frame. In order for a film to achieve Utopia, the world must push difference not only beyond the frame but also from the story world itself. If difference is moved beyond the frame, then the only way to acknowledge the loss is by the audience’s noting the erasure. The two strands of the film musical genre appeal to different audiences that can be distinguished by their interest or disinterest in locating and identifying what has been erased.

The notion that classical Hollywood musicals do not serve all audiences is central to Richard Dyer’s idea of “Entertainment as Utopia.” To some extent, this idea is implied in the work of Rick Altman. For both Altman and Dyer, the film musical displays a world that presents a hopeful Utopia of white heterosexual capitalistic ideals. This ideal represses and manages any potential difference. Dyer is quick to apply his ideas extremely broadly. Indeed, that may work for reading films produced during the Hollywood studio era where power structures, both in the studio and in American society, hold places of privilege for upwardly mobile white heterosexual males and families. However, it does not work so well in social instability created by the defeat in Vietnam, the rise of feminism, and the changing dynamics of race relations. It would be correct to make the argument that in order to hit a rising middle-class audience born out of the Hollywood studio era, the new Hollywood business model would draw heavily on the classical film musical ideal of Utopia. Nevertheless, to assume that high concept did so all the time discounts the specific nature of product differentiation and marketing, much less the audience reception context. In fact, a reading of Utopia in the film musical requires attention to the
combination of temporality, production, and reception to specific film musicals from 1970-2002. In specific historical moments, audiences responded to visions of Utopia while they responded to depictions of Dystopia in others. Since representations of Utopia are based on perspective of the characters involved in the Utopia, it becomes increasingly important to examine the depictions of Utopia created in specific historical moments, and how those depictions helped to create and extend the two branches of the film musical genre.

It is easy to fall into the trap of analyzing the film musical solely based on the reception of generic narrative formation or solely on the process of meaning creation influenced by business practices. However, because the musical already carries the narrative baggage of lead characters bursting into song, the high concept film musical challenges the need for the analysis of general narrative form. It is helpful to look at the off-screen presences in the film musical. By its very nature, the film musical assumes a narrative convention that fully defines a fixed off-screen presence. According to Altman and Dyer, the film musical requires that the audience be involved in the communal expression of song. Therefore in the high concept film musical, the off-screen presence is the audience, whenever and whomever they are. By consuming, the off-screen audience can have the hope of achieving the utopia high concept lifestyle depicted in the film.

In the film musical, the off-screen presence does not reveal any information because classical film and stage musicals encourage the audience to celebrate with the performer not contradict them. High concept film musicals such as Grease and Beauty and the Beast encourage the audience to consume in silence, because no matter what, the audience can never affect the outcome in the fixed film medium. In addition, while the high concept film musical contains some of the features of blockbuster films as defined by Wyatt, the high concept model
relies on the transmission of reading formations created and pushed by stage musicals. Since the high concept model requires that the audience find convincing every aspect of the film world, the high concept film musical assumes that the audience is the off-screen consumer to be played to and seduced by its marketing, stars, songs, and Utopia.

If, as utopist Martin E. Marty claims, utopic works are in essence “some version of a search of order” (52), then what order is sought in the utopic film musical? Bertell Ollman writes that the search for order implies power within the searcher, and that power lies in the imagination of the utopian reader. Ollman writes:

> There is without any doubt the motivation to achieve a better, happier, more secure, and more fulfilling life in all of us, and our imagination has a role to play both in helping us clarify what this is and in stimulating us to act upon it. To this extent at least, the roots of the emancipatory project can be said to exist within human nature itself. (Ollman 79)

For Ollman and Marty, Utopia portrayals imply injustice in the contemporary world. While Utopias may not give specific tools to cure contemporary societal ills, representations of Utopia give audiences hope. It is a hope that can inspire audiences to find their own solutions to contemporary problems. In striving for order with hope, the Utopia works not as a blueprint but as a goal. Ollman notes that the production of hope is a powerful tool: “Touching on hitherto unsuspected sources of pleasure, it can also heighten people’s dissatisfaction with the oppressive routines of daily life, piquing the desire for something better” (Ollman 88). The question becomes what better way of life for American audiences is depicted in film musicals during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s?
Altman and Richard Dyer’s reading of studio era film musicals as utopias that represent the ideals of white heterosexual hegemony fails to explain the broadly appealing reception of film musicals to diverse audiences. There are plenty of late twentieth-century film musicals that counter Altman’s argument that the film musical is an enactment of the heterosexual courtship ritual (including *Cabaret*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*). Theatre and performance studies scholar, Stacy Wolf offers a way of explaining the ability of audiences to find shreds of similarity in performances that may not wholly embody their individual values. Wolf writes that musicals onstage and screen can be read and accepted by a widely diverse audience that is not always represented in the Utopic vision of the film. Wolf uses *Sweet Charity* (1969) as an example:

Conventional interpretive practices would locate *Sweet Charity* as a musical of defeat – she cannot get a man…. But in terms of performance…the female star…emerges as performatively triumphant…. Charity might not be married, but she sings in the end and the audience loves it…. What is the enduring appeal of this character? Through her virtuosity and her power in performance, she spills outside the confines of the narrative into a glimpse, truly, of something better than this. (Wolf “Feminist Utopia” 328)

Wolf provides us with just one of many examples of how performance and feelings of Utopia within contemporary film musicals can appeal to diverse audiences. Wolf also notes that the power of star performance can counter and produce hope in an otherwise dystopic world. To some feminists, *Sweet Charity* could be a Utopia, but to other viewers Charity as the ideal powerful, unmarried woman is not something to be promoted. Wolf’s book-length project, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*, works to prove that
persons that do not share the same cultural or political viewpoints as white, heterosexual American culture can find not only hope but also appealing characters and messages in the film musical. This directly counters Richard Dyer’s argument that Utopia, as it appears in the film musical, represses difference and fails to include alternative voices. Certainly, there are many examples to prove that. However, in Wolf, and in the general view of Utopia, as a societal ideal which inspires the audience to confront contemporary social problems, we can begin to see how the film musical offers hope to diverse audience demographics. The self-promoting and self-perpetuation of capitalism through the high concept business model provides appealing visions of Utopia that are co-opted by capitalism. This model can be seen in film musicals like *Grease*, but it is also a model that is perpetuated and critiqued in film musicals like *All That Jazz* and *Chicago*.

If utopias show hope and senses of order for which the audience should strive, then what are we to learn? What do specific film musicals of the last thirty years inspire audiences to hope for? As we look at Utopia in film musicals from 1970-2005, it would be prudent to bear in mind that the high-concept business model produces shreds of hope that allows the audience to interface with the film musical world. Because of the increasingly complex commercial and social contexts of American film musicals, it becomes difficult to label the entire genre as utopic or dystopic. It becomes important to look more closely at the individual films to see how the complex economic and social fabric of America of the last thirty years of the twentieth-century promoted multiple readings that shaped the genre to reach a changing and fragmented audience. In high concept, vertical marketing bribes the audience with the hope of not only experiencing but also continually re-experiencing the feelings of Utopia in the theater and at home. As we
will see in chapter VII, low concept films promote feelings of dystopia that epitomize the relationship between the individual and post-Vietnam, post-Watergate American society.

If we agree with Fredric Jameson that a work of mass culture, such as the film musical, is also ideological, and with David Harvey in that the utopias work to manage space and order, then the utopic aspects of high concept film musicals are ideological because they manage the performance space by controlling the production and reception of social communication. If we look closely at contemporary film musicals, then we must look at how specific film musicals create ordered representations of utopia and dystopia and how audiences invested in the work. If we build upon the work of Kolnai and Dyer, we can see how the film musical produces a sense of super-alienation. The audience allows itself to be willingly transported to share in a world that does not exist. The key to the feelings produced in the audience is their willingness to join in the toe-tapping song and dance numbers. It is the job of the high-concept business model to insure that the majority of audiences will want to invest in the film musical with time, feeling, and (more importantly to business) money in the hope that the return is of equal or greater significance.

For Altman and Dyer, the film musical of the studio era calls forth Utopia by invoking the largely white conservative cultural ideals of hegemony, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. Contemporary high concept film musicals, which target the largest possible audience, are more likely to represent the hopes and fears of the majority of its audience. In doing so, the high concept film musical’s representation is going to target the largest and most dominant demographic of American audiences, which in the 1970s comprised of white, heterosexual, middle-class suburbians. While works of mass culture, marketed and made for mass culture exclude and repress non-dominant perspectives, Jameson concludes that “all contemporary
works of art…have as their underlying impulse – albeit in what is often distorted and repressed unconscious form – our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived” (Reader 146). If we agree that film musicals show a world as it ought to be lived, then how have contemporary filmmakers produce and audiences consume representations of Utopia as expressed in recent film musicals? What was it about late 1970s cultures that embraced the utopic *Grease* in 1978 and then two years later respond to the dystopic *All That Jazz*?
The rise of the high concept business model profoundly shaped Hollywood film practice in the last thirty years of the twentieth-century. While it is only one aspect of American film production, it is by far one of the most economically and ideologically powerful aspects. In fact one might argue, as Justin Wyatt does, that high concept filmmaking helped Hollywood films to reach a level of cultural power far beyond the classical Hollywood studio era. So as high concept films promote excess through sleek imagery, recognizable formulas, marketable stars, and vertical marketing deployment, they also must present visions of life that are appealing and consumable to American consumers. As we begin to look at how high concept filmmaking is ideologically grounded in the production and consumption of capitalistic excess, it becomes increasingly apparent that high concept film musicals rely on the traditional ideology of the musical as a representation of Utopia to influence audience reception. It is also important to note that while high concept filmmaking may have been the dominant force in Hollywood film production, there are films and even types of filmmaking that defied the high concept model and still achieved economic and critical success.

When we look at high concept film musicals, we must consider how specific high concept films relied on tools of Utopia, especially through displacement, to capitalize on familiarity as a means of audience identification. While some films used rock-n-roll to promote current musicians or albums, other films relied on historical displacement by using settings to suggest ideas of the past that were utopic escapes from the ordinary, mundane, and/or unstable cultural present. These escapist depictions attempt to obscure contemporary experiences of social disparity present in American society in the 1970s. Remarkably, these film musicals used
the familiar aspects of high concept production combined with settings and characters in social crisis. Films like *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Tommy* (1975) combine contemporary social commentary with high concept marketing and aesthetics to produce two films that are neither completely utopic nor dystopic.

As Americans experienced realities” of the Vietnam War, Watergate, the fall of the Nixon Presidency, economic recession, gas lines, and growing levels of poverty, they were also forced to deal with no clear solutions to their problems. Historically, Utopia has been invoked as a means of providing an alternative existence to social upheaval. Since Utopia relies on a subordination of the individual to an overarching ideal or ideological precept, how is an individual to react when all ideological precepts are revealed to be false and self-serving? The cultural upheaval and instability of the early 1970s led to the development of films Robin Wood labels as incoherent. Since they are products of incoherent social moments, Wood postulates these incoherent texts “do not know what they want to say” (42). In other words, as products of mass entertainment attempting to reach an audience, incoherent texts carry contrary messages interpreted differently by individual audience members.

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Tommy* (1975) are two seemingly incoherent texts that not only laid the groundwork for the high concept film musical but also represented a complex and unstable social environment. Both films use excessive imagery but can also be seen as dystopic. These films anticipate the high-concept branch of film musicals from 1970-2002. Produced by Robert Stigwood, these two films featured driving rock scores, and a film world that reflected real-world events. *Jesus Christ Superstar* relied on the success of its rock music score to illuminate an aspect of history based more on allusions to contemporary culture than Biblical accuracy while The Who’s *Tommy* moved contemporary culture into a parallel world
ruled by fantastic and horrifying visions of commercial consumption and messianic storytelling. These two film musicals helped pave the way for a third Stigwood production and arguably the “quintessential” high concept film musical, *Grease* (1977). While *Grease* signifies the true evolutionary break in the development of the film musical genre, it would never have had the same commercial impact without the incoherent mix of Utopia and Dystopia in both *Superstar* and *Tommy*.

**Utopia as a Site of Cultural Critique**

As I pointed out, Utopia’s most powerful tool is its ability to facilitate audience investment and belief by representing a film world that resembles, to some degree, the real world. The ability of Utopia to manage contemporary problems by displacing them outside of its setting exemplifies the unattainability of Utopian ideals. Yet while Utopias may be unattainable, the hope of transcending present problems through utopic representations is meant to inspire the audience to change their personal realities. Moreover, commercial utopias present in high concept films are designed to make audiences change their realities through consumption. Thus, audiences avoid real political change because they continue to consume the status quo offered up by popular culture. The act of consumption acts as a form of displacement of present reality for the hope of “buying” a new reality. One way that Utopias create displacement and identification is through the use of nostalgia. Nostalgia can be defined and described as showing aspects or settings of history that, for all intents and purposes, did not exist. Nostalgia is powerful because in being related to an actual history, audiences rely on their limited understanding of history to guide their readings of the Utopia. Like Utopia, the use of nostalgia in a work speaks more to the contemporary context of the work rather than the actual setting of the nostalgia itself.
According to Michael Janover, nostalgia is a powerful tool because it taps into directly into human feeling. Janover writes:

Nostalgias, in this plural usage, are the pangs of longing for another time, another place, another self. In this they are almost certainly romantic in seed and, potentially, corrosively decadent in growth. But these longings to be elsewhere, to become different to what one is, can also be the refracting lenses of constructive critique. (115)

Janover notes three specific aspects of nostalgia that are echoed in the writings of Fredric Jameson. First, nostalgia produces feelings that are disconnected from a historically connected self. Secondly, nostalgias can be self-perpetuating, ahistorical, and destructive of actual history. Finally, Janover argues that nostalgias can be powerful tools of criticism. What becomes important about this view of nostalgia is that it shares many aspects of Utopia and shows how nostalgia becomes a vision of Utopia that implicitly criticizes the present.

Both Utopia and nostalgia produce feelings for spaces and ideas that are neither directly connected to actual human existence nor directly achievable. Nostalgias and utopias evoke places that never actually exist(ed). While the ideal forms of existence as represented in nostalgias and utopias may share commonalities with actual existence, the nostalgic views never existed historically, much less presently. Both present a vision of nowhere-ness, unachievable and unattainable in any real societal present. Janover acknowledges this problem in nostalgias, and it is a problem reiterated in the writings of Fredric Jameson and Baudelaire. Janover points out that the problem with nostalgia “is not that it maintains the primacy of the past, but that it keeps alive the possibility that we will be able to remember, sometime, thoughts and experiences that we have not yet had” (128). In consuming the nostalgia, the audience hopes to experience a
history that they never had and that never existed. In the consumption of nostalgias, as Utopias, the audience is experiencing feelings that have no basis in reality.

While Jameson is highly critical of works of culture that invoke pastiche, Michael Janover argues that nostalgia is a conservative representation that can “serve as critical measures of the present but in conscious awareness that there can be no return for there is no purely innocent past to return to” (117). Janover’s labeling of nostalgia as conservative is a helpful way of understanding its use in film production. In fact, there is a correlation between the rise in the use of nostalgia, especially in mainstream film production, and the rise in conservative views of politics and culture. High concept filmmaking followed in the wake of the Nixon Presidency and it helped to insure the entrenchment of blockbuster filmmaking popular during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Throughout the proliferation of the high concept film model, there was a marked rise in nostalgic views of the world, especially Vietnam. The nostalgia invoked through this time period served as a cultural attempt to rewrite history of Vietnam and American consciousness. High concept films such as Missing in Action (1984) and Rambo: First Blood II (1985) sought to win the war America lost by sending the soldiers back to the battlefield to win for themselves and the ideals for which they fought.¹ These films and the use of nostalgia foreshadow an ideological shift in the production and reception of Utopia from communal to more individualistic and dystopic visions of society. Throughout these conservative moments in American politics and culture, the film industry relied on high concept to produce works that tapped into the contemporary social milieu.

While the use of nostalgia and feelings of nostalgia are present in the films from highly conservative political climates, nostalgia is not inherently conservative. Nostalgia, as Janover notes, can be a powerful form of cultural critique, as in films such as Superstar, Tommy,
*Cabaret*, and *Chicago*. These films are not necessarily high concept films; and despite their critical and box office success, none of the films are completely utopic. Nostalgia in *Superstar* longs for the hippy movement of the 1960s. In *Tommy*, there is nostalgia for the simplified, non-mediated lifestyle of the early 1950s. However, nostalgia is not the only readable precept. In both films is crushed and repressed by the emerging utopias. So just as nostalgias, as tools of displacement and representations of Utopia, nostalgia in film musicals is not the only ideological reading. However, in the incoherent texts of early 1970s filmmaking complicate any reading of a film musical of this time as wholly utopic or dystopic. In fact, both *Superstar* and *Tommy* present utopias that are very dark and not the typically rosy views of society expected in conventional utopias.

The idea of displacing history or contemporary social problems through the construction of Utopia and nostalgia has profound effects on the audience. Not only does it tap into feelings of hope, longing, and history, it changes the way audiences view society’s future. Bertell Ollman argues that utopic depictions are:

> consequences (the ideal) without causes, i.e., causes capable of producing such consequences— and therefore too with causes (what exists now) that have no apparent consequences. It is not a matter of the present losing some of its potential; its entire future dimension has been wiped out. Hence, it is not only the future that gets distorted in utopian thinking but also the present. It is futureless because it does not itself exist as a cause of its own future. (Ollman 92)

In the end, audiences of utopias and nostalgias are left with only feelings and hope for something different and outside of their present existence. As Ollman shows, it is not beneficial for us to think of either nostalgia or Utopia as a representation of history or a hopeful view of the future.
Instead, these representations are artifacts of a society that speak to their current condition rather than the hope of the future. These representations help us to understand what differences or problems that Utopia is trying to manage in contemporary society.

Reading depictions of Utopia in this way is not without consequences. Ollman warns:

The approach involves taking what we find in present society as the standard for what existed before, forcing square pegs into round holes wherever necessary to make the point. …The present simply serves them as a mirror in which they [the audience] claim to catch the reflection of earlier times. Without any attempt to uncover the organic ties between the two, however, they [the audience] have no basis for distinguishing what is unique in the present from what isn’t, and what is natural from what is historically conditioned. (93)

Ollman notes a problem with nostalgia as a tool for producing Utopia. If the connection between the representation and actual history is not strong enough, the audience has little reason to care about the difference. If the audience cannot be taught to care about the difference between the Utopia and the present, then the work cannot move beyond mere consumption of Utopia and into the realm of social change.

The high concept film musicals of the 1970s give the audience a reason to care. While the conventional utopias employ visions of the future to seek immediate social change in the present. However, the reason to care for high concept film musical audiences relates to issues of consumption rather than social change. For Superstar and Tommy, both relied heavily on the soundtrack, theatrical versions, and off-screen concerts for their box office success. The assumption in high concept marketing is that the audience cannot fully experience the film if they do not consume at all levels of the marketing scheme. If you do not own the soundtrack,
you cannot connect to larger culture on the radio. If you do not own the toys, clothing lines, food, and beverage products, how can you experience the joy of the world that does not exist? While such a view of culture provides an illusory need of consumption, it also provides hope that in consumption the audience can transcend current contemporary existence and achieve some individual satisfaction and communal whole that is presented on screen.

Looking at certain high concept film musicals, we can begin to see what the representations of utopia serve to critique. If we agree Wyatt, Dyer, and others, then the high concept film musical is a product that through differentiation and marketing capitalizes on the nascent desires of an audience for Utopia. The issue then becomes how the high concept film musical is able to draw on national social issues and consciousness to produce representations that audiences throughout the country not only understand but in which they are willing to invest. The musical will always benefit by selling music, but the high concept film musical not only sells music but also Utopia. Wyatt argues that product differentiation is measured by two terms “variety” and “quality” (High Concept 99). In the film musical, critics look to quality through representation and marketers look to promote product differentiation as a potential source of investment. The quality appears in the film text itself, while variety appears more in the marketing. Marketing seems to be the most reliable and measurable aspect of product differentiation. However, quality, or perceived quality, affects the reception of the film musical, especially if the film presents a view of Utopia as a form of differentiation.

In the Hollywood studio era, MGM’s Freed Unit led the artistic development and economic success of the film musical genre. As the studios moved to distributing films rather than solely making their own, the Freed Unit was dismantled. What the Freed Unit was to film musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, Producer Robert Stigwood was to film musicals of the 1970s.
Scholars often underestimate Stigwood’s role, choosing instead to promote the idea of auteur directors in the early 1970s. As a former talent agent who represented actors and artists such as Ann Margaret, Peter Sellers, Nancy Walker, Marvin Hamlisch, and Stockard Channing, it was Stigwood’s ability to package stars and concepts that made him one of the foremost independent producers of the 1970s (“The Production”).

As the producer for such film musicals as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Tommy*, *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease*, and *Evita*, Robert Stigwood helped to pioneer and propagate the development of the high concept film musical. Analyzing two early high concept films, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Tommy*, one can see that marketing strategies far outdistanced the aesthetic development of the films. The packaging of stars and concepts are present in *Superstar* and *Tommy*, but what is missing is the representation of Utopia in a classical film musical sense. While these two films invoke aspects of Utopia and high concept, they fail to achieve a synthesis of the business practice and aesthetic ideal to ensure a measure of box office success. While these films may have produced passing feelings of Utopia in 1970s audiences, the films do more to criticize contemporary social conditions than to provide the alternative space of Utopia present in classical film musicals. Without being able to draw on preconceived notions of genre formation, these early high concept films give little incentive for the continued investment in the film, save for being a musical. In essence, the early high concept films do not promote the continued consumption of the film. Instead, the films became temporally bound depictions of early 1970s American culture rather than universally recognizable depictions of Utopia.
Jesus Christ Superstar

When the concept single “Superstar” was released in London, it marked the debut of Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice. The single lit up the UK record charts. The success of the song led to a successful West End stage musical, and a globally successful cast recording. In fact, the original stage musical album was certified gold in December 1970 (RIAA). The success of the West End musical and the success of the album’s sales in the United States led producer Robert Stigwood to mount an expensive Broadway version of Jesus Christ Superstar. While the $700,000 Broadway production ran 711 performances (Sept. 1971 – June 1973), the stage musical failed to gain the same immediate critical and economic success as the album. However, the stage musical that began as a concept single would show the world that continued success could be measured in decades rather than weeks.

The film adaptation of Superstar relied heavily on the success of the stage musical and the concept albums as a source of audience expectations. The expectations produced by the musical were as controversial as its subject matter. The depiction of Jesus Christ in the stage musical drew protests from Jewish and Christian groups alike. While Christians were obviously concerned with the portrayal of Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene, and other Biblical characters as humans filled with doubt and questions, Jewish groups became concerned about the portrayal of the Jewish people (led by Caiaphas and Herod) as responsible for the death of the Christian messiah. The controversy helped to boost box office revenues. Just as the groups protested the stage musical, the fires were relit two years later with the forthcoming release of the film musical added another controversial aspect, the setting and filming of the musical in Israel.

The American Defamation League led the charge against the film musical adaptation of Superstar. The ADL expressed concerns that the film would raise anti-Semitic feelings by
portraying the Jews as responsible for Jesus’ death (Greenhouse 24). The ADL was also concerned about the casting of Judas as an African-American, citing the collusion between Judas and the Pharisees as potential to create more strife between Jewish and African-American groups. African-American groups, spurred by Rev. Jesse Jackson and others, had recently spoken out against what they saw as manipulation of African-Americans by Jewish groups. Furthermore, the ADL was concerned about the global distribution of the film. The ADL felt that other countries and cultures would react negatively to the film’s portrayal of Jews and Judaism, especially in Latin America and Northern Italy (Knox 28). The underlying argument, though never explicitly stated in news reports or public statements, was that the group was afraid of furthering a divide between Catholics and Jews in predominately Catholic areas/countries of the world.

American groups were not the only ones concerned with the portrayal of the Jewish people. The protests became so heated that even the government of Israel sought to distance itself from the film; and rightly so, for the Israeli government was involved in a war of attrition with Syria and Egypt. Despite the border wars, the Israeli government worked hard to court filmmakers and producers to utilize the remote deserts and countryside for location production (Smith “Jerusalem” 52). The government explained in a written response to the film: “The fact that the film was shot on location in Israel in no way constitutes any agreement whatsoever to it on the part of the Government of Israel. …The creators and producers of the film are alone and exclusively responsible for its contents” (qtd. in Smith “Government” 19). The Israeli government conveniently neglected to mention their level of cooperation during the film’s production, which included the use of Israeli Defense Ministry tanks and jets to chase down Judas during a crucial scene from the film.
Protesters went so far as to demand a prologue and epilogue be added to the *Superstar* for foreign markets. The groups asked that the additions include a statement confirming, “the film has no pretense to theological or historical authenticity or authority” (Knox 28). Universal, the film’s distributor, was ready for the publicity. While Universal never met with the protestors nor did they give way to their demands, the company responded quickly with a barrage of written statements. Their response would set the tone for the film’s reception and help to diffuse the very large and potentially damaging religious ideologies at play in the portrayal of the Bible. Universal attempted to counter protesters by declaring that the film was made for entertainment’s sake and that any ideological reading to the contrary was against the film’s intent to please audiences. Throughout their written comments, Universal repeatedly referred to the film as “a rock opera, a musical entertainment, not a religious tract” (qtd. in Greenhouse 24). The move to position the film as entertainment, seemingly devoid of ideological meanings, set up audience expectations for a film divorced from religion and meant only as a spectacle of mass entertainment. By attempting to diffuse political and ideological controversy, Universal hoped to make the film appealing to a broad audience, not just those familiar with the musical but also those who might want to see what the buzz was all about.

The idea of the film as entertainment was not just relegated to Universal’s written statements. The studio began to promote the film as entertainment of spectacle and music. Posters for the film avoided controversy by using a simple title on a brown textured background. Of course, the success of two previous cast recordings and the Broadway musical helped to promote film musical. Trailers also capitalized on the spectacle of the film. The theatrical trailer is composed mainly of short clips of songs from the film. In fact, the trailer is a complete encapsulation of the entire film from Jesus’ entrance in the opening number to the final shot of
the cross in silhouette against the setting sun. While most trailers during the studio era were to generate excitement about the stars and events of the film, the trailer for *Superstar* promoted the high concept aspects of the film, the soundtrack, the technology, and the style of the film.

Stigwood’s experience with developing the stage musical version of *Superstar* gave him a blueprint for promoting the film adaptation of the musical. In fact, I would argue that as an early high concept film musical, *Superstar* depended on the soundtrack and stage musical for its relative economic success. While Justin Wyatt suggests that the high concept model was specific to the production of film, one can see that aspects of the high concept model were already in place in other industries, including Broadway. By the time the film premiered in August of 1973, the vertical marketing tie-in established an indelible link between the film musical and its soundtrack. Wyatt writes:

> By producing a film transplanted from another medium, Stigwood was able to capitalize upon the pre-sold support of the initial projects…the film sold records connected both to the film and the stage show, while the records bolstered interest in the film and stage shows. This process became identified, within the film industry, as “synergy” between music and film. (High Concept 140)

The Broadway show did not develop any direct success from the film. In fact, the Broadway musical closed prior to the film’s release. However, I would argue that the high concept synergy was already circulating around *Superstar*. The film musical was inadvertently promoted by the protesters, which kept media interest in the film, and then was capitalized by the film and the soundtrack releases. This combination of events would lead to a film musical that grossed $13 million at the box office and helped its soundtrack become a certified gold album, less than a month after the film’s August 1973 release.² While the album was popular with listeners, the
spectacle of the soundtrack led Howard Thompson to declare that the film’s imagery “pours from the loudest soundtrack in years.” Thompson further warned his readers to “Brace your ears” (28). Despite the success of the album and the modest gross of the film, the film fails to capitalize on classical audience expectations for film musicals as producers of communal Utopia.

As noted, Utopia is based on perspective. While Superstar features the perspective of a community of performers performing the story of Jesus, the community is allowed to express themselves only through the sacrifice of their lead character, Jesus. The dark Utopia that results is a community that performs together recognizes that performance of community is made possible only at the expense of the individual. The change from this classical depiction of the film musical denotes the initial shift in film musical production that high concept practices facilitated. By challenging the classical notion of Utopia in the film musical genre, Superstar’s dark utopia would affect the production and reception of future film musicals.

What becomes intriguing about Superstar is its overall lack of classical utopic feelings. Rick Altman categorizes the film within his sub-genre, the “Fairy Tale Musical.” Certainly, the Biblical subject and the film’s band of hippy performers in search of meaning in the desert help to give the expectation of hope. Yet, even Altman is conflicted about how Superstar fits into the genre subset. Altman notes that the “unhappy love” of Mary for Jesus, one of the film’s major subplots, has more in common with the “Show Musical” than the fairytale musical. Even the treatment of songs like “King Herod’s Song” and “Superstar” are self-referential to theatrical performance, with the latter being more like a music video than an integrated musical number. This eclectic collection of elements in the film challenges clear or definitive generic formation. Despite its high concept aspects, the isolated expression of competing ideologies between Jesus, Judas, the disciples, Mary, Herod, Caiaphas, and Pilate fail to produce the classical feelings of
Utopia embodied in the following of the lead by the chorus. Instead, *Superstar* uses high concept aspects to comment on various aspects of community and community performance. In speaking to all aspects of community, *Superstar*’s dark utopia seems to have more in common with other early 1970s incoherent texts than classical Hollywood studio era film musicals.

The high concept aesthetic is present from the beginning. As the film opens the caravan of performers arrives at the ruins in the Holy Land to reenact the last days of Jesus. The vision presented is a collision of mythic setting merging Christian Utopia and contemporary hippy culture. Throughout the film, the desert and ruins play their own role in the spectacle of the film. The colors of the pink and white desert feed into the largely monochromatic costuming of the performers. The film musical is a musical-within-a-film, much like a play-within-a-play, where contemporary events impinge on the musical’s historic setting. Even within the alienating, isolating presence of the desert setting, the performer’s own technology in the form of scaffolding, rock-n-roll lighting, flying cranes, contemporary props, modern costume pieces, and military vehicles speak more to the present than they do to Biblical history. In fact, the presence of modern technology further isolates the film from the audience expectations of Biblical history. The aesthetic produces an incoherent metaphoric mix of capitalist ideology present in the high concept aspect and the humanistic ideals represented by the hippy performers.

The high concept aesthetics come to bear fully in the original concept song of the show “Superstar.” The song itself is presented in the musical, on stage and screen, as a contemporary dream sequence. As a rock-music interlude, the song seems out of place in the rest of the rock opera narrative. Instead of being integrated into the narrative, “Superstar” is a rock-n-roll interrogation of the historical implications of Christ’s upcoming self-sacrifice. Judas, costumed all in white and hanging on a star, flies in from the heavens. The one-time traitor has been
forgiven and allowed to come to earth. Yet it is not clear on whose part Judas is acting. As Judas asks Jesus to acknowledge his own role in martyrdom, Judas himself is surrounded by the glory of rock-n-roll spectacle. As the song progresses and the intensity of the spectacle increases, Jesus is noticeably silent, resolute, and resistant to Judas’ questioning. As the song moves into its depiction of the crucifixion, Jesus, arguably the hero, neither attempts to fight his fate nor speak to anyone about it. Jesus’ silence leaves Judas, the disciples, the Romans, and the audience with questions about the true nature of divinity.

One could argue that like other representations of Utopia, Jesus Christ Superstar attempts to manage difference. In the film, the dissent between Jesus and his disciples is dealt with sharply and deadly. As the film depicts Christ’s crucifixion, it does so without attempting to portray any religious homage to a Christ’s divinity. Instead, what began as a communal performance of the last days of Jesus ends with the sacrifice of one individual dissenter. Jesus does not rise from the dead. As the film concludes, the audience sees all the performers load the bus except for Jesus. Despite all that the company has learned throughout their performance, they are still without one member of the community. While this may not be an ideal for communities, it is a Utopia. Despite the shot of an empty cross against the setting sun (which is mostly obscured in the extreme backlighting of the setting sun), the absence of Jesus raises questions rather than confirming any form of divine nature.  

Since utopias cannot exist without being ideological, what does Superstar say about American culture at the end of the Vietnam War? Meyer Kantor notes, “The story taught them [the performers] that in the matter of improving the human condition there can be no miracles, no leaders who can rise up after dying, no man who cannot die, and, above all, no man who can carry the whole load unaided by the people” (32). The film questions the role of the individual
in events over which they have little control. For the most part, few young American men had
the ability to dodge the draft. Those that spoke out in favor of dissent were dealt with harshly,
made to seem Un-American or Un-Democratic. Writing a few moths after the film debuted,
Kantor reminds his readers against being apathetic about acting on the ideologies of the film, and
history. Kantor notes that Jesus’ individual sacrifice is a communal sacrifice (not just for
divinity’s sake), “we will all have to get down into the earth, get our hands dirty, and bleed. We
must all bear the cross” (32). For Kantor – Superstar is more about the death of the
counterculture movement than the death of a messiah. The implication of Kantor’s argument is a
reading of Superstar not as a story about Jesus but as a cautious Utopic metaphor for American
society at the end of the Vietnam War. Kantor concludes, “It’s not about religion or miracles, or
even God. All it is is a superbly made film about us, the ragtag army of the young who trudged
through the sixties trying to build a better world, succeeding sometimes and failing sometimes,
and being human always” (32). Kantor’s contemporary remarks invoke the intertextual and
metaphoric meanings present in the audience’s reception of the film. In this light, Superstar
becomes more about the sacrifices of the young Americans in Vietnam Era.

The ideology of Superstar is based in the portrayal of the Biblical community. Whether
the community has oppressive leaders, outspoken dissidents, and an almost silent majority who
will speak out only when it serves their individual values. The film poses the question at what
price does unity come? For the film musical, the dark Utopia of the Roman Republic asserts
rules over community by force and oppression. In the musical, the safety of the Biblical
community comes at the sacrifice of the individual dissenter. The song “Superstar” begs the
question “What historical good comes out of the sacrifice of one individual?” The empty cross
and the absence of Jesus at the end of the film magnify the emptiness of a community that lacks
its lead performer. The under duress from the outside forces of technology and oppression must willingly sacrifice the individual to survive. Moreover, the individuals must also be willing to sacrifice themselves for the continuation of Utopia. The sacrifice of the individual restores the communal Utopia, but it lacks the classical feelings of Utopia present in the unity of lead character and chorus. The performers are still a community and they have learned from the sacrifice of Jesus.

Instead of happiness and community, *Superstar* embraces doubt and insecurity. Emotions that only became present in the wake of the social insecurities of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the face of insecurity, Kantor writes, “Maybe next time we can do better. Maybe not, but we’ll be trying” (32). Kantor’s statement is rife with hope and doubt. In Kantor, there is an unsettling sense of defeat that what Kantor fought for throughout his protests of the Vietnam War was lost. The community is still a community, but at the cost of sacrifice. The dark Utopia is a result of the super-alienation present in all Utopias. In the process of alienation, the Utopia has hope that sacrifice will not go unnoticed, and that next time the community will do better. In consuming the Utopic sacrifice of the messiah, the incoherent text and utopic high concept aspects of *Superstar* remind the audience that Utopias are meant to inspire the future actions of its early 1970s audience.

While the dark vision present in *Jesus Christ Superstar* does not enact a classical film musical depiction of Utopia, it does present the audience with an allegorical setting outside of their direct knowledge of the world. Yet, the combination of Holy Land and rock-n-roll glory are an unsettling combination that feeds into the ideology of the film. This ideology of capitalism enforced through fear and individual sacrifice does not fit well with the inherent ideology of high concept business model. The tension between the business practice and textual
ideology adds to the films incoherency. Through the high concept aspects of *Superstar*, the audience can consume the spectacle of overproduced imagery and rock soundtrack. However, the high technological aspects present in the film’s production and exhibition actually highlight rather than assuage the social anxieties present in the early 1970s. The introduction of tanks, jet airplanes, machine guns, bright lights, and busses combined with the Biblical story of Jesus suggests an allegory for the final days of a post-Vietnam society. The film represents society torn apart by war, instability, and media. Just as Jesus, Judas, Mary, and Pilate question their roles in the grand scheme of things, American audiences in 1973 were asked to question their roles in contemporary society, especially how Americans had continued to perpetuate war, consume lust and greed in the marketplace of American culture, and welcome the sacrifice of the individual.

*Tommy*

The lessons Stigwood learned with *Jesus Christ Superstar* helped him to promote another film musical, *Tommy*. While *Tommy* did not have the same type of stage antecedents as *Superstar*, The Who’s rock opera had its own recording and concert presence. The film adaptation of the rock opera proved that a high concept film musical could rely on audience expectations from not only stage productions but from virtually every aspect of late twentieth-century mediated society. While *Tommy* has been called a film “that fits in perfectly with the envelope-pushing nature of musicals in the 1970s” (Muir 59), it has been consistently overlooked in scholarship on film musicals. For example, Rick Altman’s prolific study of the film musical fails to make a single reference to *Tommy*. Justin Wyatt does take a moment to discuss the film as a part of Stigwood’s body of production work (*High Concept* 142-3). Yet, Wyatt does little to clarify the film’s role in furthering the film musical genre. While one might argue that its
Britishness or its depiction of England at the rise of rock-n-roll and pinball culture precludes a view of *Tommy* as indicative of American film culture, the film itself in all its glorified excess is not only emblematic of high concept filmmaking but also high concept film consumption in the production of Utopia. The result is a film musical that challenges the boundaries between classical and contemporary feelings of Utopia, the boundaries between the utopic community as a positive place and the contemporary utopic community as injurious to the individual, and the boundaries between communal ideals and individual expression.

*Tommy*, originally written and performed by The Who in 1969, drew from its rock opera reputation and album recordings to generate audience expectations. While the film did not have a Broadway stage production from which it could be adapted, *Tommy* was a part of The Who’s performance at Woodstock. The songs from that performance are included on the Woodstock albums and even in the film *Woodstock* (1970). The fact that the musical was produced by one of the most popular rock groups of the late 1960s & early 1970s did not hurt. As a rock opera, *Tommy* was a concept album with little sense of narrative or plot. When The Who performed the rock opera on stage, composer Pete Townshend gave audiences plot elaborations. So while one might be able to read into the plot while listening to the concert album, fans would have to attend a concert to hear the true plot of the opera.

Stigwood relied heavily on pre-production publicity to generate excitement for the project. At nearly every turn, Stigwood and Columbia Pictures touted the rock-star-studded cast that included Ann-Margret, Oliver Reed, Elton John, Tina Turner, Eric Clapton, Jack Nicholson, and The Who. Ken Russell, who was well known in England for his evocative visual imagery, was selected to direct. Despite the flop of Russell’s 1971 film musical *The Boyfriend* (starring Twiggy), previewer William Hall recognized Russell’s potential as a director. Hall writes, “one
always has the feeling that Russell – thwarted genius or self-indulgent fraud – is sitting on that one movie which may one day deserve to be called great” (13). Yet even with a highly promoted cast and director, Stigwood began production without a distributor. It was a move that has been attributed to Stigwood’s need to “secure creative freedom” in the project (Wyatt High Concept 141), but it could also be attributed to the vague plot. Moreover, the over-the-top and highly evocative imagery in Russell’s other films were imaginative but hard to describe to audiences. Therefore, it was difficult for marketers to explain, much less market, the style of the film by any other label than “The Who’s rock opera.”

The casting and the imagery play are elaborate representations of lifestyle promoted by high concept filmmaking. Wyatt notes that the film moves further towards high concept aesthetics than Stigwood’s previous films (High Concept 141). While it is somewhat disjointed, Tommy goes beyond rock concert films and biopics. It is, like Superstar, an opera. But unlike Superstar, Tommy displays a world that is more closely tied to 1970s consumer culture. Like other utopias, Tommy offers an unreal, bordering on the surreal, representation of its contemporary culture, perhaps because of Russell’s visual style that was called “brilliant and beautiful [and] disfigured by banal movements” (Hall 13). A good example of this combination of imagery comes in the opening of Tommy as Tommy’s mother and father run through the bombed out streets of London. As the two flee German bombs, there are flames, destruction, people running in all directions, while three dancing girls wearing silver, sequined, 1930s flapper dresses and gas masks make their way slowly through the bombed-out rubble. The three women take a moment to look directly into the camera, showing the audience the soulless, non-reflective blackness of the gas mask eyes.
This sort of over-the-top, excessive, deliberately metaphoric, and heavy-handed imagery would be out of place in classical film musicals. For example, while Busby Berkeley’s dancing girl chorus numbers were over-the-top, they did not directly critique the situation or contemporary culture. Russell’s depiction of excess in imagery and lifestyle might have points in common with high concept aesthetics and Utopia, but its deconstruction of hegemonic ideology is also emblematic of low concept filmmaking and dystopia. Since the film employs both high and low concept aesthetics, ideological messages are ambiguous, left open to be read by the individual audience member. Given the social milieu of the mid-1970s, Russell’s depiction of excess and ambiguously floating ideologies did not turn off critics. Instead, New York Times lead film reviewer, Vincent Canby, characterized Russell’s film as “the movie that proves that there are times when much too much may be just about right, when overindulgence approaches art, when to allow oneself to become the victim is to triumph as the victor” (“Too Much” 13). Thanks in large part to Russell’s direction; the ideological messages present in Tommy are truly incoherent. At times, the film seems to invoke Utopia through high concept aesthetics. While at the same time, the evocative depictions of excess critique the perpetuation of consumer culture present in 1970s and that would become central to yuppie culture of the 1980s.

While the film is a string of songs, the songs are not integrated in the film narrative like classical Hollywood film musicals. Canby noted that the film “has the structure of a vaudeville show, laced together with specialty bits” (Canby “Film” 48). The specialty bits performed by Tina Turner, Elton John, Ann Margaret, Jack Nicholson, and The Who move the action forward in different ways. Each moment tells a small part of the story, but the numbers with the famous musicians perform more like concert videos than conventionally integrated songs. For example,
Elton John’s “Pinball Wizard” is an over-the-top depiction of the concert going experience in the age of high technology and rock-n-roll. Yet, it also has the imposed action of Tommy beating the Wizard on the Wizard’s nationally televised game show. The number features a live crowd, the members of The Who as the backup band, a three-story concert set complete with dazzling lights spelling out “Tommy,” and Elton John in five-foot tall, eight foot long, platform Chuck Taylors singing the most popular single from the soundtrack. The single song could be considered just another high concept approach to tying soundtrack and celebrity together, but the song tells the story of Tommy’s rise to fame and is integrated with the narrative.

Throughout the film, the high concept aesthetic is present. The constant deconstruction imposed on the aesthetic by Russell results in an incoherent aesthetic with something to be read by different audience members. Each number features a different monochromatic lighting scheme that is paired with a song to complement the mood of the song. For example, Keith Moon’s portrayal of “Evil” Uncle Ernie, the alcoholic pedophile, the abuse plays out in blue lighting. The blue wash is cut together with a shot filmed in complete darkness, where the audience can only hear Ernie walking around, playing with his sexual devices, and maniacally giggling.

There is one piece of consistent imagery and color that makes the film decidedly high concept, and it is Russell’s continued use of mirrored steel as a color scheme, reflecting device, and system of containment. This single piece of color is both Tommy’s prison, in the mirror, and the key to his freedom, in the pinball game. The use of mirrored steel is present in virtually every attempt to free Tommy from his psychological bindings, including the Acid Queen’s torture chamber, the mirror reflecting the underside of St. Marilyn (Monroe’s) idol, the use of mirrored ball in the Doctor’s (Jack Nicholson’s) office, and even in the giant pinball altar from
which the prophet Tommy preaches. The shiny-mirrored surfaces not only reflect the dystopic horrors of Tommy’s world but also serve as a reflection of 1970s high concept consumer culture. Russell’s imagery seems to say, “If you hold a mirror up to our world, this is what you would see.” Just as Tommy is set free by the destruction of the mirror, Russell’s incoherent text suggests that the dark utopia of 1970s consumer culture is a self-perpetuating machine that destroys any individual attempts to control. The incoherency is further promoted by Tommy’s escape from the revolution and ascension to the same mountaintop as his father. The final shot of the film is a reflection of the first shot only this time Tommy has taken his father’s place. The out-of-place final sequence serves as a filmmaking convention rather than ideological statement.

The excessive imagery was a target for critics of the time. The film was criticized for it’s overall lack of coherent message. This is endemic of Russell, and Townshend’s collaboration on the film and indicative of the incoherent film texts of the 1970s. Russell states:

> It says so much – and all my pictures are religious now, you know. Every one of them. This one, it’s on so many levels that it’s practically impossible to describe.

I talked to Peter Townshend for six months, and still neither of us ever said outright to each other what it is really about. (qtd. in Hall 29)

The lack of coherent ideology in the film seems to criticize the incoherency of life in the heavily mediated society of the 1970s. Ultimately, the film represents a world that does not exist. While the film attempts to encapsulate one baby-boomer’s experience growing up from 1944 through the 1960s, it also represents the alienating affects of media, religion, and excess promoted by capitalist consumer culture. In one way, the film might be considered dystopic. However, the film also suggests that drugs, religion (church or the “Cults of Personality” which can be one in the same), and media cannot save the individual. In this case, the notion that the individual is the
key to freedom represents a high concept and conservative view of the individual in the free market society.

Tommy’s mediated world is full of fantasy perpetuated by drugs, high tech games, televisions (that gush forth in seas of champagne, chocolate, and baked beans), cults that worship at the feet of celebrities, pedophiles who become preachers, prophets who arise from their own problems, and the destruction of religion with violence. The film’s use of parody and cynicism is indicative of the skepticism and cynicism of 1970s post-Vietnam, post-Watergate society. The film uses historical events and imagery, but it does not attempt to rewrite history. Instead, it uses history criticize the development of contemporary society. The contradictory ideological messages conveyed by the film and the concept recordings are a representative vision of what Vincent Canby called “a world inhabited by people to jaded to react to anything but overdoses” (“Film” 13).

The overdose that is Tommy could be the reason for it being so neglected by scholars. However, the final lines of Canby’s film review help us to position the film within its historical context and see what critics and audiences saw in the film. Canby writes: “[Tommy] illuminates the concerns of the concerned youth of the nineteen-sixties, and that sends up those concerns at the same time. …it’s an unforgettable souvenir of a time in our history when the only adequate dose was an overdose” (“Too Much” 13). Through Tommy’s troubled childhood, to his meteoric rise to superstardom through pinball, to his prophetic undertaking, to his messianic downfall, Tommy gave audiences a completely different view of the world from classical film musicals. The world of Tommy shares much in common with the dystopic, unstable reality of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Tommy portrays a dark and creepy Utopia lorded over by an individual, who was repressed at one time but set free by technology. While film musicals like Jesus Christ
Superstar would seek to question the benefits and problems associated with difference in community, the incoherency of Tommy would simultaneously promote and critique the excessive nature of high concept living.

Tommy represents a significant shift in the understanding of Utopia. Tommy shows Utopia cannot be found in religion (cultural or spiritual), drugs (ala San Francisco during the height of Haight/Ashby counterculture), capitalism, or family (filled with alcoholics, pedophiles, and exploiting stepparents). Instead, Utopia is individuality given agency by the power of pinball and rock-n-roll. High concept film musicals of the 1980s and 90s would expand on Tommy’s spectacle of the high concept lifestyle. Only in the latter films, incoherency gives way to the promotion of American consumer culture. The high concept film musicals of the 1980s and 90s fail to employ explicit cultural critique. In emptying the spectacle of criticism, studios hoped to appeal to larger audience demographics and bring in more money at the box office.

The techniques of promotion and production, pioneered on stage and brought to use in film, utilized by Robert Stigwood would be brought to bear on virtually every high concept musical of the 1970s. The various recordings of Tommy and Jesus Christ Superstar continue to sell today, but in 2006, Superstar’s ideology of sacrifice for communal good seems to be more palatable than the ideology of a fractured mediated self made free by the acknowledgement of individuality over the dystopic community. Perhaps, the continued debate of religiosity, consumption, and sheer musical spectacle make Superstar more of an ahistorical piece and commercially more viable to twenty-first century audiences. While it is not the point of my study to decide which has more lasting value, it is important to note that the film musical is a site of cultural critique with specific ideologies present. It becomes increasingly important not only to look at the genesis of high concept projects, but the repeated consumption that fuels the
development of the film musical genre. As the high concept model became an entrenched model for producing films in Hollywood, the combination of popular music and filmmaking redefined the production of the film musical. While *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Tommy* were just the beginning of Robert Stigwood’s legacy to Hollywood film productions, the lessons he took from his early productions led to one of the most profitable high concept film musicals of all-time.
Justin Wyatt’s High Concept begins with a brief comparison of *Grease* and *All that Jazz*. Wyatt uses the two musicals as representative examples of high and low concept films, respectively. In a very brief comparison, Wyatt shows that *Grease* is a high concept film because the film, casting, and marketing were focused towards the largest possible audience, while the complex, self-referential plot of *All That Jazz* made the movie difficult to market in a concise manner to American consumers. While Wyatt’s analysis covers the production and marketing aspects of the *Grease*, he does not examine the way the film’s production elements promote a nostalgic and utopic view of the 1950s that manages conflict and promotes a view of the world dismissive of social difference and the instability prevalent in American culture during the late-1970s. If we place *Grease* within the historical context of post-Vietnam America, we can begin to understand how high concept business practices served to promote an escape from an uncertain social reality. While it is easy to say that the broadest possible audience wants to invest in a safe, communal Utopia drawn from the socially familiar, I will show how the film employed high concept business practices to enhance the film’s appeal as a representation of an unproblematic Utopia. In presenting a Utopia devoid of any true historical past, the film empties out ideological difference and provides hope for social stability.

As a stage musical, the original production of *Grease* is one of the top-ten longest running shows on Broadway. The success *Grease* culminated in a virtually unheard of eight-year, 3388 performance run (Feb. 1972 – Apr. 1980) that included seven Tony Award® nominations. Much of the stage musical’s success can be attributed to its evocation of nostalgia for the 1950s. John Bush Jones writes that while the show was meant to parody the era, the show itself “was so gentle that in addition to laughter the show evoked nostalgic longings”
(Jones 305). The show’s nostalgic look at the 1950s offered a view of America that was pristine and certainly more stable than the America of 1972.

Denny Martin Flinn makes the broad claim that *Grease* “created a format for nostalgia” that subsequently led to a host of “off-Broadway musicals that used or referred to songs from past eras” (305). The stage production of *Grease* depicted an America that was the best of all possible histories. However, as is the case with nostalgia as a tool of Utopia, if the shred of familiarity is strong enough, audiences are willing to consume the unreal history rather than examine the conflicted and unstable present. Ben Brantley called the original production “a corny, good-natured paean to adolescent randiness” (Brantley “Grease” Revival” 5). The new form of bottled nostalgia evoked comments from Richard Schickel calling the show “engagingly tattered and funky…marvelous entertainment, mostly because it was unpretentiously true to the times it briskly summoned up” (78). Critics were quick to note the nostalgic feelings and symbols utilized in the stage musical. Yet, critics often overlooked how, or more importantly, why the new representation of a communal historical Utopia was so popular with audiences.

As a stage musical and nostalgic representation of a time before the Vietnam War, *Grease* seemed to show audiences that the 1950s were not perfect but that they were certainly better than the 1970s. In creating a utopic space onstage in the theatre, the stage musical was able to use nostalgia to push aside the instability of widespread social unrest outside the walls of the theatre. The stage musical created a space where difference was easily identified and managed in the form of stereotypical high school constructions. It made a high school out of a theatre; by staying in the fictional high school, white people did not encounter the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, second wave Feminism, and Gay Pride. By coming to the theatre, audiences could forget about the realities of the 1970s and leave humming the tunes of
forgetfulness. The nostalgia of the stage musical evoked a sense of loss and longing rather than the attempt to re-write history. Granted the *Grease* version of history never occurred, but the musical allowed audiences to neglect their own present by consuming the nostalgia of a perfect Utopia. The perceived simplification of Utopia as the “All-American” high school experience made it easier for audiences to dismiss the horrors of young Americans dying in a far away land. If extrapolated to its fullest, *Grease* taught audiences that American’s were better off staying in school than graduating (and dying), and that while it is impossible to recapture a lost innocence, one should strive to do so.

As *Grease* moved from stage to screen, the reception context changed. The film adaptation was several years removed from the stage musical’s Vietnam War. In being somewhat removed from events that informed its creation and reception, Robert Stigwood and Paramount had to find another way for *Grease* to differentiate itself from other high concept films and film musicals. *Grease*’s use of nostalgia in the production of a historical Utopia is a twist on the idea of product differentiation. On the one hand, the film musical was a parody of every juvenile delinquency, beach blanket, and teen exploitation film of the era it evoked. On the other hand, the film was extremely bound to its own historical context by casting, visual imagery, and even its soundtrack. The combination of high concept business practice and the production of Utopia through nostalgia in *Grease* was a product of a society deeply divided by politics and historic events during the liberal Carter administration. While the sounds of the 1950s setting were familiar to late 1970s audiences, the technology employed in the film’s production gave the film a presentness that conflicted with and subsequently erased any historical reference (Knight). The film was promoted as an adaptation of the hot Broadway
musical, but the randiness, nostalgia, and historical truths possible in the film musical were subverted by the film’s casting, technological advancements, and imagery.

While the cast of *Grease* was noticeably too old for any honest representation of high school students, they were drawn from a large cross-section of performers that included a member of the original Broadway production (Jeff Conaway), a member of the national tour, and several lesser-known television stars. However, virtually all of the hype was linked to a film and television star, John Travolta, and a singer-turned actress, Olivia Newton-John. Despite reviewers bemoaning the age of the cast, some even going so far as to say “its high school students seem more like college dropouts” (Knight), and despite the stereotypical nature of the casting, the ensemble brought raw energy and sexual confidence lacking in any age appropriate casting.

Travolta’s success in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and the television series *Welcome Back Kotter* (1975-1979) led Arthur Knight to compare Travolta’s presence to “Brando, Dean and Presley in their day. And in ‘Grease,’ its makers use it to the maximum” (Knight). Knight also noted that Olivia Newton-John brought a sensuality coupled with “youthful innocence” that allowed her to take on Sandy’s transformation for the end of the film (Knight). The combination of Patty Birch’s choreography and the highly charged sexual energy of Travolta, Olivia Newton-John and the cast gave the teenage audiences an alluring depiction of high school. It was a Utopia filled with characters that did anything and everything in a school that audiences only wished they could do in reality (Carr D6). In the film, the high school is a Utopia of cautious rebellion, sexuality, and the hopeless devotion to hormones.

The casting mobilizes contemporary celebrity fame in popular music, television, and film to promote lifestyles to which teenagers could aspire. Whether or not the characters actually
existed is immaterial; the fact that Travolta and Newton-John were famous gave the audience an in-road to the film. The teenage boy might say, “Look how cool Travolta is! If I were that cool, I could get Olivia-Newton John!” Because of the celebrity casting, distinctions between the character and the star either become blurred in the individual audience member’s mind or, more ideologically dangerous, are erased by the individual audience member. Teens in the 1970s could consume the stars’ identities as reproductions of popular culture or consume the film as an escape into an otherworldly dream of repressed desires and fantasies (or phantasies). Regardless of how audiences consume the image or the celebrity, the high concept production and promotion of *Grease* sought to open the film up to audiences of the time through the inclusion of popular celebrities, particularly those important to the teen and young adult audiences well-versed in popular culture.\(^5\)

Writing in 1982 about the demographics of 1970s mainstream audiences, Noel Carroll states, “Though the college-educated provide an important portion of the regular movie audience, neither they, nor the cognoscenti in their ranks [film connoisseurs and scholars], constitute the bulk of Hollywood’s loyal constituency. The queue at the box office is dominated by teenagers seeking a hearth away from home” (56). Carroll goes onto note that audience-minded directors (or as Wyatt does, film producers and marketers) rely on genre as a means of reaching audiences. This use of genre, as a form of connection, leads to the consumption of films as “pure entertainment” (Carroll 57). In other words, genre was not only about product differentiation but also product identification.

Noel Carroll contends that a large number of seventies films generated a two-tiered system of communication based on genre and allusion to culture beyond the film. In this system, we can see the collision between mainstream studio filmmaking and the auteur and art house
movements of the late 1960s and early 70s (Carroll 57). One aspect of this two-tiered system, as it played out in high concept films, is lowbrow and highbrow film viewing. While one may read a film based on its ability to present cultural critique and ideology, other audience members would view the film for its experience (in both quality and quantity of experience). While Carroll divides the audience into those who see sub-textual messages and those disinterested in covert meanings, there could also be a third group of audience members that would consume the spectacle and see the ambivalent ideological constructions of the representation. Perhaps films that can function on these two levels had the potential to strike a chord with American audiences of the late 1970s.⁶

A large part of *Grease*’s success can be attributed to its ability to connect to a wide demographic of audiences. Not only did producers Robert Stigwood and Allan Carr rely on the film itself, but Stigwood also produced a large amount of pre-production hype for the project. He capitalized on Travolta’s success in *Saturday Night Fever* and used the sustained success of the Broadway musical to prove the worthiness of the upcoming film. *Grease* was even predicted by *Time* magazine to be the top-grossing musical of 1978 and “the safest bet” for success in the upcoming summer releases. The same pre-summer review explained that “film makers have discovered that kids are the ones who fill the movie theater, and they love rock music and fantasy” (“Yellow Brick Road” 80). The article also previews four upcoming film musical releases: *The Wiz*, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *Hair*, and *Grease*. Commenting on the role of fantasy for attracting teen audiences, Robert Stigwood was quoted as saying that “Total fantasy works today” (qtd. in “Yellow Brick Road” 80). *Grease*’s first-time film director, Randall Kleisser, used the opportunity to promote the high technological aspects of the film as a “‘70s look at the ‘50s. …Stylistically, the actors will break into song – that’s old – but we are
using all the ‘70s film techniques we can muster, like split-screens and high-powered sound” (qtd. in “Yellow Brick Road” 80). The combination of high technology and pure fantasy were the pre-production keys to generating audience interest and expectations for all of the upcoming film musicals. Of the four film musicals profiled, *Grease* was the only one able to not only meet expectations but also exceed them.

The high concept marketing of the film uses the trailer to boil the film down to three specific aspects: John Travolta, Olivia Newton-John, and the music. In fact, Travolta and Olivia Newton-John are mentioned by name nine times in the course of two minutes, and the film’s title is mentioned three different times. Despite a brief line in the voiceover about *Grease* being “one of the longest-running musicals on Broadway” and a short scene between Rizzo and Kenickie (who are never mentioned by name in the voiceover), the trailer features shots of Travolta and Olivia Newton-John acting, singing, and most importantly, dancing. Wyatt points out the high concept marketing campaign for *Grease*, especially the posters and trailer, seek to encapsulate the entire film, focusing on the stars’ image first and everything else (including the title) second. It also identifies itself with classical film musicals by promoting itself as “The movie filled with more song, more dance, more of everything that makes a great musical unforgettable.” For Stigwood and Paramount, *Grease* was about marketing emotional images that tied into *Grease*’s legacy as a “classical” musical, but the promotion of the film reveals that *Grease* was less about the 1950s and more about popular 1970s entertainment.

High Concept aesthetics combines with aspects of popular culture to create a utopic space that combines a nostalgic view of high school in the fifties with the celebrity and pop music culture of the 1970s. Because of its ability to present aspects of contemporary culture, Rick Altman places *Grease* with in the sub-genre of the Folk Film Musical. Altman argues that the
folk musical attempts broad appeal by tapping into elements of popular culture such as artists or
song styles. *Grease* accomplishes both. The film has contemporary singers such as Olivia
Newton-John, Sha-Na-Na (a 1970s band that parodied 1950s musical style), and a title song
written by the breakout group of the late 1970s, The Bee Gees.

Altman notes that early folk musicals, such as *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *West Side Story*
(1961) work to present a very concise “vision of America as a galaxy of small towns, with the
impersonality of the big city permanently banned” (Altman *Film Musical* 275). Everything that
makes the city environment urban is pushed beyond the frame. The result is a depiction of day-
to-day rituals based on socially defined roles, integrated communal singing, and expressing
oneself through colloquial dances. These rituals, created in the classic Hollywood film musical,
are given a contemporary twist through the incorporation of contemporary popular culture
elements. The result is a Utopia based on dramatic conflict between individuals held together by
popular music. Altman argues that the ritual of life in the small town “brings the entire
population together” (Altman *Film Musical* 275). Being such a small and focused community,
the folk musical, by its very definition, crafts a utopic space unhindered by the events outside the
local. In the folk musical, the big city can be made to seem no larger than a small community
(such as in *West Side Story*). To insure the broad reception of this Utopia, the folk musical crafts
a generalized locale filled with generalized types of characters.

*Grease* is an excellent example of generalized locales and character types. Shot on
location in Los Angeles, the entirety of setting can be boiled down to the beach, the school,
Frenchie’s bedroom, the soda shop, the Drive-In theater, Lover’s Lane (the backseat), and
Thunder Road. All are ambiguously non-specific slices of Americana setting. In fact, most
settings look closer to *Happy Days*’ depiction of Milwaukee, WI, than Southern California (save
the Beach). Eliminating the song “It’s Raining on Prom Night” from the main narrative erases any acknowledgement that there is even weather in high school. The folk musical’s ability to draw on familiar locales works to recall a broad societal knowledge of culture (Altman *Film Musical* 281). Altman, noting that folk film musicals contain at least one song (or I would argue song style) that is familiar to the audience, explains, “the folk musical tries desperately to inject folk values and experiences into a world governed by the mass media. In order to achieve this goal, the folk musical must disguise its identity as a commercial, mass mediated product” (*American* 324). The Bee Gees’ recording of “Grease” is a good example of masking a piece of nostalgia as contemporary popular culture. If we consider that the song is the title number and accompanies the opening credits, then it is easy to see the film as setting up an expectation of parody of the 1950s that has more to do with consuming contemporary culture than consuming historical culture.

Such a localized view of America makes *Grease* more utopic and more classical in its approach than many other high concept film musicals. Everything about the film is familiar, its setting, songs, and the emotions it attempts to invoke. While part of the settings and emotions draw on nostalgia as a way of rewriting historical complexity and managing difference, the broad use of types in setting, character, and emotion creates an almost immediate sense of audience identification with the setting and characters. *Grease* as a folk musical, and as an integrated musical, blurs the lines between dancing and acting based on rituals of everyday life (Altman *Film Musical* 286-7). Through defined, yet geographically ambiguous settings (such as the malt shop and the auto shop), the film *Grease* is able to localize the experiences in the film to very specific rituals of life such as going to school, eating, drinking, having relationships, and, most important to *Grease* and most hormonal high schoolers, having sex. *Grease* also moves beyond
nostalgia to create a coherent representation of Utopia where, despite being defined socially, its characters are free to do what they want when they want. In a sense, the use of contemporary cultural rituals makes *Grease* more utopic than nostalgic. The amalgamation built through casting and soundtrack emphasizes the truly American high school experience, especially as an extension of culture based on teenage consumption.

The Utopia created in *Grease* is indicative of an overall view of Utopia present in other 1970s American cultural products. Robin Anne Reid writes, “The seventies utopias tend to share a collective process of governing rather than a centralized government or strict class structures” (101). In 1970s visions of utopias, the ordered system is internal rather than an overbearing system of law and order. Such is the case in *Grease*. Given that the Utopia is based in the experience of high school, the distinctions between class and structure are negotiated and violated with relative ease in favor of the teenage hormones, energy, and celebrity. In fact, the characters in *Grease* are allowed to move beyond divisions of class and school classes with virtual ease. They can because everything within the high concept musical is based on stereotype and generalization both in setting and character.

The lead characters promote the transcendence of school roles. Danny’s purported coolness gives him the ability to transcend social class and have any girl in the school. In fact, it is inferred in the film that he has had relations with a diverse group of girls ranging from Rizzo to Patti Simcox (Homecoming Queen and Yearbook Editor). Danny is even able to move beyond his greaser image and find a place in the athletic world by lettering in track. Societal and high school class roles are further diffused in the communal carnival ending. The event places all students together in celebrating “the best moment of their lives.” It will have to be, because that is all American audiences in the post-Vietnam era are left with. The Utopia represented in
*Grease* manages the societal pressures of socially defined roles by giving the audience characters that destroy the boundaries. Without the boundaries or any real presence of difference, dance numbers are presented as cathartic, collective expressions of rock-n-roll, hormones, and boundless youthful energy. Critic Robert Hatch called the unifying collective ideal in *Grease* as “stupidity expressed in hysteria – a not very merry conceit” (27). Critics’ visceral disdain of such visions expresses more of a disdain for not finding anything in common with the Utopia presented in the film, because they see the film as being out-of-step with contemporary social realities.

David Shumway argues that rock-n-roll nostalgia films of the 1970’s and 80’s use music to stir up feelings of community that reinforce a sense of solidarity in its followers that ultimately pits the community against those that do not understand the rock-n-roll feelings or do not belong to the rock-n-roll community (38). While a rock-n-roll nostalgia film such as *Easy Rider* (1968) uses music to unite the characters and counter culture audience through shared experience of music, Shumway argues that in *Easy Rider* the killing of the riders by the others “destroy[s] whatever utopian possibilities such solidarity might offer” (39). Shumway postulates the social instability in the 1970’s made it impossible for rock nostalgia films with contemporary settings to facilitate feelings of Utopia in the community. Shumway argues that this caused a change in the representation of community. Shumway states, “If the rock ‘n’ roll communion could no longer plausibly be located in the present or future, it could be placed in a fictional past” (39). By relocating contemporary culture in the past, *Grease* is able to achieve a communal Utopia built on a shared experience not only of 1950s nostalgia but on the experience of going to high school.
The use of nostalgia in high concept films is not uncommon. In fact, one could argue that the continued consumption of high concept films relies on feelings of nostalgia for the audience’s initial encounter with the film, its images, and its music. In looking at nostalgia in the high concept film *American Graffiti*, Frederic Jameson provides a bridge between nostalgic representations of history and the utopic feelings created by them. Jameson calls *American Graffiti* the “inaugural film of a new aesthetic discourse” that relies on the reproduction of nostalgia as means of experiencing history in the present (19). The nostalgia film’s main purpose (which includes a film like *Grease*) is to produce visions of history that serve to comment on contemporary life. Jameson writes:

> This approach to the present…endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage. Yet this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way.

*(Postmodernism 21)*

This idea helps to explain *Grease*’s broad appeal, especially to those who did not experience the 1950s. Audiences, actors, and re-enactors of culture at home can put on a leather coat, sing, and dance around in their own attempts to connect with a history with which they have no direct knowledge. Such consumption outside of the theater and film experience is one of the hallmarks of the high concept film. For Jameson, the power of the nostalgic mode to evoke the presentness of history has the power to help the audience to escape “the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” *(Postmodernism 21)*. In other words, the nostalgia films provide the audience the opportunity to escape the contemporary social milieu.
What reasons would prompt the need of 1970s audience for escaping? Economic instability, an ineffective and corrupt system of government, racism, and sexism to name a few aspects of 1970s society worthy of escaping. The effect of erasure through the presentation and consumption of Utopia presents the audience with a dual experience of the film musical that is simultaneously an escape from the present and a reminder of the problems from which they seek to escape. Rebecca Ann Rugg writes, “The audience experiences a momentary release from the restrictions of political correctness before returning to their modern consciousness in a world in which bland cultural sensitivity is socially enforced but resented” (53). The resentment of social constriction in the 1970s made the nostalgic social border/role crossing a pleasant alternative. Nostalgia, like Utopia, is subjective, based on perspective, and bound to the context of the reader. As Arthur Knight points out in his 1978 review, “Grease is like American Graffiti in its bridging of the generation gap through a top 40 score and a plot that plays up the naiveté of a more innocent era (which was still considered plenty dangerous by its elders, who were scandalized by Elvis the Pelvis)” (Knight). There is power in nostalgia and Utopia. The managing of difference and rebellion produces a dual reading of the film that uses the profitable feelings of Utopia to open up awareness in the audience for what is wrong in the world. However, the profitable feelings of escape can lead to a reinforcement of the ideal presented in the Utopia. In other words, just as representations of Utopia can theoretically inspire some to react to current problems, representations of Utopia can lead to the reinforcement and reinscription of power.

The reinforcement of old ideals is especially dangerous in the consumption of nostalgic utopias. Bertell Ollman notes that the power of Utopia has led some writers to convince the world that Utopia once existed in the past, if only for a brief moment. The logic behind such
arguments, Ollman maintains, is that such a utopia can be achieved again, in the present or the future (91). By showing how good things used to be, the audience is given the impression that we can achieve Utopia again. This can be problematic when the Utopia manages difference by pushing it beyond the frame. Therefore, the challenge of presenting utopic visions of the world is, in the words of George Kateb, “to find pleasures worthy of humanity, within the reach of all, not liable to cloy and weary when experienced continuously, and as independent as possible from the prior existence of terrible pain and privations” (253). To truly achieve change through escape, the utopic film musical must give pleasant alternatives to the audience that further the development of societal values. While *Grease* is nostalgic and warm-hearted, Arthur Knight observes, “it has the feel of now” (Knight). Since, the Utopia of *Grease* has the feel of the 1970s what does the film promote in terms of ideology?

As I alluded to earlier, *Grease* promotes the values of dominant ideology by managing difference within the narrative space constructed in the high concept film musical. Warren Buckland notes that most blockbuster film’s tendency to push difference beyond the frame creates a narrative performance space that includes an “off-screen presence” (172). This unseen presence simultaneously provides additional information to the audience and serves as an opportunity for characters to act. In other words, characters often work to protect the clarity of the Utopia in the performance space by continuing to manage opposing ideas; or characters can work to integrate difference and change the representation to a more palatable Utopia for the character. In other words, even the utopic film space is constantly under threat from the difference it seeks to exclude. Buckland argues that the off-screen presence is localized and contingent to the relationship between a specific shot or set of shots and the narrative construction (174). Therefore, based on a given shot in any given moment, the information held
in the audience and given in the film can connect to give a different “name” to the off-screen threat.

As a utopic film musical, *Grease* relied on 1970s Americans’ understanding of high school and managed difference by containing it within stereotypical high school character types. The cast and chorus contain a host of stereotypical student types including jocks, nerds, the popular girl, the bad girls, the bad guys, and inept teachers. While there are differences in the high school culture, *Grease* never reveals or shows the face of parental roles. Even when the girls are having the slumber party at Frenchie’s, there are no parents to be seen. As most high school students would say, teachers are not parents, and in *Grease*, the teachers are inept adults with little connection to the younger generation regardless of how much they care, or appear to care, for them. Free from parents, the characters are taught to rely on each other. They are taught independence, and more importantly, taught that everything works itself out. This is definitely a utopic view of high school culture. In American high schools, students are prepared to go into the real world, a world noticeably absent from *Grease*’s Utopia.

This is not to say that *Grease* was not controversial; it has just enough tension to make the film less like *Beach Blanket Bingo* and more like *Saturday Night Fever*. Yet it is important to remember that the audiences that could see the PG rated *Grease* were not the same audiences of the R-rated *Saturday Night Fever*. As a representation of Utopia, any potential life-changing events in *Grease* are managed by feats of deus-ex-machina or crafty narrative construction of Utopia. The teen angel celebrity will always have the right answer; Rizzo gets her period which leads to a proposal from Kenickie; the more experienced racers will always lose at Thunder Road; Danny the outsider letters as a jock; everyone gets a chance to party and sing the final number at the graduation carnival; Sandy appears bad but then never gets the chance to act on her
new found sexualized presence; and the entire high school experience is encapsulated in the final credit yearbook. The whole film, like high school, is a dream never again to be directly lived, only re-lived through consumption of high concept film musical Utopia.

All potentially troubling events in *Grease* are managed and made to disappear behind the communal knowledge of the high school experience portrayed and promoted by the most consumable elements of popular culture: film, music, and celebrities. What better way to get a teenage audience to invest in a film than to manage the only real world presence of conflict and source of constant reinforcement of real-world consequences, the parent. Moreover, for those parents who might be worried about the rebellious teens, the high concept film uses nostalgic aspects of the fifties to provoke feelings from their own past. For adults in the late 1970s, *Grease* is a pastiche of a past they never experienced. For teenagers in the late 1970s, the lyrics of the Bee Gees’ title song encapsulates *Grease*’s most marketable aspect “*Grease* is the way we are feeling.” The film is not about the 1950s, but it is about a need to escape from the present.

The depiction of Utopia at play in the dancing and rock-n-roll culture of the film obscures the more problematic ideologies managed by the Utopia, especially in the representation of women. The nostalgic view of the film musical reinforces the traditional objectification of women in American films. From the opening animated credits until the final song, Sandy is presented as a virginal Snow White type to be made fun of and criticized by the sexually liberal Pink Ladies. What may appear to be an attempt to deconstruct traditional gender roles has the potential to reinforce the same traditional constructions of gender. Robert Hatch writes, “This behavior [the change from black leather/greaser] may be intended as satire, but it is informed by no point of view and is therefore a mere exploitation of once-popular clichés” (27). For Hatch, the use of nostalgia in *Grease* invokes the recirculation of popular clichés in fashion, ideas,
sayings, speech, and setting. However, what is revealed in Hatch’s comment is endemic to folk musical utopias and exposes potential problems with issues of representation in the high concept utopic film musical of the 1970s and 80s.

While the intention of parody and nostalgia in *Grease* may be an attempt to show “how far we’ve come,” the escapist nostalgic tendencies had the potential to erase the progresses made by American society. While the film attempts to represent a liberated view of women who are free to act as they wish, the women in *Grease* are anything but feminists. While Sandy has the ability to transcend two different social roles, she still finds herself appealing to Danny for social and emotional validation. Rizzo’s pregnancy scare is honored by Kenickie’s proposal to “make an honest woman” out of her, as if there was anything wrong with her sexually liberated identity in the first place. In fact, *Grease* is an example of Robin Wood’s contention that seventies films sought to restore the sexual stereotypes of the 1950s which included the “restoration of women [to their place in the home and subservience to men], after a decade of feminism and ‘liberation’” (Wood 152). This is further accentuated by the absence of the parental characters in the film. The high school Utopia pushes parental and socially conceived sexual roles beyond the frame. In turn, the repression causes tension and angst as teenagers are allowed the freedom to act any way they want within the boundaries of the Utopia. The absence of parental authority and a system of responsibility presents the audience with feelings of freedom and rebellion. In identifying with the Utopia, audiences were given the opportunity to feel carefree despite the oppressive social realities of the 1970s.

In the final graduation, carnival scene, social responsibility is only present offscreen, for the carnival is presented as the reward for all of the rebellious acts of the film. The communal space gives Sandy the license to transcend her “good girl” roles. George Kateb defines this type
of freedom in the Utopia as fulfilling the need of utopists “to play” (Kateb 246). It only promotes Utopia when, according to Kateb, “it is placed in the service of the play impulse rather than the private gluttonous consumption” (247). In other words, the carnival only works as long as it continues to enforce the ideals of the American high school experience. It does so by erasing all difference from a year’s worth of living. Such a display of abundance in the Utopia, Kateb argues “forgets…history, the record of human suffering; what it tries to forget is mortality” (248). One could argue that the communal song number in the musical is the final chance for the utopists to play. To some degree, the chorus and lead are allowed the freedom to express their communal values and they are rewarded by the applause of the audience.

The end result for this type of high concept film musical Utopia built on abundance and excess. Kateb contends that to be truly “utopian” such issues of play:

cannot even be the play that provides accompaniment to, the relief from, the implicit commentary on the normally boring or normally painful existence.

…Utopia must strive for the creation of a new reality and transform a dependent party (play in the context of seriousness) into an independent whole (life as play). (248)

Utopia strives for the act of living as an act of play. For a Utopia to succeed, those in the Utopia must be as happy fulfilling their roles in the society, living as if they are playing. The act of living produces pleasure in the fulfillment of Utopia. Therefore, if there is pleasure in living and pursuing Utopia, then there is little need for the individual to break out of or rebel against the ideals of the Utopia. Kateb further contends that issues of pain (the seeds of destruction in the Utopia) are solved by helping the sufferer to achieve higher pleasures (intellectual and moral) and achieving pleasure itself. He writes:
these pleasures, in principle, do not require contrast for their enjoyment and, though intense are as removed from animality as it is possible to get. They give meaning to the idea of a life of pleasure and they do so not by threatening human dignity, but by establishing it. (Kateb 255)

Such is not the case in *Grease*. Pleasure is based completely within the act of play, or the act of sex as an act of play. While the feelings of fulfillment in pursuit of pleasure are present in *Grease*, the film as a whole capitalizes on sexual pleasure and attempts to neutralize it by placing it under the umbrella of “romantic love.” Yet the final sequence of shots reinforces the utopic and fantastic nature of the film. Danny and Sandy are in love, but the only way they can consummate their love is by flying off in a “magical car.” If the Utopia is so perfect, why must Danny and Sandy fly to the stars to have sex? Why not just hop into the backseat? The film shows that there is no place in Utopia or the 1970s mainstream film musical for sex between a “good girl” and a “bad boy” no matter how attractive or famous they are.

As a high concept film musical, *Grease* attempts to show that it is sex, as outwardly expressed in rock music and dance, which masquerades as love that leads Americans to Utopia. At first glance, *Grease* seemingly fulfills Altman’s model of the American film musical as an enactment of the courtship ritual. When filtered through a reading of Utopia, we can see that the film itself serves to promote Utopia through sex that can, in turn, be marketed and consumed by an audience through the high concept business model. *Grease* is one of the most generalized and non-specific views of Utopia that attempted, and economically succeeded, in getting audiences from a wide set of demographics, across a span of two decades, to invest in its vision. While the communal songs and utopic aspects of the musical help to promote a culture of perpetual consumption in high concept films, the representation of Utopia in the film serves to remind the
audience of what is missing, or what should be missing from society – parents and social responsibility.

David Harvey notes that there is a dialectical nature to Utopia, a type of self-perpetuation that always attempts to perfect the vision of the perfect ideal in the Utopia. What becomes increasingly important about *Grease* is not only how it shaped the way film musicals were produced under the high concept business model, but that its generalized use of nostalgia and depiction of Utopia through sex gave the musical staying power. In erasing the historical referent, the film became consumable by producing feelings of Utopia that gave the audience an escape from the dystopic realities of American life in the 1970s. This was accentuated by the high concept marketing of the film, where the net of promotion is so wide that virtually anyone could find a shred with which they might not only identify but also perpetually invest.

The *Grease*’s success at the box office virtually guaranteed a Broadway revival. However, the 1994 revival did not reproduce the original 1971 stage musical. Tommy Tune, noted Broadway director/choreographer/producer, completely reworked the revival to capitalize on the historic success of the film musical. The revival became a self-perpetuation of the film musical right down to the soundtrack and celebrity casting. While the high concept film musical did not begin with *Grease*, *Grease* ensured that the high concept business model would contribute to the successes and failures of the genre by defining audience expectations for the genre. It also taught audiences that the end of the film in the theater is not the end of the film experience. In helping audiences to re-experience the film through the soundtrack and feelings of Utopia, *Grease* helped to rejuvenate the entire film musical genre.

It was the popularity of *Grease* (1977) that not only momentarily revived the commercial production of musicals but also led to a rash of high concept film musicals, including *Xanadu*
(1980), Popeye (1980), and The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas (1982). However, none of these high concept film musicals would reach the cultural or economic success of Grease. In fact, it would be twenty-five years before another film musical, Chicago (2001), would repeat Grease’s success at the box office. Only this time, instead of conquering audiences with representations of Utopia, Chicago would use high concept practices to present a dystopic vision of contemporary culture.
Given the success of *Grease*, it is easy to see how the film musical became so tied to the high concept business model and how films that successfully integrated high concept practices were able to give the audience a vision of Utopia inextricably bound to the process of capital consumption. However, unlike the vision of Utopia as a high school that helps to completely manage any forms of difference by pushing them beyond the walls of the school, the incoherent texts of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Tommy* displayed that utopias are based on the perspective and cannot always be labeled as happy alternatives to reality. While the individual is sacrificed for the good of the community in *Superstar*, individuals can conquer their psychological barriers and come to lord over a dystopic world. The high concept film musicals produced within seven years of *Grease* further articulate the film musical genre’s ability to draw on aspects of high concept business yet give the audience alternative depictions of Utopia.

With the advent of high concept filmmaking and marketing that gave audiences a variety utopian visions in which they could invest, Hollywood studios reduced the risk of investing in their films and were able to tap into an audience demographic rich in expendable time and capital. While *Grease* and other mainstream Hollywood high concept film musicals represent visions of utopia that evoke feelings of pleasure through stereotyped characters and experiences, the high concept aspects inspire the audience to consume a lifestyle rather than to change their contemporary situation. Moreover, the process of consumption gives the audience hope that in consuming they will change the world. The audience hopes that by consuming they can achieve a small semblance of the high concept lifestyle of excess. Throughout the various depictions of Utopia present in the high concept film musicals of the 1970s and 80s, the perspective of the
Utopia became focused more and more on the individual. At the end of the twentieth-century high concept films were able to accentuate this shift in the definition of Utopia by centering its depiction of Utopia on the role of the individual rather the communal expression of traditional studio era film musicals.

David Harvey writes, “Utopian dreams never fade away. They are omnipresent as the hidden signifiers of our desires. Extracting them from the dark recesses of our minds and turning them into a political force for change may court the danger of the ultimate frustration of those desires” (195). The constant reconsumption of excess in high concept film musicals may have contributed to the frustrations of those desires in the audience. The constant reminder that Utopia is unattainable did not set well with the “Me” generation. While producers could not immediately recapture the magic of *Grease*, they would be forced to do what so many other artists in a late twentieth-century mediated society were forced to do – adapt. In adapting to shifting political and economic environments, studios and producers would find alternative methods of making film musicals. The result of those frustrations would come in the form of another branch of film musicals that were far from high concept ideologies and much more palatable to critics, but not as worthy of investment by audiences. Bertell Ollman writes, “As Wilde rightly observed, no map that doesn’t have utopia on it is worth looking at. But no map that has only utopia on it is worth taking seriously” (Ollman 100). The low concept film musicals developed at in the same economic, political, and film industry would challenge the construction of the film musical genre and the depiction of society as something from which society should escape. The competing marketplace view/critique of society in the low concept film musical displayed the world as a dystopic mess from which nothing, even capitalism, can save society.
While produced at the height of high concept Hollywood filmmaking, *Xanadu* (1980), *Popeye* (1980), *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982), *The Pirate Movie* (1982), and *A Chorus Line* (1985) drew on celebrities, soundtracks, and special effects technology but constructed conflicting visions of Utopia. Equally intriguing is the fact that most film musical scholars often overlook these movies. Despite being created in the same historical context and under the same production principles, each high concept film musical (except *Chorus Line*) was able to achieve moderate successes at the box office.

**Xanadu**

Olivia Newton-John’s big screen follow up to *Grease*, was a high concept patchwork of performance, popular music, disco, and roller-skating. The story of a love affair between a muse, Kira (Olivia Newton-John), and her lover, Sonny Malone (Michael Beck), Kira, the daughter of Zeus to comes to Earth to inspire Malone’s struggling art. Her intervention gives Malone the will to follow his dreams and open up his own nightclub. Throughout the film, the two lovers sing and roller-skate all over the Santa Monica Beach boardwalk to the songs of Newton-John and the Electric Light Orchestra. In essence, both *Xanadus* (the film and the club Sonny and Kira create) depict a Utopia of culture present in American discotheques of the 1970s and 80s. Despite the film’s attempt to depict the process of artistic inspiration as timeless, the setting and historically bound setting of roller-skating discotheques in Los Angeles doomed the film to a short box office run.

Despite the promotion of the film by posters that only showed a windswept ethereal headshot of Olivia Newton-John, the film also attempted to draw on the classical Hollywood film musical legacy of one of the film’s other stars, Gene Kelly. The film attempts to link popular American culture to classical film musicals and ancient Greek civilization. The film
attempts to show early 1980s roller-skating as the natural dialectical progression (or digression) of musical performance. *Xanadu*’s nostalgia for classical film musical performance (including a roller-skatin’ in the rain sequence) features the integration of the popular electronic musical style of ELO. The high concept soundtrack is integrated into the narrative much in the same fashion as classical Hollywood film musicals. The integrated numbers are given a high technological look with special lighting effects such as glowing auras and shooting stars that blaze down the Santa Monica boardwalk. The high concept musical performance is accentuated in Kira’s solo “Suspended in Time” which features Olivia Newton-John singing with a glowing aura. Newton-John never moves, she stands simply and sings to directly to the camera. While classical film musical conventions would virtually insist that the lead character sing and dance in a solo number, the song plays more like a high-tech music video where the emphasis is on the glowing aura and the magical rows of lights that act as a floor.

While *Xanadu* attempts to portray the act of inspiration as universal, the temporally bound aspects of disco and roller-skating fail to depict a utopia that is universal. Instead of a Utopia that is based on the timeless act of creation and inspiration, *Xanadu* portrays Utopia as a club where the audience can be at one with culture and inspiration in the same room. What was once a dream achievable in the classical film musical is achievable in American popular culture. As the lyrics of the film’s finale, sung by Olivia Newton-John, asserts, “the dream we have made is real.” Heaven is the discotheque and Utopia is a one-night party in heaven. As the finale plays out, the audience is shown how the excess can fulfill the hopes a cultural Utopia built on special effects and popular music. The result is view of culture and the ultimate life experience as a night of excess, a night only possible in a fictional Santa Monica club.
New York Times reviewer Janet Maslin noted that the real problem with the film is the disconnection between the music and the imagery. Maslin writes, “I had to hear the songs on the radio to like them. They sound infinitely more buoyant when they aren’t laboring to keep the movie aloft. …It’s a movie best watched with your eyes closed” (“Scrapheap”). The film imagery was nowhere near as popular as the soundtrack. In fact, the continued legacy of *Xanadu* is tied more to soundtrack and culture than the quality of the film. The depiction of disco culture as a Utopic culture was too much of a stretch for most of American audiences for most Americans in early 1980s lacked access to the heavenly discotheques. Despite Arthur Knight’s labeling of Olivia Newton-John as “a kind of ’70s Debbie Reynolds - and I project for her the same cinematic longevity, if she so chooses” (Knight), Olivia Newton-John’s presence and singing could not overcome audience’s inability or give enough need for audiences to create their own discotheque heavens. In the end, studios would learn that high concept casting was not the important aspect of high concept filmmaking. Studios would come to learn the hard way that while Olivia Newton-John could continue to sell recordings, she would not be able to recapture the blockbuster status of *Grease*, no matter how many times she was paired with Travolta.²

*Popeye*

Paramount studio executives promoted Robert Altman’s *Popeye* (1980) as a high concept film musical that appealed “to the proverbial family audience…somewhat missing in recent years” (“Cukor”). Despite being cast with celebrities like Robin Williams (who had made a name for himself on television’s *Mork and Mindy*), Shelley Duvall, and Ray Walston, Vincent Canby observed that the film was a “thoroughly charming, immensely appealing mess of a movie” (Canby “Popeye” 5). The film is loosely based on the comic and animated shorts of *Popeye: The Sailor Man* and centers upon Popeye’s arrival in Sweethaven to search for his
father. The mostly anonymous Commodore governs the Utopia that is pleasant “Sweethaven,” and the enforcement of Utopia falls to the Commodore’s main bully, Bluto.

Granted the town of Sweethaven, even in name, is not the typical Utopia. Fredric Jameson labels the film’s seaside island town Sweethaven as a Utopia. Jameson writes:

[Sweethaven is] a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature: not the beings of Thomas More, in whom sociality has been implanted by way of the miracle of the Utopian text, but rather those of the opening of Altman’s Popeye, who, no longer fettered by the constraints of a now oppressive sociality, blossom into the neurotics, compulsives, obsessives, paranoids, and schizophrenics whom our society considers sick but who, in a world of true freedom, may make up the flora and fauna of ‘human nature’ itself.

(qtd. in Rogers 109)

Jameson notes that the definition of Utopia is transitory, temporal, and culturally bound. In fact, the cultural Utopia of Popeye is a 1980s version of Utopia island living, except without God and with a lot more spinach. Because Popeye’s setting lacks geographical or temporal boundaries, it is more of a metaphor for American society of the 1980s than the nostalgic Utopia of Grease. While Popeye more accurately portrays the types of persons that constituted the American populace in the Reagan years, the film shows the how Utopia can be challenged and reshaped to further the good of the family, no matter what types of people occupy it. As Popeye discovers that his father and the Commodore are one in the same, and the true threat to Utopia is the iron hand of Bluto, Popeye learns that the true path to freedom and unity is in the restoration of the complete family unit, not necessarily the authoritarian enforcement of the island lifestyle. In the
end, the real hope of Utopia lies in the complete assumption of a lifestyle constructed from a stable family unit rather than the fascist enforcement of utopic ideals.

Utopia notwithstanding, the critical reviews of the *Popeye* were lukewarm to deadpan. Richard Schickel called the film an “over-Freudianized analyses of popular art that used to appear in the little magazines” with “spacey and junked up” direction fueled by “many witless songs” (“Comics” 72-3). Despite grossing $50 million at the box office and $25 million in home video rentals, the film is considered a failure for the auteur Altman because if failed to reach Paramount’s financial expectations (Wyatt 73).³ While children and families may have found it a reinforcement of family values, the film failed to speak enough to other audience demographics. The film’s failure to reach a broader audience may lie in the film’s inability to marry high concept values with the low concept songs. In fact, Nilsson’s soundtrack failed to generate a single pop hit. Despite the string of moderate box office earnings, high concept film musicals would continue to promote the excesses of living in the 1980s.

*The Pirate Movie*

*The Pirate Movie* (1982) challenged the narrative formation of the film musical in a way that would shape other high concept film musicals. By framing the film musical as a dream experienced by Mabel (Kristy McNichol) as she recovers from a near-drowning experience, *The Pirate Movie* reminds audiences that Utopia is achievable in dreams. While the film draws on Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *Pirates of Penzance*, it parodies not only the operetta but also makes reference to virtually every aspect of popular culture. This prompted Janet Maslin to write that because the film lacks “jokes of its own, [it] reaches shamelessly into other movies for a few” (“Pirate” C11). The parodying of popular culture rarely serves to forward the story. Instead, Mabel’s occasional direct address to the camera attempts to include the audience in the
jokes, which often serve to enforce contemporary societal roles by calling other characters’ actions by calling them “gay” or “feminine.” The jokes serve to forward a model of Utopia that is a reinforcement of mainstream Reagan era conservative culture. Like Sandy and Rizzo in *Grease*, Mabel has agency but continues to embody traditional societal gender roles. Combine these values with an overly synthesized musical soundtrack, and the result is a film musical that shows the audience that Utopia is dream, infused with culture but reflective of dominant social values, not unlike other high concept film musicals.

Mabel’s agency in the dream could be considered as a criticism of mainstream values, but the film’s communal ending counters any potential criticism present in the ideology. Everything in the film’s narrative is managed by way of Mabel’s dream. When the dream, hence Utopia, is in peril, Mabel merely has to shout, “Hey, I want a happy ending.” The shout leads to a cut, complete with costume change, music cue, and the final communal chorus number, “Give me a Happy Ending.” The happy dream ends with a happy “real world” ending complete with a wedding (without the courtship), eighties high fashion, and an extra-diegetic reprise of “Happy Ending.” Even though it is all a dream, the film lacks consistency even in its anachronistic references. Despite that both McNichol’s Mabel and Adkins’s Frederick spend the film clothed in relatively nothing (including a reprise of Adkins’ loin cloth from *Blue Lagoon*), the casting of Ted Hamilton, and icon of Australian television and film comedies, as the Pirate King is of little reference to broad American audiences. While *The Pirate Movie* depicts Utopia as a dream, not unlike *Moulin Rouge!* and *Chicago*, the film’s anachronistic cultural references rely on a broad knowledge of popular culture in film and often fail to play beyond the contemporary context of the film.
Another high concept film musical neglected by film scholars, The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, was based on a successful Broadway musical. The film drew on the star talents of Dolly Parton, Burt Reynolds, Dom DeLuise, Jim Nabors, and Charles Durning. What makes Whorehouse unique is that Universal, the film studio that helped produce the Broadway show, went on to produce and distribute the film adaptation. Unlike Grease and Jesus Christ Superstar, which relied on Robert Stigwood’s producing talents on both stage and screen, Whorehouse had a film studio as a producing arm from the beginning. The Broadway production can be read as another product tie-in for the upcoming film. As with Grease, portions of the film adaptation were changed to reflect the talents of its high concept casting. These additions included new musical numbers, including new song by Dolly Parton, and expanded dialogue sequences to showcase celebrity actors, such as Burt Reynolds and Dom DeLuise.

Whorehouse serves as an example of what Justin Wyatt called the 1980s “entrepreneurial spirit, the link between capitalism and exploitation, and most significantly in the Reagan era, the methods through which the upper-middle class reproduces itself” (High Concept 197). When discussing issues of exploitation and capitalism, what better subjects are there than sex and politics. Instead of a liberal understanding of relying on society and government to forward the ideals of society, the 1980s entrepreneurialism promoted a self-centered approach to the philosophy of “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” The inability of Mona (Dolly Parton) to adapt to the conservative political climate by going “underground” results in the closing of her bordello by the vocal, religious right, represented in DeLuise’s portrayal of the media-savvy Rev. Melvin P. Thorpe. Charles Durning’s performance of “The Sidestep” in the halls of the Texas Statehouse reminds the audience that, despite their connections or fondness for Mona and the
Chicken Ranch, even political figures are out to save themselves. While the film exposes the depth of the entrepreneurial spirit as it has permeated all aspects of culture, the film never condemns the entrepreneur who is honestly working to improve her situation. Instead, the hooker with a heart of gold is simply trying to better her and her girls’ economic situation. The want of a better life makes Mona worthy of empathy, regardless of the political climate.

While the film mourns the loss of individual entrepreneurialism based on goodness, the film also seems to indict the conservative moral evangelicals (characterized in Dom DeLuise’s portrayal of Melvin P. Thorpe). DeLuise’s performance of “Watchdog/Report – Texas Has a Whorehouse in It” is so over-the-top that it depicts the television church as little more than a variety show meant to propel the power of its leading Reverend. Thorpe’s use of investigative reporting techniques even parodies 1980s news journalism. While the film offers up some critique, Utopia is present and promoted by the high concept aspects of the film. In fact the celebrity casting of Parton, DeLuise, and Reynolds gloss over the true loss of good business sense. When Parton and the girls sing “Hard Candy Christmas,” her disarming good country-girl image is really convincing instead of ironic. While the women should be singing of their loss of agency in the conservative political climate, they seem to convince the audience, as well as themselves, that every thing will be fine and dandy. The closing of the whorehouse maybe a hard candy Christmas but it is still a holiday, and things could be a lot worse.

The entrepreneurial spirit, present in other 1980s high concept films like Risky Business (1983) and Weird Science (1985), is an enactment of the ideology of high concept films in the Reagan era. Wyatt writes “Opportunities for advancement are still available in the Reagan era, but these chances are limited to those who are already firmly ensconced in the affluent socioeconomic class” (High Concept 197). While the Chicken Ranch provided a service to all
classes, Mona and the girls were outsiders to begin with, and so what was once a Utopia of desire and fantasy fulfillment is replaced with a Utopia built on conservative Reagan era values. While the resulting Utopia is dark, the celebrity images of its lead characters help to obscure the dark aspects with their bigger-than-life personalities. While *Whorehouse* attempts to promote these same entrepreneurial values, it does so through nostalgia and music that obscured by its high concept celebrity casting. *Whorehouse*’s message is not abrasive or cynical enough to overcome its high concept aspects. In fact, the high concept aspects of the film helped it to secure a place in the top-ten grossing films of 1982.

*A Chorus Line*

As we have discussed, dystopic film musicals in the 1970s and 80s portrayed contemporary American society as a complex and ultimately repressive system for the individual. These films did this by exposing the systems of power within American society. Both *Cabaret* and *All That Jazz* expose show business as a dystopic environment filled with creative, flawed individuals often times at odds with their contemporary society. So what happens when the very institution of the musical is stripped of its most identifiable and Utopic of its conventions, the lead performer? The result is one of the longest running Broadway musicals of all-time, *A Chorus Line*. Running, at the time, an unprecedented 6,137 performances and spanning a 15 year-run, the musical, written and conceived out of the personal stories and interviews of dancers on Broadway “demonstrated that a musical doesn’t need a plot, at least a typical boy-meets-girl plot to be popular with audiences” (Jones 285).⁴ John Bush Jones notes that the self-reflexive nature of the “Plot isn’t where the fascination lies. It’s the inner drama of the show’s human personalities” (287). By getting to know the living breathing characters over the uninterrupted course of the two-hour musical, the audience is forced to confront the nature of
utopia and performance as located in the communal connection between performer and audience. Unfortunately, even a long-running and historic stage history would not be enough to sell a musical that requires the direct connection between performer and audience.

*A Chorus Line* seemed to have everything required for a high concept hit. It had instant name recognition, an extraordinary hit Broadway production, a relatively simple plot that could be boiled down to a single tagline: “Hundreds will audition but only eight will be chosen,” sweating, sexy dancers, and Michael Douglas. However, it also had the pitfalls of an awkward flashback love story, the inability for musical numbers to function effectively within the film’s narrative, and the fact that Michael Douglas does not dance or sing in the film. The poster relegated the title of the show to a small part inside the “o” of the phrase “The Movie,” did not mention that the film was directed by Sir Richard Attenborough, and relied on the vague promotional tagline: “The Line between nowhere and stardom.” The film’s weak performance at the box office is surprising because films about dancers have been quite popular with American audiences of the last thirty years. High concept films about dancers, including *Saturday Night Fever* and *Staying Alive*, were extremely popular because they were able to attract their target audience demographic. In the 1980s, films about dancers needed to appeal to teenagers who were not jaded by the realities of entertainment and could believe in the possibility of the individual to achieve fame and glory. In fact, *A Chorus Line* falls in line with a group of films about dancers that includes *Showgirls* (1995), *Centerstage* (2000), and *Honey* (2003).

*A Chorus Line*’s commercial downfall seems to be related to its attempt to naturalize the theatrical experience rather than demystify it. The stage musical is a self-reflexive musical that emphasized the most human aspect of performance, the live performer. Writing of the original
stage version, Paul R. Laird writes that those “who saw *A Chorus Line* during its original run will not easily forget it. The plot was minimal and somewhat artificial, but the characters were engrossing. We recognized types of people that we knew” (“Choreographers” 197). Implied in Laird’s observation is a belief in the “magic” of the musical. *A Chorus Line* is about the life of the dancer. Each story told in the musical shares similarities with the experiences of any audience member. There is a type of shared social experience with which American audiences could identify. Once they identified and began to empathize with the characters, they could appreciate the talent and power of each individual as an individual. The conceit is that the characters are real authentic individuals with stories just like everyone in the audience. However as filmed, *A Chorus Line* stifles the immediate character-to-audience connection of the stage musical, and the performances are seemingly as artificial as those in studio era film musicals.

Despite Zach reminding the dancers, “I don’t want anybody trying to act. Just to be exactly who you are,” the film ends up reminding the viewers that they are watching characters. This is reinforced by the generic expectations of the film musical as an onscreen encapsulation of performance. In theatrical productions, audiences could revel in the suspension of disbelief promoted by expectations of theatre and find moments of identification in the stories and sweating physical presence of the dancers. In the case of *A Chorus Line*, the Utopia of performance on stage trumps the flat-footed screen depiction of “live” performance.

In theatrical or filmic incarnation of *A Chorus Line* is a story about competition; a competition that some will win and some will lose. Given the dancers’ constant pressure of competition, there is an ever-present reminder that the chorus line is the ultimate equalizer. There are no individuals in the chorus line because it is a community. An audience member might get to know the dancers and begin to root for them, but they are ultimately rooting for
individuals to become faceless members of the masses, there to promote the goals of the lead character over their own. The dancer’s individuality is willingly sacrificed for the sake of the community. While the high concept aspect of Broadway theatrical productions can seem glamorous, the reality is that the chorus promotes the lead. Rarely does the individual get the opportunity to step out of their community and be noticed. This displays the downside to communal performance present in traditional film musicals. While the stage musical sought to emphasize and criticize a business that requires individual sacrifice in pursuit of capitalist, big business theatrical production, the message is curiously absent from the film adaptation.

There is a dual reading present in the stage musical that is not present on film. On stage, the performer is allowed to perform and express the individuality of the character. They are performing in front of a live audience, yet the Utopia they achieve as characters in the musical secures their place in the mass of faceless kicking sweating mass of the chorus. No matter how special the director, leads, or show is, the chorus will never be able to rise above the others in the chorus. Onstage, the poignancy of the final communal number emphasizes this point. “One” is the only number in the film that fulfills expectations of a large communal showstopper. It is the only one that features the dancers in full costume, choreography, and lights performing the number for which they have been chosen. However, as the performers perform, they are joined and overtaken by other dancers. Line by line, they fill the stage, so much so that by the end, the chorus is the faceless horde. The individual talents are nothing more than a faceless mass of workers that serve to make the lead of a musical unique.

The final number is indicative of many problems of the film adaptation. Marginalizing the social commentary of its stage predecessor, Attenborough gives the performers a close-up on screen, even the ones who are not chosen. The editing and framing of each performer in this
light gives them a level of individuality not afforded on stage. The simple choice to frame someone in close up creates a sense of individuality and makes those actors special because they were in “The Movie” of *A Chorus Line*, while onstage, the uniqueness of the performers stories and dances are preserved only in the memory of the spectator. Throughout the film, directorial choices undermine the dystopic ideology of the stage musical. By giving each of the individuals their close-up, Attenborough forces the dystopia of competition into a Utopia of performance. Because all of the main performers receive credit for competing, performance becomes Utopia, and simply by performing, one can achieve Utopia.

While *A Chorus Line* relied on many high concept aspects, the low concept approach of the stage musical had to be changed to capitalize on high concept audience expectations. While the film adaptation failed to successfully navigate the divide between high and low concept, the box office failure may be related more so to the inherent low concept aspects of the film. Despite the previous success of low concept films such as *Cabaret*, audiences were more interested in the spectacle of the high concept aesthetic than the cultural commentary present in dystopic, low concept film musicals. As John Kenneth Muir explains:

Musicals and the fantasies they encouraged by contrast were no longer afforded the same degree of leeway. The musical was a genre not based on new technology or special visual effects, but rather on elements straight from the heart. Like songs. Like the beauty, elegance, and simplicity of dance. Audiences permitted themselves to believe in droids, trash compactor monsters, and tie fighters, but as soon [as] [sic] someone broke into song during a movie, there were titters of disbelief. (Muir 66)

Low concept film musicals’ inability to connect with audiences in the 1980s reflects two factors. First, as the high concept model proved, films needed to find the simplest way for audiences not
only to identify but constantly reinvest in the ideology of the film, hence the high concept attraction to Utopia. Second, film musicals were tied to their context as much as they were tied to their stage predecessors. The failure of certain stage adaptations to connect with American audiences may reveal as much about the historical context of the films as it does about the ability of filmmakers to adapt musicals for the screen. The box office failures of film musicals such as *A Chorus Line*, *Hair* (1979), *The Fantastics* (2000), and *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) are as much issues of reception context as issues of directorial adaptation.

The commercial demands of the Hollywood film industry were more sensitive and more attuned to the rising importance of neo-conservative perspectives. The changing context that affected the reception of the low concept musicals can be correlated to the continued entrenchment of the high concept business model and the blockbuster film. It can also be attributed to the films audiences’ discomfort with depictions of society as dystopias – even though dystopia, or the depiction of a flawed society, was not only possible but also popular, in theatre during 1970s and 1980s. Yet in the 1980s, Broadway also began to experience a rise in the blockbuster mentality that was born out the high concept business practices of the film industry. While the new blockbuster musicals accumulated long runs, monster revenues, and global proliferation, they were produced alongside and in stark contrast to dystopic visions of society.

The theatrical and filmic dystopias exposed the artifices of film, theatre, and the musical genre by showing all performances to be the creation of living beings full of talent but devoid of Utopic magic. The representations of dystopia served as cautionary tales for all individuals in American society. They exposed the isolation of individuals and their inability to act in a capitalistic society that was built on a culture of overabundance and relegated people to faceless
hordes used to promote ideals that served the interests of capitalistic power. In dystopic musicals characters are the representations of the frustrations experienced by individuals when continuously confronted with unattainable or undesirable visions of utopia. While these dystopic musicals are cautionary, dare say argumentative, they also celebrate the relative free will of the individual. These low concept dystopic films promote the belief that the way people function in the society is more important than upholding the false ideals of communal Utopia. To some degree, performers perform because that is who they are, but tragedy ensues when their individual uniqueness is co-opted by capitalistic forces and the unrealistic expectations of American culture and society. A life of individuality without hope of Utopia was inconceivable for high concept audiences in late twentieth-century America. After all, Tom Cruise proved in *Risky Business* (1983) that anyone could achieve their goals by simply dancing around in their underwear and becoming a pimp to their high school classmates and college admissions counselor (Wyatt 196-7). By comparison, dystopias did not give Americans the hope offered by the excesses of high concept Utopias. Dystopic film musicals proved that sometimes no matter how hard someone tries to act, they might never get what they want. The perpetuation of high concept utopian ideals, and the subsequent box office failure of films that could not successfully integrate high concept business practices with low concept ideologies would give way to the spectacular utopias of the late 1980s and 1990s that capitalized on the depiction of the individual as a site of performance. Yet, while dystopic film musicals showed the individual as being at odds with society, the spectacular Utopias would display the individual as a combination of celebrity, music, and popular culture with the power to enact his/her own vision of Utopia. In that vision, the spectacular Utopia is a fantasy to be consumed by virtually anyone, anywhere in the world.
If we follow the logical evolution of the musical genres as suggested by Thomas Schatz and others, then a musical such as *Cabaret* (1972) should not have made it to the screen until after a musical like *Grease* (1978). It is a commonly shared understanding of genre development that the end of genre is self-reflexivity or a deconstructive critique of the genre itself. If that is the case, self-reflexive film musicals such as *Cabaret* are only possible once the genre has exhausted its repertoire of straightforward narratives like *Grease*. Yet *Cabaret* was produced before *Grease* and that is a reflection, in part, of the fact that in the 1970s the film musical experienced a developmental break in the genre. While some musicals based on stage musicals or otherwise sought to promote the Utopia and capitalistic ends of the high concept business model, other film musicals, produced and released within months of high concept film musicals and heavily reliant on their stage predecessors, sought to deconstruct the genre by exposing the genre as an artifice created and driven by “non-magical” human artists. This body of work flies in the face of Utopia by preserving the dystopic spirit of their stage versions and cultural contexts.

While some dystopic film musicals attempted to employ some of the high concept practices, the interest of the artists involved in creating and preserving representations of dystopia gave the films critical appeal. However, these visions of dystopia often failed to achieve widespread box office success. Instead of focusing on strong communal utopias built on choral songs and production numbers, managed forms of difference, and the creation of pleasurable feelings, these dystopic film musicals presented depictions of a society that oppresses the individual with its own unattainable vision of Utopia. These dystopic musicals are neither evocative of utopic visions of the Hollywood studio era nor do they fall under the
guidelines of high concept film musicals. Instead, musicals such as *Cabaret* and *All That Jazz* (1979) are disparate visions of 1970s and 80s American society that defied high concept business conventions. Whether set in 1930s Germany or in late 1970s America, each film depicts the uncertainties facing the individual in late twentieth-century American society and culture. This is a cultural dystopia born out the unrest of 1970’s economic collapse, the rise of global media availability, and the failures of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. This chapter discusses the development of an alternative film musical genre that depicts the cultural and political dystopia of American society pushed to the margins by the culture’s dominant ideals of Utopia.

In dystopic film musicals of the 1970’s and 80’s, individual characters battle the erasure of individuality within allegedly benign social utopias. In these films, the lead characters do not easily succumb to societal pressures to conform. Instead, they often choose to accept their faults and take their marginal place in a society that is also flawed. The lead characters in the low concept film musicals of the 1970s and 80s embody these dystopic visions of the contemporary world. Characters such as Sally Bowles (*Cabaret*) and Joe Gideon (*All That Jazz*) unapologetically struggle to reconcile his/her suffering in the present with the stifling pressures of social Utopia. They struggle against the unattainable ideal for which they seek, often times relegating themselves to continue the struggle in spite of their individual failures. These characters are willing to endure pain, suffering, and even death to maintain their individuality and sense of “right” in a mediatized consumer society bent on the destruction of individual differences. This onscreen depiction of dystopia is an outward expression of societal disillusionment that runs contrary to the rising politics of 1970s neo-conservatism. While the New Right sought to build American society in the image of a utopic, conservative, Christian
family, onscreen the characters of dystopic film musicals address audiences interested in celebrating their individuality even in the face of social and political pressures.

When placed in the context of the late 1970s and early 80s political environment, we begin to see that film musicals constructed in a conservative American political environment used the musical as a coping device. These dystopic musicals express a need, on the part of the individual artists, to cope with having individual liberty and freedom repressed by the conservative politics of both the Nixon and Reagan eras. The focus on character in these film musicals culturally challenges the politics of high concept films. While high concept film characters promote a view of the world where individual freedom (e.g. feelings of Utopia and community) are consumed by the audience, these low concept film characters confront the audience with a view of the world as an uncontrollable system of power that uses Utopia as a means of repressing the individual.

The same historical moment that spawned the high concept business model simultaneously generated an alternative representation of society outside of Utopia. While the high concept film musical would facilitate audience consumption of the feelings of Utopia through product tie-ins and soundtracks, the high concept model also served to promote cultural representations of Utopia that, in the words of Frederick L. Polak, attempted “to bridge the gap between the factual environment and another, imagined world” (290). Low concept films would work to expose the imagined world of film as a world more like contemporary society than the nowhere of Utopia. Moreover, these low concept films not only exposed the era’s visions of Utopia as repressive ideologies but also served to express contemporary cultural anxiety. So while high concept utopias attempted to diffuse issues of historical reference and ideology with rock-n-roll, high technology, and celebrity, low concept film musicals utilize innovative film
technique and a narrative structure built on performance to present problems that expose the
ilusions of ideal pasts, presents, and futures as elements that repress our ability to “perform” as
individuals in contemporary society. Ultimately, the low concept film musicals of the 1970s and
80s did not attempt to show American society as it should be but exposes contemporary
American culture for what it is.

Dystopia and the Film Musical

Much like Utopia, dystopia is an extension of the feelings it creates in its audience. Most
notably, dystopias expose and promote feelings of individuality as isolation and disillusionment.
Often times, defining and determining dystopia means proving that something is not utopic. In
exposing the flaws of Utopia, Paul Tillich writes, “The impotence of utopia is the fact that its
negative content of untruth and unfruitfulness leads inevitably to disillusionment. …Such
disillusionment is an inevitable consequence of infusing the ambiguous preliminary with the
unambiguous ultimate” (300-1). For Tillich, the depiction of utopia creates its own dystopia. As
I discussed earlier, Utopia promotes an unattainable future without giving its audience the tools
to achieve it. The total lack of tools for achieving perfection ultimately leads to disillusionment
in the audience and the destruction of hope and faith in the institution of Utopia.

While utopias are not always cheerful happy islands, societies breaking into songs, or
even historical moments that never existed, dystopias often times are more familiar to the
audience. In fact, dystopias have a tendency to carry even more shreds of familiarity for
consumption by an audience. Sharon Stevenson writes:

A dystopia then is more than a bad place; it is a familiar, yet unfamiliar,
malvolent place where good or at least average people suffer deprivation of basic
freedoms required to be fully human, and this suffering occurs at the hands of a
faceless system, either social or governmental or both, that is beyond the protagonists’ power to control or change. …The dystopia creates paranoia not only from the suffering in the novel but also from the readers’ own social milieu that supplies additional information about the tendency portrayed; that is readers must already know something about environmental problems or the power of the religious right. (Stevenson 135)

The fact that dystopia is already present or can become present in contemporary living triggers anxiety on the part of the audience (130). This anxiety can incite action on the part of the audience, but more often than not, the angst is a paralyzing force that reinforces disillusionment and isolation with current systems of power, whether it is governmental or social. While Stevenson is writing of science fiction dystopias, this outline of dystopic settings certainly applies to the dystopic film musical, which is every bit as “fantastic” as science fiction.

Exposing institutions of power as systems of control and causes of disillusionment is a popular trope in literary dystopia, especially when the institution is held in power by human greed, corruption, and hatred. Roger Schlobin writes, “Dystopia, the nightmare of utopia’s daydream, is very real and constitutes mimetic literature, especially since the Holocaust” (11). In other words, dystopias give the appearance of being more factually based, threatening, and ultimately more real than its utopian counterpart. Schlobin argues that dystopias are products of context:

[Dystopias are] inspired by reactions to anxieties and discontent, suffering and pain, blocked and failed social systems, tyrannical languages and symbols, oppression of gender and color, dehumanization, the loss of the ‘American
Dream,’ science and machines, materialism, antithetical cultures, ideologies, and colonialism. (Schlobin 14)

The deconstruction of ideals and dreams redraws the boundary between the individual and the society. Seemingly more real than Utopia, dystopia reminds the individual that they are often times at the will of larger social forces.

Individuality, Schlobin argues, is central to both the utopian and dystopian impulses. Schlobin states:

[U]topias celebrate the power of individual will, and dystopias will negate it. …in utopias, the inspirations are the perceived needs to exercise the will in the reverie of the ideal world to escape…[I]n dystopias, to mourn or satirize the impotency of the will [is] to free itself from the dark world. (15)

As I argued earlier, utopias thrive on the acceptance of the social ideal by the individual. While utopias rely on the free will acceptance and promotion of ideals by each individual, dystopias work to expose the individual as not having free will much less the ability to exercise it. This loss of free will is a point of suffering and gives potential audiences something with which they can identify. Stevenson notes, “In a dystopia misery and suffering must happen to good, though perhaps flawed, people in circumstances beyond their control” (129-30). By exposing the individual as a pawn in a society that moves with or without them, dystopias emphasize the distinctions between the individual/society and free/social will as a point of suffering not only for the character in the dystopia but the individual in the audience as well.

Dystopic views of American society serve a purpose that is not completely contrary to utopias. In fact, dystopias can be employed to achieve Utopian ends. Dragan Klaic postulates that theatre as a Utopian expression of performance also displays dystopic elements. He writes:
The more difficult it becomes to sustain utopian ideas against the record of history, the more contemporary political and social practice compromises utopian yearning, the more necessary it becomes to deploy dystopian modes of expression to express utopian expectations. (Klaic 61)

As contemporary social situations isolate the individual from the communal goals, the more important it becomes to expose the rifts between individual and the social whole. The goal in exposing these divides is to provide a point of communication between those isolated from the collective and the collective itself. In essence, it becomes a minority expression of community pitted against the collective majority. Through the deployment of dystopian theatrical expression, the minority hopes to change the majority’s idea of Utopia. C.W.E. Bigsby echoes Klaic’s view of theatre as a source for dystopia and self-reflexivity. He writes: “The fact that theatre, by its very nature, deals in transformations is perhaps one reason why it proved the central genre in the sixties and early seventies, a period, anyway, when performance was a primary trope, metaphor and political reality” (Bigsby 267-8). During the Vietnam War and well into the 1970s, the theatre exposed American society and politics as a system of power based on performance. Self-reflexivity in the theatre exposed those in power as manipulating, flawed individuals who used power to make their own world. By exposing politicians and cultural impresarios as humans, instead of magicians, theatre and performance art sought to create a new Utopia based on the individual’s need for expression and acceptance in the community.

The contrary, yet simultaneous, rise of dystopic and utopic film musicals is a product of the unstable cultural context of 1970s America. William Chafe notes as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, “the social complexities and cultural contradictions of the 1970s can be traced to one preeminent reality – the postwar world of abundance and optimism had ended. … It was a new
world, full of frightening uncertainties” (Chafe 466). After all, the same country that seemingly single-handedly ended WWII had been beaten, rather handily, by a band of unorganized, ill-equipped, and illiterate Communists in Vietnam. In light of the highly volatile cultural climate of the 1970s, it is easy to see how some audiences yearned for escape from the present to a utopic past or present. Yet, it is equally easy to comprehend how other audiences yearned for ways to reckon with their current social situation. Rick Altman makes note of these two divergent paths as they related to the film musical, but does not analyze the development of these two paths in light of the dichotomous entanglements between art (low concept) and commerce (high concept). Instead of attempting to define the division within the musical genre, Altman metaphorically and pessimistically writes, “Down one path lies the death of the musical by subservience to Broadway and then to the recording industry; down the other lies the death of the musical by self-inflicted wounds” (Film Musical 121). While the former serves the high concept ideal, the latter is born out of dystopia and seeks to deconstruct the genre and expose it to be an artifice of creation and no-less utopic than contemporary society. The result is a branch of the film musical genre that is self-reflexive, didactic, and counter to culture in both its production style and reception.

Noel Carroll argues that by 1967 “the idea that style is something that an audience should see and consciously unpack as part of the overt meaning of the film had become the wave of the future” (78). In the case of the film musical, style was a means to promote non-hegemonic ideology and/or deconstruct genre. Such a move in film production meant that filmmakers would start to expose film musicals, performance, and reception as something other than “magical” or utopic. Self-reflexive approaches to the musical sought to expose the “magic” of production by showing it for what it was, hard-work, heart-breaking, often out of the control of
the actual artists, and filled with creative people who are not always in control of themselves and their social situations. Charles Affron notes that the consequences of exposing film, theatre, and the musical as “performance” rather than “magic” leads the audience to wonder “where performance ends and reality begins” (Affron 42). The angst created by exposing the performing arts as performance rather than magic emphasizes the role of the performer in the creation and reception of performance.

It is important to take a moment to discuss the historical nature of self-reflexivity in the musical. It can be argued that any musical that shows performance and the creation of musicals as performance is self-reflexive. For example, Rick Altman, Jane Feuer, and others have argued that *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) is self-reflexive because it exposes the artifice of filmmaking during the development of sound cinema. Yet, the film itself is not shown to be an artifice, but instead is upheld as the synergistic creation of artistic professionals. The film never deconstructs the genre of the film musical. In fact, *Singin’ in the Rain* continues to perpetuate a classical view of film musical genre by continuing to sell the act of performance as magical and utopic, despite the artifice of sound reproduction. In the end, Don Lockwood never falls down in the rain puddle, Kathy Selden is rocketed to stardom from the chorus, and Lina Lamont always gets what she deserves. Instead of being a true critique of the artifice of sound recording and playback, *Singin’ in the Rain* is the celebration of technology and performance that ushered in a new era of cinema and ultimately reaffirmed the audience’s expectations of film musicals as utopic. While the film reaffirms the objectivity of film production by locating the unrealistic expectations of the genre in the minds of the audience, it ultimately reinforces the “magic” of the movies and promotes the utopic fantasy of bursting into song and dance without the true fear of retribution of a society that may not dance with you. This is a far cry from the self-reflexivity expressed in
musicals such as *Cabaret*, *All That Jazz*, *Moulin Rouge!,* and *Chicago*. Self-reflexivity in film musical reception implies a dual understanding of genre as a collision between narrative structure and historical context. In fact, the self-reflexive film musicals of the 1970s deconstruct generic convention by calling attention to the theatricality on which the musical genre itself is built.

*Cabaret*

Just as theatre and performance came to be used to depict dystopic allegories for American society in the 1970s, it is appropriate that one theatre professional’s directorial film debut consisted not of a reaffirmation of the theatre and performance but instead a complete refashioning of the genre in theatrical terms. In both *Cabaret* and *All That Jazz*, studio-era genre conventions collide with auteuristic authority. The individualistic vision of Bob Fosse challenged and reconstructed the conventions of the integrated film musical. By grounding performance and musical numbers realistically within the film’s diegesis, Fosse gave the audience a logical real-world explanation for characters bursting into song. In these two films, it is not necessary that the audience believe it is normal for the character to burst into song at a given moment. Instead, there is a realistic and logical reason for the song. For example, the narrative structure in *Cabaret* functions as an anti-musical or even a backstage musical rather than the conventional integrated film musical. In the backstage musical, songs rarely move beyond the presentational form on a literal, diegetic stage, and the songs seek to entertain in much the same fashion as a vaudevillian song break, or a high concept music video. They may tie into an overall character action, but only subtly and rarely explicitly. Instead, in backstage musicals songs and song breaks serve to comment on action and character without the character explicitly singing about it. In *Cabaret*, the songs rarely leave the stage of the cabaret, and when
they do, there is a direct connection between the song and the diegetic world of the film. Fosse’s use of the studio era convention exposes the darker-side of performance and society and depicts the nature of performance and reception as “real” and ultimately more human than the glossy historical conventions of the film musical genre.

_Cabaret_, featuring music by John Kander and lyrics by Fred Ebb, premiered on stage in November 1966. The dark story of a love affair between an American writer and an English actress in the Berlin cabaret scene during the rise of the Third Reich was conceived and directed by Hal Prince (who also directed _The Phantom of the Opera_) and ran a respectful 1,166 performances. John Bush Jones notes that Prince’s concept for the musical was “to transform some stories of life in Berlin around 1930 into a cautionary tale for the United States in the 1960s” (241). Jones observes that _Cabaret_ was as much about Civil Rights in America as it was about 1930s Berlin. Jones also notes that the point was not lost on the musical’s lyricist who called the musical a “parable of the 1950s told in Berlin, 1924” (qtd. in Jones 241). Yet as _Cabaret_ came into preproduction five years later, Fosse chose to return to the original inspiration for the musical, Christopher Isherwood’s _Berlin Stories_, to fashion a film, not necessarily a musical (_Legend_). Fosse described the film as “Not a copy of the Broadway musical, but a drama with music. Obviously this is not ‘My Fair Lady’. …This is a story about a real and dark time. It is a modern-day nightmare in song and dance” (qtd. in “The Story”). This perspective is echoed by Rick Altman who notes, “_Cabaret_ reveals man’s obsessions and nightmares rather than his dreams” (_Film Musical_ 265). The return to the historical setting and the depiction of 1930s Berlin is a choice that reinforced the naturalistic tendencies of film, especially with regard to the interplay between performance and reception context because America in the 1970s had much in common with Berlin in the 1930s.
The inclusion of historical cabaret performance in Germany, the Isherwood stories and Fosse’s choice in setting the film historically presents a view of a historical society that was as dystopic as contemporary America of the early 1970s. In discussing the rise of cabaret theatres between the decline of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Third Reich, Alan Lareau notes that a “cabaret prospers in times of economic and political unrest, for then it has controversy and the public concerns on which to build” (Lareau 485). It seems only appropriate that Cabaret would come to American screens during a time of political and economic unrest. Lareau argues that the cabaret theatres of Germany in the early 1930s were a mix of popular fare for entertainment’s sake and slight political satire. For the most part, entertainment was favored over political satire (486). Lareau also points out that historically, artists believed that the “Cabaret was hypocrisy for sale, performers and audience acting self-important merely because they were so marginal and out of touch with the times” (489). When placed within its historical context, it is possible to see that Cabaret uses 1930s Germany as an allegory for American culture in the era of Watergate and the Vietnam War.

The songs in Cabaret’s narrative have more in common with contemporary films than high concept film musicals. In fact, Fosse integrates the songs so seamlessly that he connects all elements of performance wholly within the film’s diegesis. Instead of performance being something that points towards a utopic view of the world, the singing and dancing have a real place in a dystopic world. The result is a view of the world that more closely depicts its era than classical film and stage musicals did. The argument could be made that Cabaret has more in common with high concept rock bio-pics, like Purple Rain (1984) or This is Spinal Tap (1984) than Babes in Arms (1939) or Meet Me in St. Louis (1944). One might also argue that by giving a logical narrative space for the unfolding of songs and performance, Cabaret legitimized the
high concept film’s use of music montage as music video. However, because high concept film music montages are meant to promote the off-screen product tie-in to the soundtrack, they fail to carry the self-reflexive criticism of character and action as the songs in *Cabaret*.

The naturalistic integration of songs in *Cabaret* led Randy Clark to announce, “Although the plot structure of the film is more in keeping with traditional musicals, it is not a musical!” (emphasis in original, 53). Clark points out, “Except for the last two numbers in the film, “Cabaret” and the finale (a reprise of “Wilkommen”), each number features crosscutting, either between the performer and [diegetic] audience, or between the cabaret and events in [other locales of the story] world” (56). Clark argues that such a use of song in the naturalistic film world has decidedly different effects than it would in an integrated film musical. Instead of a character breaking naturalistic conventions by bursting into song, *Cabaret* does not disguise, but instead, plays up the alienating effects of the musical numbers as ironic comments on the world in which the plot is taking place (56). The result of such ironic commentary about the film world gives the audience a means by which they can see their own social situation in ironic terms.

1930’s Germany becomes the setting of a metaphoric struggle between American society and the choices individuals must make to preserve their individual agency in a time of corruption and political malaise.

Fosse’s framing of the performance sequence in the Kit Kat Klub emphasizes the role the audience plays in live performance. Arlene Rodda writes that the “action is seen from odd angles as the viewer is constantly looking up at the action from a weird perspective” (39). Instead of framing the performance from stage level, Fosse places the camera in the audience of the Kit Kat Club. When replicated in the movie theater, the audience is perpetually looking up at the performer, making the audience in the movie theater similar to the audience in the cabaret.
In cutting between the action onstage and the audience reactions, Fosse creates a narrative space where the audience in the movie theater becomes part of the audience of the Kit Kat Klub. When juxtaposed with the events outside of the cabaret, the viewer is subjectively part of the club audience but omnisciently a viewer of history unfolding before their eyes. In this dual subjective experience, the audience is made aware of the events of the outside world as they inform the performance in the Kit Kat Club.

Even the mirror present on the club’s stage, adapted from the Broadway stage version, forces the audience to recognize their own reflection and implicates the audience in the world of the musical (Jones 242). Yet, the reflection is a shadow of the contemporary world. The reflection implies that those in the reel audience are reflections of a real audience. While the audience reflected in the film is a 1930s Berlin audience and not the audience of 1970s America, the Nazis are among the film’s audience nonetheless implying that there are fascist forces in the contemporary audience’s midst. This audience self-reflection is reinforced in the Master of Ceremonies (Joel Grey) who directly addresses the camera. The momentary break in naturalistic convention further reinforces the film audience’s role, and the alienation produced forces the film audience to realize its role as audience to societal events. The alienation created by the MoC disallows any blind consumption of the film without critique. The silent complicity of the 1930s audience is equal to the silent complicity of the 1970s audience. Hence, the seeds of dystopia are in the audience. Ultimately, the audience is asked to confront their role in the consumption of art and production in American politics, culture, and society in the waning years of the Vietnam War.

Fosse’s extensive use of crosscut editing in *Cabaret* helps to cement this interplay and serves to provide commentary on the nature performance and politics. In film, crosscutting, or
parallel editing, is often employed to emphasize the shared temporality of different events. A classic example used in film scholarship is the ending of Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*. As Michael Corleone is in church becoming a Godfather to his nephew, Coppola intercuts the scene with sequences depicting Michael’s retribution on rival mafia groups. The crosscutting between sequences emphasizes that the events are occurring at the same time and they serve as literal and metaphoric rise to his place as *The Godfather*. However, Coppola lost the Oscar® for Directing and Best Picture to Fosse’s *Cabaret*. While box office revenues suggest a preference for Coppola’s style of crosscutting to Fosse’s, it is apparent that Fosse self-reflexive style appealed to the Academy.

Fosse’s use of crosscutting is every bit as brutal as Coppola’s but Fosse’s continued use of the technique also provides strong social commentary. Not only do the songs serve as performances, but they are also sites of montage for events occurring in the world of the film. From the playful slapping choreography of “Tiller Girls” being crosscut with the beating of the maitre’d by the Nazis to the flashback sequences of the developing love affair between Sally and Brian in “Maybe This Time,” the songs serve to comment on the action and expose elements of character rather than just being sites of musical performance. Randy Clark notes, “each of their propositions is at odds with the diegetic reality” (Clark 56). The juxtaposition of innocence and power is ever present in Fosse’s choreography but the editing adds an additional layer of meaning that exposes the performance as evocative of social instability. Much like Brecht’s utilization of signs in theatrical performance, the crosscutting comments on the integrated nature of songs in the film musical as an artificial construction of Utopia rather than a natural Utopia. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of stage performance and other events in the story serves more as commentary on the utopic representation of real life as song than a commentary on 1930s as a
dystopia. The juxtaposition of Utopia in performance with the uncertain realities of dystopia in society gives the appearance that the only way to achieve Utopia is in performance. The song “Maybe This Time” shows Utopia is always fleeting. When Sally’s insecurities come through in her stage performance of the song, Fosse reinforces her performance by intercutting it with scenes from her offstage relationship with Brian. The realities of the story world inform and influence not only the audience’s reading of the song but also Sally’s performing of it.

*Cabaret*’s depiction of 1930s Berlin is neither nostalgic nor utopic. In the film, and as Fosse would argue, putting on a show is never magical. It is a complex mix of artistic expression informed by and commenting on its contemporary social context. The narrative structure and editing in *Cabaret* emphasize the artifice of art and film. In constantly reminding the audience that they are complicit in the consumption of performance, Fosse produces a scathing rebuke of 1970s America. The musical is no longer just about civil rights. David Cook observes, “in developing its historical anti-authoritarian theme, *Cabaret* clearly suggested the political and moral price of withdrawing into self-indulgence at a time when many sixties activists had done just that in the face of the Nixon ascendancy” ([Lost Illusions](#) 212). Historians like William Chafe share such a view of American society. He writes that:

[M]illions of Americans “dropped out” of politics because of disillusionment with the alternatives offered by major parties, millions of others were galvanized into action by their outrage at the excesses of the 1960s and at what seemed to be a concentrated assault on the most basic values and institutions of the society – the family, the church, patriotism, and sexual morality. …For conservatives, the 1970s represented a cultural war against the liberal technocrats attempting to invade the private domain of the family and destroy America’s most cherished values. (Chafe 461)
The backlash against 1960s cultural and social progress became embodied in Nixon and his conservative voting base. The subsequent turn to dystopic representations by artists helped to emphasize the disillusionment felt by many in film, theatre, and even the commercially successful music industry. *Cabaret’s* promotion of homosexuality, abortion rights, and the right of a woman to seek her own sexual freedom was a scathing rebuke of mainstream cultural values of America and the Nixon presidency.

The dystopia of *Cabaret* displays the suffering of the performer and the individual as caused by a warped society. The depiction of suffering of those at odds with mainstream society becomes a point of escape for the cabaret stage. The only place Sally is at home is in the spotlight, the single spotlight. While Fosse portrays the need of a performer to perform, especially in the face of fascism, the historical depiction of Sally and MoC’s suffering at the hands of a changing society becomes more than just a wake up call to 1970s America, it is a direct slap in the face. Paul Tillich remarks that those who suffer disillusionment through the realization of dystopia have a tendency to become “fanatics against their own past” (emphasis in original 301). The past becomes not only a reminder but also a direct indictment of the present. Since the individual has seemingly little power to upend the growing utopianism of German heritage and nationality in the Third Reich, the individual must continue to act on their own terms, at least as far as they are able to.

In the final moments of *Cabaret*, Fosse wants to celebrate the individual performance but he is cynical and daring enough to expose the cabaret and film audience for what it is, a grotesque reflection of fascist desire, greed, hatred, and repression. Instead of ending with the classical Hollywood utopic musical number, the final performance of the Kit Kat Klub ends almost abruptly with Sally and the MofC walking off the stage in silence, not uproarious
applause. The camera continues to track to the mirror on the stage and the audience’s reflection, Fosse’s final shot of the reflection of the Nazi members in the audience can be compared to Sharon Stevenson’s definition of evil in dystopia. She writes:

The evil in a dystopia is usually a faceless, all-encompassing state, bureaucracy, or belief system that annihilates or restricts some set of values the readers believe are indispensable to both their own and the characters’ ability to function as fully dignified human beings. The more plausible the ideology and working of the evil fantasy system, the greater the paranoia the reader will feel. (131).

The final image forces the film audience to look at the reflection as a potential allegory for America in the 1970s. Having been witness to the seemingly innocuous rise of German nationalism, American audiences were forced to confront their own impotence in the current social situation (economically, globally in Vietnam, and socially at home). The suffering of the individual in the dystopia of Cabaret is socially influenced by one type of conservative politics. Another conservative swing would provoke Fosse’s own semi-autobiographical look at the production of art in a dystopic world.

_All that Jazz_

Fosse’s influence on American film and the development of the film musical genre was profound. Fosse’s auteuristic approach to film production gave him the reputation of being hard to work with, constantly over budget, a consummate perfectionist, but ultimately worth every dollar and minute. Fosse’s talent, creativity, and artistic vision were unparalleled. Justin Wyatt notes, “The degree of assimilation of avant-garde artists within the mainstream industry obviously depends on the extent to which these artists are interested in engaging narrative in their creative projects” (High Concept 199). In 1973, Fosse was the only director to earn the
“Triple Crown” of directing by earning an Oscar for *Cabaret*, a Tony Award for *Pippin*, and an Emmy Award for *Liza with a ‘Z’*. Fosse was also the only film director to earn an Academy Award nomination for direction in three consecutive films (*Cabaret*, *Lenny*, and *All That Jazz*). Despite his ability to cross the boundaries between theatre and film, Bob Fosse will always be noted first for his stage accomplishments. A self-professed workaholic, Fosse suffered through various addictions and personal insecurities to achieve his numerous successes. However, it was Fosse’s own encounter with mortality, in the form of a heart attack and double-bypass surgery, which helped to inspire one of the most autobiographical yet self-reflexive critiques of the film musical and American entertainment.

According to Justin Wyatt, *All That Jazz* is the epitome of low concept filmmaking because it struggled to be easily marketed to audiences. Wyatt notes that the marketability of a high concept film “is based upon such factors as stars, the match between star and project, a pre-sold premise (such as a remake or the adaptation of a best-selling novel), and a concept which taps into a national trend or sentiment” (*High Concept* 15). As a semi-autobiographical musical of a womanizing, pill-popping, workaholic, choreographer/director all rolled into the character of Joe Gideon who, in the wake of commercial film and stage success, has a heart attack and dies, Bob Fosse’s film *All That Jazz* has a plot that is neither entirely happy nor completely tragic but wholly cynical and unapologetic. The incongruous nature between the plot of the film and the audiences’ expectations of classical Hollywood musicals, as good people suffering through difficulties to achieve Utopia, left some audiences confused. *All That Jazz* did not jive with the expectations created in the linear narratives seen as inherent in musicals such as *Grease*. Yet the vision did incorporate the same creative outlook that informed *Cabaret*, only this time, the audience had changed.
To further complicate the disconnect between *All that Jazz* and American audiences on the eve of the Reagan revolution, the music and stars of the film were not the typical headliners that consumers had become accustomed to seeing. To complicate matters further, *All that Jazz* is full of unremarkable songs that can barely be sung, much less hummed on your way out of the movie theater. One of the few memorable musical numbers is a duet of “Bye, Bye Life” sung by Ben Vereen and Roy Scheider. The casting of Roy Scheider as Joe Gideon was also not what film audiences were used to seeing from the actor (Wyatt 6). Wyatt points out that while Scheider was a high concept star (notably from *Jaws*), the actor’s previous endeavors were not musicals. According to their picture personalities, Liza Minnelli was a singer and stage performer, while Roy Scheider was neither a choreographer nor a performer. Scheider was the man who killed a great white, not just once, but twice. While Scheider received an Academy Award nomination for his portrayal of the Bob Fosse archetype, the casting was not a coherent match between the star’s picture personality and the genre. Because Americans had become accustomed to seeing Scheider as a good guy who stopped the drug pushers in *The French Connection* (1971) and killed the shark in *Jaws* (1975), they had trouble seeing the actor as a successful Broadway choreographer/director.

True to Fosse’s reputation, *All That Jazz* invokes popular entertainment only to criticize the entertainment industry. Gideon’s deathbed fantasy, “Bye, Bye Life,” draws on popular music and television variety shows to make communal the personal act of dying. By crossing fantasy and reality, Fosse challenged consumers to make sense of the film’s narrative by re-imagining the meaning of appropriated popular culture. Fosse draws on the high concept aesthetic only to turn around and deconstruct it. This “generic deconstruction” of a genre created problems not only for the audience but for the marketers of the film as well (Wyatt 7). The
stylistic deconstruction made it hard to pin the film down to a single saleable set of ideas, reinforcing it low concept marketing status. Selling dystopic critique is hard, especially if the lead character is zipped into a body bag at the end of the showstopper. Given that few Americans were comfortable identifying with a pill popping, sexaholic film director, and without a set of neo-conservative communal ideals with which to identify, American audiences found it hard to invest in *All That Jazz*.

As Wyatt explains, the problems of finding an audience also reflect the fact that the film did not fulfill the high concept model. Without a clear image or marketable ideology, promoting *All That Jazz* involved boiling the film down to a set of ambiguous images that could not portray the diversity or the complexity of the film. Despite the incongruities in the film, *All That Jazz* netted nine Academy Award nominations. While nominated for Best Picture, the film was unable to beat anti-feminist and Academy favorite, *Kramer vs. Kramer*. *All That Jazz* did not leave the Oscars empty handed, however. The Academy rewarded the challenging new style of musical with Oscars in Editing, Art Direction, Costume Design, and Original Score. While the film made $20 million dollars at the box office, the style of *All That Jazz* was not suited to the utopic consumerist synthesis required by the high concept model. Its dystopic view of the American entertainment industry as a system of oppression for the individual did not entice the American audience to invest in the film the way they invested in the rhetoric of the Reagan campaign.

While *All That Jazz* is a critique of self-destruction bred and cultivated by life in the entertainment industry, the beauty of the film is the stark depiction of the entertainment industry. *All That Jazz* seeks logical integration for the film musical number in the world of the diegesis. Yet instead of attempting to give the appearance of naturalism as *Cabaret*, Fosse uses
performance as a way to define boundaries between real life and a fantastic death. Throughout the film, large production numbers come not in the glitz and glamour of stage performance but as performance in the pre-death mind of Gideon. The performances that arise in Gideon’s daily life are stark unflinching looks at the life of an entertainer. Whether it is Gideon’s daughter and lover performing their own living room version of “Everything Old is New Again” or even Gideon’s rehearsal staging of “Aerotica,” the real life performance is all body sweat, hard work, and a product of the relationship between artist as director and father. The story world performances of Gideon’s work are expressions of humanity in its barest sense that show that the majority of entertainment is hard work, co-opted, repressed, and commercialized by greedy producers and envious colleagues.

By exposing the backstage magic of performance as real-life sweat and hard work fueled by a daily dose of Dexedrine, showers, coffee, cigarettes, celebrity, rehearsals, booze, more drugs and sexual encounters, Fosse reminds the audience of the social problems present in early 1980s society. In fact, Gideon’s daily ritual sequence has come to encapsulate Americans’ degradation of self through addiction. For audiences in the Reagan era, Gideon’s addictions serve as a device of alienation. While Gideon’s suffering through addictions were a response to the cutthroat entertainment industry, Gideon became the embodiment of a dystopic character who, according to Sharon Stevenson, are made to suffer because “they chose the wrong values” (129). Despite Fosse’s depiction of Gideon’s inability to control his addictions, Stevenson argues that dystopic characters were seen as “not worthy of being pitied” (129). Carey Wall calls All That Jazz “a shaky gospel, a gospel of joy on the edge where joy is suddenly convertible to self-destruction” (38).
The irony of such dystopic representations comes not in the death and self-destruction through booze, cigarettes, sex, and drugs. Instead, the irony lies in the fact that *All That Jazz* embodies everything the Reaganomics and conservative America at the beginning of the 1980s saw as wrong in art and culture. The real irony is that neo-conservative culture in America tacitly promotes the self-destructive tendencies of artists. Fosse shows that the rare moments when Gideon is most human are with his daughter, lover, or ex-wife. A real irony of the film is that audiences will hope against hope that Gideon will achieve happiness, even when it is completely unattainable. The damage to Gideon has been done before the film even begins. Gideon’s happy ending is as unattainable as studio era communal Utopia and equally unsatisfactory for high concept audiences because it is more real than the Hollywood ending. Gideon’s final deathbed numbers are a stylistic fuck you to a society that has so overtly promoted his artistic talents while secretly looking forward to his artistic downfall. So instead of pleading for forgiveness to such a society, Gideon says goodbye to his family, coworkers, and enemies and rides off on a sled to meet death. At the end of this quasi-utopic display of personal forgiveness and celebration of life, a human body is nothing more than something to fill a plastic body bag (not something very palatable in the post-Vietnam era).

Fosse’s depiction of Gideon’s death as a mix of raw human emotion in the midst of the ultimate show stopping number further emphasizes the isolation of the artistic individual from corporate American society. While many other musicals from 1970-2005 choose settings outside contemporary America, *All That Jazz* embodies all the darkness of contemporary life and makes an ironic comment of it in the theatre of death. Gideon rejects communal Utopia by choosing to die. Instead of wanting to be a part of a society that has self-righteously promoted, challenged, and consumed Gideon’s work and soul, Gideon chooses to be an individual and die.
in a manner of his choosing, the big curtain call. It is not as if Gideon actually wants to die, it is that he has no choice. As he is lying on his deathbed, Gideon is confronted by his alter ego and given the opportunity to beg to live. However, Gideon is unable to speak because the tube in his throat stifles him. Gideon does not want to die, but the new corporate order in American society has given him no other choice. So instead of going out on society’s terms, Gideon has the opportunity to choose his own terms. In choosing to die, Gideon exposes the ultimate Utopia is not life but death. When filtered through the self-reflexive nature of the dystopic film musical, Utopia is still unattainable and tempered by the hard reality that every American will end up in his/her body bag.

In his commentary of the film for the DVD edition of All That Jazz, Roy Scheider says that the entire film was “[Fosse’s] chance to examine himself, and he was pretty hard on himself” (Scheider). Scheider said that he always believed this was the kind of death for which Fosse hoped. Fosse even went so far as to do his own run through the diegetic film audience of the film’s final number. At the end of the experience, Fosse remarked, “They forgive me” (Scheider). What is certain about this semi-autobiographical self-critique is that for Scheider the “movie passes on his [Fosse’s] legacy.” While Fosse’s own untimely exit was far less spectacular, dying on a park bench in Washington, D.C., the film’s examination shows that American society does repress and stifle individuality, and the only logical end to overabundance is not fame, glory, acceptance, communitas, and certainly not Utopia but instead simply, ironically, and coldly, death."
The spectacular utopias in film musicals of the 1990s reflect the reality that “High concept breeds more high concept” (Wyatt *High Concept* 189) and that the film musical “provides alternatives to capitalism which will be provided by capitalism” (Dyer *Entertainment* 25, emphasis in original). Film musicals such as Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and the adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Evita* (1996) draw upon the power of celebrity casting to engage immediate mass appeal that redefines Utopia as the site of individual consumption. In spectacular utopias, the film industry’s use of marketing and cross-promotional tie-ins is played out to its fullest. Spectacular film musical utopias define the audience expectations for specific films as products, the full ramifications of product differentiation, rather than the attempting to forward the development of the genre. In fact, these film musicals are the culmination of high concept and utopia at its biggest, most fantastic, and ideologically conservative. The utopic spectacles in these films become high-value products because they are not “your average musical.” By becoming differentiated products, spectacular film musicals become a site of indoctrination into the ideals of a culture that valorized the consumption of image, music, and spectacle.

Needing to appeal to a mass audience for the sake of financial returns, the political message of the film is diffused and confused by intertextual readings generated by the Hollywood marketing machine. For example, the casting of Madonna, a star who rose from obscurity by capitalizing on her sex appeal, in the title role of *Evita* served to make the film a narrative about Madonna rather than Eva Peron, the wife of Argentine President Juan Peron who was known for the social reforms she initiated to assist poor Argentinians. As I will explain in
my analysis of *Evita* in chapter IX, the 1990s Hollywood depictions of spectacular utopias were
nostalgic and politically incomprehensible to most American audiences. Ignorance of historical
realities allowed audiences to interpret films like *Evita* as a dream of culture and spectacle in
which Utopia was not only palatable, but also achievable in the imagination.

As high concept drives the production of film musicals in the 1990s, everything placed
within the diegesis of the film became a commentary on the practice of consumption. High
concept means high budget with high production values. Since studios are spending exorbitant
amounts of money on the production of a film, the societal implication is that the film is
entertainment and enjoyable as much for its wealth and spectacle as for its meanings or quality.
This chapter will show how those spectacular utopias come to embody 1990s American
economic growth, politics, and cultural trends as aspects of capitalist individuality perpetuated to
its fullest in the high concept business model. Given the financial success of these musicals, the
films represent sites of consumption that in turn influenced the business practice of consuming
other cultural works, most notably theatrical adaptations of the film musical.

In the same way that Justin Wyatt argues that self-perpetuating effects of high concept
business practice are expressions of capitalism at its most powerful, Thomas Schatz argues that
the Hollywood blockbuster creates a dual reading of the blockbuster film as:

[M]ore process than product, and involves the audience in the creative process –
not only as multi-market consumers but also as mediators in the play of narrative
signification [or] reduced and stylized to a point where, for some observers, it
scarcely even qualifies as narrative. (“New Hollywood” 39)

Hollywood’s need to make each film a unique product in a diverse marketplace of mediated
films and images, locates the process of meaning making almost exclusively in the audience.
Instead of existing marketing the film to potential audiences as having specific meanings for them, the high concept films of the 1990s were marketed as having something for all audiences. For Disney this process included the addition of plot elements or jokes that would purposely be above the comprehension of younger audiences but well within the humor of more adult audiences. Instead of choosing which films to consume based on specific meanings, these films are consumed simply because they have a different style from other films. In other words, it is just as important to studios that audiences are going to the movies much less that they are watching specific genres of films. In order to gain the most from audience investment, Hollywood must simultaneously offer differentiated spectacle (or technology) while providing a way for the individual audience member to continually consume the film and its product tie-ins.

Frederic Jameson illuminates a change in works of popular culture that refashion the site of consumption from one of narrative ideology to spatial ideology. He writes:

> What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (Reader 192)

In the 1990s, by continually refashioning the film’s narrative space and then promoting the space as a site of product differentiation, Hollywood began to promote spectacle, instead of narrative, as the site of perpetual consumption. In the film musical, the question no longer becomes how does music fit into the construction of the narrative. Instead, the film musical’s narrative space is read according to how big or celebratory the space is. In the 1990s, audiences were encouraged
to consume the musical for its spectacle by imagining themselves not only as consumers of spectacles but also as the enactors of spectacle in their own imagination.

David Harvey notes that when a change is made to the internal social order, it results in a change of spatial form. Harvey argues that authoritarianism and totalitarianism controls the utopic space, no matter how they are constructed (163). Utopia requires a strict enforcement of order. In other words, the utopic ideal promotes happiness on the part of the individual, but it is a happiness controlled by totalitarianism either through personal adherence to the utopic ideal or through the physical enforcement of the ideal. In some utopias, individuals have a strict sense of personal responsibility to the utopic ideals. In dark utopias (and most dystopias), there is an individual who enforces the adherence to Utopia, either through devout service to the ideal or their own corruptible attraction to power of enforcement. Representations of spectacular utopia feature the presentation of this control, as Utopia brought to bear and enforced through the actions of the individual.

In order to reach 1990s audiences, film musicals presented Utopia as a spectacle in which the individual has control and can reach his/her individual potential. The shift is a change in Utopia that moves from the Utopia as a spectacle in which the individual has a place to a Utopia in which the individual is in control. It is essentially a fascist Utopia that is achieved by the consumption and promotion of capitalist ideas that exercise complete control over the production and consumption of the image of the ideal individual. Harvey argues that the ideological result of such a Utopia of continuous spectacles of commodity culture, including the commodification of the spectacle itself, play their part in “formenting political indifference” (168). As just individuals become in charge of their personal Utopia, the audience becomes more engaged with the individual rather than the ideology promoted. The end of this utopia is vacuous consumption
of image that attempts to mask ideology with perpetual re-enactment through cultural consumption. In unmasking the ideologies at work in spectacular film musicals such as Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King, and other Disney films we can begin to see the extent to which high concept has transformed not only film musical but the stage musical as well.

Spectacular Utopias

As part of a self-perpetuating business model, the high concept film musical in the 1990s continued to adapt to changing audience expectations. At the end of the twentieth-century, the film musical had to find new ways to promote not only its own consumption but the consumption of its product tie-in as well. During the classical Hollywood studio era, the film musical relied on spectacle. Berkeley, Ziegfeld, Kelly, Robbins, and others could rely on the grandeur of huge soundstages filled with scenery and performers captured in long and sweeping crane shots to re-enforce the communal utopic ideal of the studio era musical. However, as television and music television became popular, audiences were treated to quick changing images that encapsulated spectacle in medium shots and quick cutting. To adapt to changing viewing habits informed by television, the film musical had to change its narrative and editing style. This not only helped contain the spectacle and Utopia but also helped the film musical to play on the small screen medium of television. The aesthetic change became especially important as high concept film musicals began to rely heavily on shots in commercials and television trailers to help facilitate audience expectation and theater attendance.

It is ironic that the strongest influence on the construction of the film musical at the end of the millennium would also be music television, the same form of entertainment given birth by the film musical. As products of popular entertainment, the contemporary film musical has much in common with its offspring, the music video. They both use music to sell entertainment
and products, and they rely on the same style of performance. Blaine Allan notes that there is very little illusion of authenticity in either the film musical or the music video performance. Both require the performers to sing and dance. The body is there in all its performative glory (dancing, lip-syncing, or posing), but the effects, and even the music are pre-recorded and post-dubbed to fit the visuals (Allan 8). Yet while the film musical uses a song to tell part of a multifaceted story, the music video is a “the representation of a performer or performers of the musical number, the devotion of a video to a single song, and the continuity of the music throughout the segment” (Allan 5). The music video encapsulates a group or a song and seeks to promote those two aspects. Some performers, such as Michael Jackson or Britney Spears, attempted to tell larger narratives over the course of several videos and to even sell products in their videos (such as cars, soda, or clothing). Ultimately, the music video serves to sell the single and the artist (Allan 6). In the high concept business model, the music video serves to sell not only the single and the artist but also the film.

Despite their overt similarities, the separation between the music video and its earlier incarnation, the film musical, is apparent in the different ways song is integrated into the narrative structure. In the music video, the two-minute song is used to tell a two-minute story or sell a two-minute connection to the artist. In the film musical, integrated numbers cannot be easily divorced from the entirety of the narrative. In order to capitalize on the medium of music television, the contemporary film musical had to find a way to adapt its integrated song style to allow for the performance of a single song to sell both the song and the film musical. As I have discussed, songs such as “I Don’t Know How to Love Him,” “Superstar,” “Pinball Wizard,” “Summer Nights,” and “Hopelessly Devoted to You” were popular because they stood as songs outside of the narrative and relied on the celebrity of the singer to promote the song. This is
especially the case with Olivia Newton-John, Elton John, and The Who. These songs illuminate character and action but they also are vague enough in character and action to stand alone as songs. Historically, the showstopper, or eleven-o’clock number helped to keep audiences engaged. While certain songs have the ability to stand on their own, a song like “Maybe This Time” (Cabaret) did so largely because the performance of Liza Minnelli brought the same performance style utilized in the film. To some degree, Minnelli’s performance evoked more of the film than the stand-alone songs of high concept films. Yet, who in American consumer culture in the 1990s wanted to consume (again and again) the pain of Minnelli’s character rather than of the peppy utopic visions of high concept songs? It is extremely difficult to name a song from All That Jazz or A Chorus Line that hit the popular music charts with the same power as Olivia Newton-John’s “Hopelessly Devoted to You” from Grease.

Yet what is particularly interesting about the songs from Jesus Christ Superstar and Tommy is that both musicals (or rock operas, as their composers labeled them) existed as songs or concept albums first. While earlier film musicals benefited from airplay on the radio and album releases, high concept business practice in the age of cable and music television necessitated a multifaceted release and market saturation that included the music video. Securing the biggest audience required hitting the marketplace in the broadest fashion possible through the multiple wide releases of film, music videos, singles, and products. In order for a film to meet the expectations of wide release without complicating the work or confounding the expectations of the audience, the film musical of the 1990s had to incorporate aspects of the music video such as editing, product placement, and the filming of the singing star.

Blaine Allan observes that the music video, as a product of television, “addresses a problem posed by the institution of television itself, which characteristically transforms the
commercial into the personal and emotional” (Allan 10). Not unlike the film musical, the music video turns the emotional experience of the song into a personal exchange between performer and audience. Thus, the music video becomes a producer of pleasure in the audience. While the film musical promotes a utopic exchange of capital for feelings of hope, the music video produces an exchange based on a perceived personal relationship between the performer and the audience. The shift moves from social exchange in the film musical to personal exchange in the music video. Just as dystopic film musicals began to portray the individual as divorced from the unattainable utopic ideals of American society, music television reinforced the musical experience as one built on personal, individual exchange of shared feeling. Invoking a utopic exchange in the music video is as much a product of the medium of television as high concept practices. What started as an aspect of the small-screen medium became yet another site of promotion on the big screen.

As the exchange of feelings in the relationship between performer and audience moves towards the one-sided, individual source of pleasure, the use of music video technology in the production of commercials also facilitated an exchange of products, rather than ideas, as personal. Allan observes, “It is by now axiomatic that music videos and TV commercial spots are virtually interchangeable” (Allan 10). Allan notes that commercials themselves draw on music and music video because both are selling products. In fact, commercials often set products dancing, literally or figuratively to with music. By attaching itself to popular forms of expression both the television commercial and the film musical utilize the music video as a form of product differentiation based not on performer but genre of music video (Gow 45). Just as the high concept film musical appropriated the music video for selling product tie-ins, the corporatization of popular culture has led other aspects of the entertainment industry to use the
same techniques. With mass entertainment proliferating high concept techniques, audiences became reliant on reading formations cultivated and enforced through high concept’s commercial utopic depictions.

As a product of the high concept regime and the contemporary film musical, music videos promote an idealistic exchange of emotion that depends on an artificial interpersonal connection between artist and audience.\(^1\) Since representations of Utopia are designed to instill feelings of hope and interconnectedness, the music video can be seen as a possible avenue for the facilitation of utopic desires. While the traditional film musical seeks to promote a social Utopia, the music video personalizes Utopia. Instead of the audience being equal to the massive chorus, or the hope that a chorus of voices will join in behind the enactor/consumer, the new utopia is a personal exchange where one person can be as unique as the star in the music video. Just as the music video boils down the artist’s expression to a combination of individual artistic expression and rock-star spectacle, the spectacular film musical utopia would employ the techniques and expectations of the music video to produce a vision of the world as individual utopia. Through the imaginary relationship with the filmic performer, the audience of 1990s spectacular film musicals could share the feelings and desires of the individual, and in these engagements with spectacular Utopia, the individual stands above and outside of the society.

Where dystopic film musicals of the 1970s and 80s displayed the unattainability of Utopia and the individual at odds with society, the spectacular utopia of the 1990s would reassert the individual’s rightful place as head of the chorus and enforcer of a utopic ideal. The emphasis on individuality as site for utopic exchange opens the realm of spectacle to nearly every possibility. When the presence of a celebrity is combined with spectacle, spectacular utopias promote themes of individuality and agency but feature spectacles that attempt to disguise the
homogenization of narrative structure by masking ideologies or potential readings with capital consumption. The vision of Utopia in these films is one in which individuals can get what they want. Spectacle, joy, power, hope, and love are the rewards for the individual who perseveres through difficulty. By emphasizing the difference between the individual and the society, these film musicals privilege a view of Utopia attainable through magic, imagination, and personal action. Where there is hope in a society of equality in classical film musicals, these utopias seek to replace the utopic commercial society with the hope of individual achievement through the perpetuation and consumption of capital in the audience’s personal life and imagination. In the end, these films reinforce the idea that individual achievement will “trickle down” and effect everyone else who “should be happy” for the individual.

Animated Film Musicals and Utopia

After the high concept misfires of the 1980s and the perpetual loses studios received from the production of big-budget film musicals, there was only one studio willing to produce in-house musicals, Disney. Disney was also the only studio to produce film musicals with any regularity. While dystopic musicals of the 1970s and 80s exposed the realities of the American dream, Disney would turn to animation to redefine the American dream as a combination of ardent individuality in characters, crystal clear computer animation, and a squeaky-clean brand image.

Disney’s use of computer technology in the animation process energized the animated film industry and helped animation to display the glossy, high concept qualities of big budget Hollywood filmmaking rather than Saturday morning cartoons. The technological advances allowed Disney the freedom to create three-dimensional worlds. The added dimension gave the animators the freedom to move and shoot the film using the same framing, tracking, and crane
techniques of conventional filmmaking. It is easy to argue that since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1939), Disney built its corporate image on animation. Yet until *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the film studio did little to advance the technical aspects of animated filmmaking. The technological advances became important aspects that gave Disney’s new films a distinct difference from other animated films.² It was a difference that changed the animated space from two-dimensional painting to three-dimensional excess. In turn, the images and brand marketing of Disney’s corporation gave outlets to product tie-ins by making its toys more like the characters in the film.

Some may argue that since the opening of their theme parks in 1955, Disney has attempted to bring their characters to life. Historically, there has been something of a corporate separation between the theme parks and film studio. However, the high concept model gave immediate attention to the vertical marketing of Disney’s brand image. In one advertisement, Disney could promote the theme park, the films, and even to some degree the soundtracks. This type of promotion necessitates a brand image that is immediately recognizable. By promoting the consumption of the film for one’s personal life and leisure time, Disney is promoting a way of living. This way of living and ideology is especially important when parents use it as a means of entertaining, teaching, and pacifying their children. The messages promoted in such consumption extend to social issues of cultural consumption and what lifestyles the individual can be achieve. The lifestyle afforded to those who can afford it is a lifestyle based on bringing to life the excess of animation through a combination of imagination and consumption.

In the 1990s, the high concept model forced the audience to view excess as a way of living versus a style of filmmaking. Justin Wyatt writes:
The modularity of the films’ units, added to the one-dimensional quality of the characters, distances the viewer from the traditional task of reading the films’ narrative. In place of this identification with the narrative, the viewer becomes sewn into the ‘surface’ of the film, contemplating the style of the narrative and the production. The excess created through such channels as the production design, stars, music, and promotional apparati, all of which are so important to high concept, enhances, this appreciation of the films’ surface qualities. (Wyatt High Concept 60)

Since the viewer of 1990s spectacular film musicals becomes a part of the process and the consumption through identification and imagination, the viewer is wowed by the spectacle and challenged to live the excess. The more glorious, magical, or clear the image of excess in a high concept film, the easier it is for a broad audience to invest in it. What better corporation to bring such easy of consumption to an audience than the corporation that created the magically cleanest place on earth, Disneyland.

Arguably the most important release Disney could have made under the high concept film model was their 1991 animated hit Beauty and the Beast. The film depicted a new version of the classic fairytale of a young woman imprisoned by a beast who learns to love the beast for his inner beauty, thus breaking his curse and returning him to his human form to live happily ever after with the woman. At first glance, the film does not appear to be a high concept film. It is cast with the vocal talents from a collection of actors that were noticeable, but not overly noticeable (David Ogden Stiers, Robbie Benson, Jerry Orbach, and Angela Lansbury). In other words, the actors’ voices would not overshadow the animated characters onscreen. Because it is Disney, the immediate audience expectation is that the film is for children; therefore, it has a
small market demographic. However, the film is a high concept film musical for four reasons: technology, the Disney animated brand name, an integrated musical soundtrack featuring a hit single, and the spectacular, commercial utopic depiction of the animated world.

While Beauty and the Beast brought three-dimensional computer animation to the forefront of the film industry, the film filled the environment with a fully integrated musical soundtrack. Yet the real surprise of the film was the ability of the film to transcend the Disney “just for kids” brand name to attract audiences of all ages. While the high concept model nearly ensures the broad investment by a large demographic, Disney incorporated adult humor and the classical integrated musical tradition to allow for broad audience access. The film’s depiction of a feudal system as a foreign or odd collection of animated household goods and a vain, ugly, and brooding lord represents an America of the old world. After all, the castle is a place where the servant knows their place and even fight against the villagers determined to destroy the far away place. When the ugly feudal lord learns to love and be loved in return, the dark fascist Utopia is made beautiful. The servants could have asserted their individuality by leaving the castle. Instead, they willingly fight for the utopic ideal, and because they fight willingly, they will get what they want, Utopia.

The utopic vision of the Beauty and the Beast is largely reliant on the combination of music and images possible only in the animated film musical world. The film’s music, composed by Alan Menken with lyrics by Howard Ashman, plays like a typical Broadway or classical film musical. The opening song “Belle” introduces the heroine and the mutual misunderstandings between the funny girl and her quiet village. The song evokes visions of Ashman and Menken’s “Skid Row” from their Off-Broadway and screen versions of Little Shop of Horrors (1986). It establishes the heroine as out-of-place in an ordinary world because only she
finds satisfaction in her dreams beyond the ordinary life. The number establishes Belle’s to affect change in the patriarchal feudal village. Seeming to support women’s agency, in tune with its era, the film actually subverts that idea by having the heroine long for male understanding in a world of fairytales. With its reaffirmation of patriarchy (in that Belle achieves her fantasy only through the love of a good, but cursed man), the song and the film reflect the powerful legacy of the Reagan Era. The film’s view of Utopia as achievable through the defense of a castle full of appliances that are all too willing to help is an articulation of the cultural divide between a culture that elected a Republican House, led by Newt’s Gingrich’s “Contract with America” rhetoric, and a liberal “rock-n-roll” President. It is a depiction of a contradictory culture that is all too willing to promote equality for women and others, so long as they can help maintain a conservative order to society.

The film’s spectacular vision of Utopia is reinforced by technology. The computer-animated aesthetic features a crystal-clear cleanliness of the animated foreground and a colorful, often out-of-focus background. The tension, between that which is in focus and out-of-focus accentuates a reading that privileges watching the foreground and forgetting about the background. The out-of-focus background suggests that the focused foreground is part of a larger world but the only thing the audience needs to worry about is immediately in front of them. Difference is pushed out-of-focus and thus managed. Utopia is localized to the foreground, giving it an in-your-face look, and feeling of immediacy to the utopic imagery. In this Utopia, everything in the background fades to an out-of-focus horizon reminding the audience that individual sight is rarely far-reaching. It helps the audience to forget that the Beast’s castle is part of a larger world. If the Beast’s castle is made ugly by magic, one can only imagine how ugly the real world beyond the castle is, because it has not been touched be magic.
In this Utopia, it may be dark, but it only that way because of magic and the alternative to this
dark Utopia, especially one without dancing plates, teapots, candelabras, clocks and furniture, is
far worse.

Through Belle the audience is asked to believe in the magic of the story and the magical
effects of love that erase the appearance of difference. In his Marxist review of the film, Kirby
Farrell writes:

By overcoming her distaste for the ugly, hostile Beast, the little woman wins the
Prince and a house full of wish-fulfilling appliances. It is the logical extension of
her father’s firewood-making machine into a utopia of creature comforts, with all
human costs radically hidden. So much for the story’s supposedly feminist
sympathies. (Farrell)

Farrell is not only critical of Belle’s apparent ability to exercise power in the film, but he is
especially critical of the film’s depiction of the working servant class. Farrell review criticizes
the many problems inherent in high concept filmmaking. High concept films are largely
conservative and capitalist. The depiction of the castle as Utopia achieved challenges the idea of
utopia as a community. Farrell’s analysis concludes with concern for the nature of the Utopia
depicted in the film. Farrell writes, “audiences will see a glorious cartoon horizon which fades to
a close before anyone can ask what has happened to Belle’s neighbors and how the infantile,
cozily ruthless world of the castle can ever relate to those neighbors in the future” (Farrell). In
the spectacular utopia, the individual is in charge and the true Utopia is a community built on and
supervised by the individual and the individual’s search for happiness. As the happy couple
dances in the final sequence, the quasi-improbable crane/helicopter shot zooms-out while the
couple remains in focus and the servants are out-of-focus colored silhouettes that are barely
distinguished from the background. Utopia is the beautiful dancing couple served by the faceless masses of their kingdom.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, Utopia is achieved by enacting the desires of the individual. It is indicative of late 1980s and early 1990s American culture. The same culture that led to rapid technological expansion corporate profits through the undefined technological marketplace of ideas also gave weight, through revenues, to an idea of Utopia as defined by the imagination of the individual. Whether it is a dot.com built and financed through speculation without the promise of revenue or fame through reality television, if Americans could imagine it, they could achieve it. Yet in the film, the individual who brings about the transformation earns control of the utopia. It is a conservative Utopia under an ostensibly liberal Presidency. The contradiction of a conservative majority masked with the image of moderate liberalism is apparent in the film. Belle is a heroine that rises from the legacy of Reagan. She has some individual agency but is also relegated to fulfilling conservative gender roles. Belle helps to bring about the beautiful Utopia by learning to love the blue-eyed beast and assuming the role of queen. In the end, they live happily ever after under the traditional model of a good, conservative family, even though it is the Beast’s castle and his servants. The feudal Lord, Lady, and their servants have vanquished the villagers to their rightful place outside of the castle. Since the villagers are unable to see past their own fear, they do not deserve to share in the spectacular commercial Utopia. The spectacle of the animation gives human qualities and traits its characters, thereby helping the audience to forget that these are non-human characters. Instead, the commercial consumption of the film and its product tie-ins gives the audience the opportunity to enact their own feudal Utopia through their imagination. The individual in the audience cannot experience the true magic of the film without giving themselves and their imagination over to the film and its Utopia. Through the
spectacular high concept film musical, if you can afford it, you can imagine it, and in the consumption of the products, imagination can mask the need to really live the utopic experience.

Technology, image, and music culminate in the ultimate high concept film musical song, “Be Our Guest.” The one song in the film in which the enchanted servants-turned-serving items attempt to enchant Belle and the audience to “buy into” their fantasy, “Be Our Guest” is a technological animated depiction of a Busby Berkeley number featuring everything in the house, including the kitchen sink. Moreover, “Be Our Guest” is the high concept number of the film. As more and more corporations became involved in the potentially endless bounds of product tie-ins, very few corporations were as efficient or prolific as the Disney Company. In fact, the Disney Company was so effective at blurring the boundaries between the corporate experience and their film musicals that songs not only served to promote their films but also their theme parks. “Be Our Guest” became the song for their resort theme parks around the globe. Just as the song asks Belle to make herself at home in the castle, in which she is a prisoner, the song asks the tourist to become a guest of a Disney resort: another capitalist experience, or Marxist prison, the choice is the consumer’s. Importantly, the company promotes an individual’s utopia frames that vision so that idyllic experience becomes increasingly reliant on the individual’s ability to afford the utopia.

The spectacular utopias present in the film musicals of the 1990s taught audience’s to love the process of consuming. Throughout this process, the audience spends capital and receives the hope that they can retain individuality and achieve Utopia. The continued use of the integrated film musical score with computer animation helped to perpetuate the idea of utopia as spectacular and individualistic. Masking magical objects or talking animals with utopic characteristics of human expression, most notably singing, dancing, and playing manage
potential differences occurring in the Utopia. Graham Wood observes that the musical number “I Just Can’t Wait to be King” from *The Lion King* (1994) is a playful device is set to play against the coming darkness (Wood 222). It seeks to educate the young prince by pushing the childish dreams of being King to the outer frame. Throughout the upcoming events, including the death of his father, his self-imposed exile, his return to the kingdom, the Hamlet-esque killing of his effeminate uncle, and his subsequent return to be King of Pride Rock (to become head of the pride of lionesses that includes his own mother), the young Simba’s journey is one from supposedly false communal Utopia in the jungle with buddies Timone and Pumba to the actual Utopia as “King” of Pride Rock.

Both *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* invoke the restoration of rightful order present in classical depictions of myth, but the myth becomes enacted through the consumption of the high concept tie-ins. At the end of these film musicals, the ideology enforced is one of balance righted and power restored. The use of traditional formulas gives the films the appearance of being devoid of inherent ideologies. The audience, it is assumed, understands the traditional tales but is more interested in consuming them in the high spectacle and high technological form. As individuals achieving their desired Utopia restore traditional orders, the films reflect the conservative values present in their socio-political contexts. In *The Lion King* (1994), all aspects of socialism and feminism are repressed by the order of the “King.” The traditional order includes abolishing the starvation and poverty produced by a figure who usurped the throne and disrupted the rightful order of the savannah. The restoration of established power eliminates corruption from the unstable landscape.

Disney’s ability to fashion Utopia as individually achievable through practices of high concept consumption led to record profits. From 1991-2000, Disney’s animated features brought
in more than $3 billion, that was just for the films that ranked in the top-ten for their year. During the same ten-year span, Disney films received grosses in excess of $8 billion. This is including the fact that Disney failed to break the top ten grossing films in 1993. Disney relied largely on its brand image as a family-friendly studio to achieve their box office supremacy. Disney did not use film musical conventions in their animated releases. In fact, Disney relied heavily on the film musical genre to fashion one of their biggest box office debacles.

In the attempt to continue to depict the film musical space as an expression of individual Utopia, the Disney Company would release two live action musicals that would fail to bring in the expected box office revenue of their animated cousins. From 1991-2000, Disney distributed two live action film musicals. While *Newsies* (1992) was an in-house production, *Evita* (1996) was an independently produced film distributed by Hollywood Pictures, a live-action subsidiary of Disney. *Newsies* (1992) is about the staging of a strike by newsboys against a ruthless newspaper mogul. Despite the star power of the film (including Robert Duvall and Ann Margaret), the film performed miserably at the box office. At first glance, *Newsies* is everything that the animated features are not. Its subject matter is communal the communal overthrowing of an evil capitalist businessman. Neither wholly utopic nor wholly dystopic, the film is a collision of classical Hollywood style and high concept values. The film is a classically constructed integrated film musical that plays more like “Hey, let’s put on a musical” than “Hey, let’s put on a strike!” In fact, the serious ideology of working class struggles and strikes are relegated to a bunch of orphans singing and dancing around the saloons and alleyways of New York City. It is dystopia, turned into Utopia, and not even a socialist one at that. The appearance of their happiness to be orphaned and living on the streets makes *Oliver!* appear dark and extremely dangerous. The inability of the live-action film musical to reach its American audience is due to
the film’s inability to make any meaning. The film’s reviews mirrored the box office performance of the film. Despite featuring a score from Alan Menken (*Beauty and the Beast*), the film failed to yield a single hit song. The film itself failed to give audiences anything that they might invest in. *Newsies*’ $25 million dollar budget secured a meager $2 million at the box office. Its subsequent failure set the record as Disney’s lowest grossing film, live-action or animated, ever.

Disney’s failure with *Newsies* reminded studios that live action musicals were a huge risk. Yet, high concept also taught the studios that with the right combination of product, star, and packaging a film could at least recoup the initial investment of the studio. Even with the failure of *Newsies*, Disney continued to produce animated film musicals. While the animated films relied on a combination of popular signers like Elton John (*The Lion King*) and Phil Collins (*Tarzan*) to compose songs for the film, they did not rely on high-powered film stars to voice the films. Instead, Disney utilized the talents of Broadway singers (such as Paige O’Hara, Lea Salonga, Donnie Osmond) and other popular character actors from stage and screen to give vocal life to the characters. Their use of B-list stars accomplishes two important functions. First, the use of trained professional singers does not take away from the celebrity musical scores, because those singles are recorded separately as another product tie-in. Secondly, the use of specially trained actors gives an appearance of vocal authenticity to the integrated songs. The audience is given the opportunity to invest in the characters as characters rather than the celebrity voices. The use of Robin Williams as the Genie in *Aladdin* is one of the few moments when the star outshined the performance of the character. However, as the Genie, Williams could be as over-the-top as he wanted. In fact, the ability of the Genie to invoke a string of cultural references and impersonations at the drop of the hat adds to the magical nature of the character. Second, the
relative low use of “star power” in the character voices ensured that star image did not overshadow the brand image of the film or the Disney Company. In other words, it was more important to Disney that audiences, be able to experience the feelings of the film without invoking celebrity images. When used at all, the choice of star voices was deliberate and served only to reinforce the excessive nature of the film as spectacle. Disney would distribute one of the few mainstream film musicals of the 1990s, one that relied on nothing less than the star power of its leading lady to add to the spectacular nature of its story.
Historically, the film musical has relied heavily on its leading stars for box office success. From Judy Garland, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, to Gene Kelly and Barbra Streisand, Hollywood studios have marketed and produced films that featured the singing and dancing of the stars. Even if the film musical featured unremarkable songs, the casting of the star could virtually ensure a film’s success. Since the end of the Hollywood studio era and the rise of high concept, the casting of stars has become part of the larger business model. Rather than the film being driven by the star, the film musical’s success is driven by the package of all the elements. The addition of the celebrity presence to the spectacle of the film musical asks the audience to consume the spectacle of film and star. As we begin to examine the depiction of spectacle as a facilitator of Utopia in the live-action film musical of the 1990s, it is important to remember that in the addition of the star to the film’s performative text adds intertextuality and complicates the otherwise simple utopic readings of the film.

As the spectacles of animated films invoked and reinforced classical film musical production values (full musical scores, large settings, communal expressions in song and dance), the animated features reflected the largely conservative societal ideology present in American society during the 1990s with high concept marketing and squeaky-clean brands. The result was the depiction of Utopia as attainable in the imagination of the individual through the real world consumption of commercial products. The animated film musicals helped to redefine audience expectations of the genre by directly countering the dystopic film musicals of the 1970s. In terms of business practices, the combination of animated musical successes and the relative box
office failures of some 1970s musicals complicated the production of live-action musicals, especially if they were not linked to high concept ideals. James Greenberg writes:

*Jesus Christ Superstar, Godspell* and *A Chorus Line* delivered a sure message to producers that musicals were a genre in trouble artistically and commercially. Furthermore, for a young audience accustomed to the quick rhythms of MTV, a story in operatic form was regarded as problematic. (1)

So, as the studios evaluated the musical, they began to look at how to package “spectacle” to the mediated audiences of MTV, contemporary animated film musicals, and classical film musicals. The resulting packaged spectacle was Hollywood Pictures’ (a subsidiary of Disney) adaptation of another Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice mega-musical, *Evita*.

Premiering as a concept album produced by Robert Stigwood in 1978, *Evita* was the stage story of the Eva Peron’s rise from relative poverty to “sainthood” as the spiritual leader of Argentina. The musical appeared on Broadway in September of 1979 and won nearly every major stage award, including eight Tony Awards®. Given the success of the stage musical, it seemed to have all the elements of a sure-fire film musical hit. However, it would take fifteen years for Stigwood to begin full-scale pre-production on the film adaptation of the stage musical. John Kenneth Muir, like other observers, highlights the changes in directors (including Oliver Stone, who retained co-screenwriting credit on the film), changes in leading ladies (including Liza Minelli, Meryl Streep, and Michelle Pfeiffer), and changes in production locales (required by not being denied the option of shooting on location in Argentina) (101-5). While it is not the purpose of my study to explicate a full production history of the film, the complicated pre-production history only helped to generate buzz and anticipation for the film.
As the pre-production continued, over the course of years (not months as is typical for film production), Stigwood found a director in Sir Alan Parker and found in Madonna an Eva with nearly as much American star power as the first lady of Argentina. The rest of the cast is a combination of attempted musical performance authenticity (Jonathan Pryce) and ethnicity (Antonio Banderas). Despite Banderas, Pryce, and nearly 4,000 other cast members and extras, the high concept casting of Madonna brought not only marketing buzz but also an intertextuality that fills out the spectacle of Webber’s over-the-top music and Parker’s cinematic realism. The result is a film that obfuscates ideology with the spectacle of location and the power of celebrity presence.

As discussed prior, the high concept film relies on intertextuals created by the inclusion of aspects of popular culture into the film’s narrative. The process of intertextuality becomes increasingly complicated when the pop culture referent is also a celebrity cast in the film. The process of casting pop culture icons brings inherent intertextual readings that constructed through various purveyors of popular culture, including film, television, and music. Richard DeCordova uses the term “picture personality” to describe the intertextual readings created by an actor’s appearance in a series of related roles. The intertextuality of the star image, for DeCordova, is a construction of the tension between the star’s constructed film image, the public’s perception of the star’s private self, and the public’s perception of the image across multiple film texts (20). The celebrity status of the star is heavily dependent on the intertextuality of the collision between their appearance in film texts and the public information about their private lives.² DeCordova’s study of stardom in early Hollywood cinema is still somewhat applicable to a contemporary celebrity, because television and media outlets give audiences access to a multiplicity of images of the celebrity. The increased access to the celebrity appears to give the audience a more
authentic view of the celebrity than was possible during the classical Hollywood studio era. The nearly endless newscasts of E! Entertainment Television, MTV (which rarely shows music videos any more in favor of reality television and backstage reality shows on the lives of popular music stars), VH-1’s “Celebreality” television shows (including The Surreal Life and others), and syndicated celebrity “gossip” newscasts (like Access Hollywood, Entertainment Tonight, and others) provide excessive access to celebrity gossip, news stories, political interventions, charitable contributions, and fashion to audiences virtually anytime and on any channel. Today, the star image is a complicated mediated construction of celebrity appearances in film, television, and popular culture.

Andrew Britton echoes the work of DeCordova and applies the use of celebrity personae as a propagator of product differentiation to other aspects of contemporary mediated society. Britton postulates:

[T]he star in his or her films must always be read as a dramatic presence which is predicated by, and which intervenes in enormously complex and elaborate social themes and motifs, and thereby refers us to a particular state of the social reality of the genre, and of the relation between the genres. (205)

Britton’s explanation of intertextuality displays the relative complex and virtual endless intertextual readings brought about by a star’s presence in a film. While Justin Wyatt calls the use of intertextuality a form of high concept product differentiation, intertextuality becomes increasingly confused by the continuous influx of celebrity information available through the media, television, and the Internet. When the celebrity is placed within a genre film, such as the film musical, the star becomes a site of product differentiation that provides the “interpenetration of the genres” (Britton 203). Britton echoes Wyatt’s idea of the celebrity as a part of the high
concept package, yet I would expand both of their theories to say that with the incorporation of the celebrity in the film musical in the age of MTV and millennial celebrity culture the interpenetration of genres involves more than just star image and film text but also the lifestyle suggested by the celebrity image and the products of high concept entertainment. This is especially true as the celebrity image is marketed as an example of an ideal lifestyle.

The combination of cultural capital, in the spectacle of celebrity and spectacle of the 1990s film musical, shapes audience expectations for the films. As Britton writes, “Any set of star vehicles reveals recurrent thematic and stylistic features whose particular operation and development are indeed determined by the presence of the star” (205). In fact, the casting of Madonna in *Evita*, with her cultural status as a pop-icon, suggests that MTV reading formations can assist in deciphering her performance in film. Moreover, the casting of Madonna as Eva Perón serves to reinforce and give legitimacy to the incorporation of popular music celebrities into the film musical genre. The authenticating process in *Evita* is two-sided, both MTV and the film musical have music, images, and Madonna. Yet, the casting of Madonna also challenged the film to incorporate elements of familiar to MTV audiences, regardless of their familiarity with the film musical genre. Madonna brings as much, if not more, expectations of MTV style of performance and rock-star celebrity capital to the role Eva than the contemporary capital and perceived legitimacy the role would bring to Madonna. Still true to high concept, the film gained more from the presence of the celebrity than the celebrity from the film.

Peter Marshall argues that there is pleasure in consuming the celebrity image. For Marshall, the pleasure in watching the star in the film musical in the age of the mediated celebrity presence comes from the “distinctive quality of the film star is built on the control of knowledge about the star beyond the filmic text and, within the audience, a desire to know more”
(Marshall 228). In the 1990s, the pleasure to consume the star as another product tie-in fuels the perpetuation of high concept and can even help to determine the longevity of a film’s continued consumption. This pleasure relies on the interaction between the star and the audience. For a popular music star such as Madonna, there was a perceived relationship between the fans of her music in concert that helped to define her performance on film. Much of this was based on the audience seeing the celebrity as the embodiment of “something, however vague that something might be” (195). Madonna certainly represents what Marshall calls “a generation of interests” (196), for while Madonna continued to attract new fans with each album, she would always be considered the “material girl” embodying the materialistic excesses of the 1980s and 90s. It is only appropriate that she would take on the role of a woman who rose above material excess to embody the hope of an entire country.

Celebrity casting is not the only high concept aspect of Evita. The film won an Oscar® for Best Original Song for Webber and Rice’s “You Must Love Me.” The song was the only original music written for the film. The film also influenced the development of a wide variety of product tie-ins built on the excesses of high fashion. Evita’s product tie-ins were built exclusively on the image of the high fashion celebrity lifestyle, masked with the vintage stylings of the 1940s. The film inspired a line of Estée Lauder cosmetics promoted by Madonna, and inspired clothing lines by Victor Costa, Tahiri, and Nicole Miller. What would the 1990s woman seeking to embody the legacy of Eva Perón and the celebrity of Madonna be without shoes by Steve Madden and Ferragamo (“Bloomingdale’s” 8)? The product tie-ins promoted the lifestyle of fame, power, and fashion embodied in the film’s spectacle of setting and celebrity casting.

The intertextuality provided by Madonna’s presence ensures the high concept dimension of the film by helping to promote not only the musical aspects of the film but also Madonna’s
status as a pop culture icon (which extends beyond music to aspects such as fashion). While the entirety of the high concept film model at work in *Evita* helps to promote the lifestyle and attitude of capital excess, we must remember that the musical itself is something of an operatic biography. While the film is noticeably lacking in the 1980s style of high concept aesthetics (otherwise present in *Grease, Xanadu, and The Pirate Movie*), the continued use of high concept strategies speaks to the longevity of the high concept model. It also says a lot about how the model changed the production and reception of films long after the aesthetics of high concept films changed. The animated film musicals brought the idea of big budget spectacle back to the genre that not only capitalized on communal spectacle but also virtually invented it. While the animated film musicals brought back conventional film musical aesthetics and combined them with the high concept business model, the live-action film musical expanded on that combination by adding the presence of the celebrity.

As a high concept film musical, *Evita* is constructed on the legacy of the stage play. However, the high concept model diffuses the political ideology of both the stage musical and the Perón Presidency. Despite John Kenneth Muir’s observation that “Evita herself is not really the point; but our image and perception of her is” (111), Madonna and the film serve to reinforce a 1990s perception of the power of celebrity and the theatricality of politics as created through the charismatic manipulations of individuals with their reasons for seeking power. By beginning with Eva’s funeral, there is an understanding on the part of Rice, the lyricist, and Parker, the director, that valorizes Eva’s role as first lady and “Supreme Spiritual Leader.” However, there is present in the musical, an attempt on the part of the writers and directors to paint a more complete picture of Eva. The film musical portrays Eva’s personal and public lives as indivisible from each other. No matter what Ché says in the opening of the film, the audience is confronted
with the finality of Eva’s glass-topped casket and the thousands of mourners lining up to view it. This utopic ending is certainly different from the dystopic, clear body bag funeral shot of Joe Gideon in *All That Jazz*.

In her comparison of the stage and screen constructions of Evita versus the real-life Eva Perón, Jean Graham Jones notes that the Webber/Rice musical has never been professionally produced in Buenos Aires. Jones notes that Argentina developed its own musical based on the life of Eva Peron. Graham-Jones notes that the Argentinean musical *Eva* is a more complex portrait than the “the standard ‘foreign’ negative party line regarding both the Peróns and Peronism and delivers a rather predictable story of a woman driven to extremes by her apparently insatiable need for power and acceptance” (69). In Jones’s work we find the need of Argentineans to reclaim the celebrity figure of Evita from the colonialized Webber/Rice version. The casting of Madonna adds a simultaneous story of a highly sexualized rise from rags to riches. Madonna and the Eva of the American film musical are both seen as women who used sex to achieve their power. Madonna has been criticized for her overtly sexualized presence in her concerts, music videos, and backstage documentary (*Truth or Dare*). With Madonna cast as Eva, American audiences in the 1990s could not help but to see the story of Eva as a metaphor for the rise of Madonna to pop-icon status. The inclusion of Madonna’s pop-celebrity status in the film subverts the historical successes of the Perónists in Argentina, the least of which included national health care, economic self-sufficiency, and women’s right to vote.

A large portion of ideological confusion in the film comes from its inability to negotiate the presence of Ché. On stage, Ché (played on Broadway by Mandy Patinkin) was costumed in his iconic green fatigues and beret. Ché’s inclusion in the musical is seemingly a random association, but Guevara, a trained physician, spent the last years of Eva’s life traveling through
the poor villages of Northern Argentina. His time there helped to reinforce his adherence to Communist ideology and fueled his desire to effect revolution in Latin America. On stage, Eva and Juan Perón’s interpretation of socialist ideology is contrasted with the embodiment of Latin American socialism in Ché. Ché’s strict adherence to and forwarding of socialism serves to critique the political ideology and fascism of the Perónists. In the film musical, the competing celebrity figures of Antonio Banderas and Madonna vie for the audience’s attention and challenge the audience’s reading of Latin American politics.

In the film musical, Sir Alan Parker and Robert Stigwood chose to fashion Ché as more of a Greek chorus rather than political critic. As with a classical Greek chorus, Ché (played by Antonio Banderas) serves as an observer and commentator on the events of Eva’s life rather than a character that directly affects action in the plot. Banderas’ charismatic presence and intensity bring a level of humanity to the choral function mostly through his direct address to the camera. Yet, Ché of the film musical not only comments on history but also is affected by events, so much so, that the flashback narrative style of the musical is infused with an irony that criticizes the people of Argentina for being fooled by Eva’s “sainthood” status. The relationship between Ché and Eva in both the stage musical and the film is a conflicted collusion of historical interpretation.

While the stage musical was far more critical of political ideologies, the film musical is a critique on the reading of public celebrities. Jean Graham-Jones notes the ramifications of reading celebrity presence as an interpretation of Eva’s historical legacy. Jones writes:

Guevara’s Eva was not Rice–Lloyd Webber’s hypersexualized Evita but rather desexualized, her brief life played out within the context of a much larger Argentinean class struggle. In obvious empathy with some of Peronism’s loftier
goals, Guevara transformed *Evita*’s tragic flaw of proud ambition into a virtue: ambition as a model, a way out of poverty, neglect, and derision. Guevara’s Eva was not punished for having overreached her position; rather, she was regarded as a woman upon whom enormous and conflicting demands had been made and whose commitment to social change blinded her to some, but not all, of the moral ramifications of her choices. (Graham-Jones 72)

When the musical *Evita* is portrayed by the already hypersexualized presence of Madonna, the spectacle of celebrity overshadows any authentic desire or rise to power that may have been a part of Eva’s life. When this is combined with Banderas’ ambiguous role as Ché, which serves the film more like a Greek chorus than a Communist revolutionary, the real history and political advances of Eva and Juan Perón become lost behind the gossip and speculations surrounding sex and politics. Instead, of promoting a complex ideological battle between the Communist revolutionaries and the Perónists, the film gives greater weight to Eva as a celebrity.\(^5\) Just as the relationship between Ché and Eva complicates any authentic historical view of Argentina’s former First Lady, the problem lies within history as well. After all, as Victoria Allison observes, “As a politicized woman in the male-dominated political sphere, Evita’s story was never fully her own to write or interpret even during her lifetime” (12).

The spectacle of setting articulates an explosion of the high concept model. *Evita* is as much high concept as the Disney animated musicals because it obscures history and ideology with the celebration of sexualized celebrity. Despite the one direct interaction between Ché and Eva, the film’s narrative is spectacle for spectacle’s sake. Victoria Allison articulates the problem with the high concept spectacle as it plays out in *Evita*. She notes that the film’s emphasis on selling a lifestyle through the presence of Madonna facilitates “more than one
reading of the Evita image” (Allison 22-3). Even if there is more than one reading suggested by Evita, the fact that Madonna portrays Eva complicates any historically informed reading. Allison argues that to hold any lasting presence as both a film musical and a high concept product “the narrative must strive for a universal and timeless quality, the chief reason Evita is about her celebrity rather than a history lesson starring Evita” (15).

As a high concept film musical, Evita is the epitome of the high concept business practice. It exemplifies the self-perpetuating nature of high concept. It is spectacle for spectacle’s sake, celebrity casting for celebrity’s sake, and high concept for consumption’s sake. The high concept model led to Evita being quite different from classical film musicals even while it seemed to embody elements of studio era musicals. Reviewers took notice of the high concept influence on the film’s narrative and confusing ideological formations present in the casting and performances of its leads. For example, Lisa Leigh Parney observed that some of the film’s “scenes are reminiscent of [Madonna’s] music videos” (Parney 14). Other reviewers also expressed frustration behind the overall inability of the film to produce any clear meanings. Newsweek’s David Ansen observed the ideological confusion present in the film. He writes:

What a tantalizing, frustrating movie this is: you yearn to be drawn inside its seductive surface, and never get there. Instead of deepening with Evita’s amazing metamorphosis, the movie remains opaque. Instead of insight, you get spectacle. At the end, I knew I was supposed to be moved, but I couldn't figure out what I was supposed to be moved by. Maybe all the people who loved the show will love the movie, too—it’s certainly impressive. But I still haven’t a clue what it thinks it’s saying. (67)
The reviewers’ confusion highlights a problem with and a value of high concept film musicals, for despite the incoherence American audiences in the 1990s were engaged by the spectacular Utopia represented in the film.

To better understand why audiences were willing to invest in the film, we must look again at the high concept model and specifically how the character of Eva promotes the consumption of celebrity as a Utopia. David Sheinin points out that although the film shows that Argentines both loved and despised Eva. He writes:

Argentines backed her in the first instance for her political project and through her brief career for all the reasons an informed electorate will support an effective leader: she represented their interests enthusiastically and promise more of the same. (595)

If we consider Eva (the character in the film rather than the historical figure) as the mythological expression of a need on the part of the audience to invest in the “parasocial” relations of celebrity, then Evita as a high concept film musical allows audiences to consume all aspects of celebrity as both a product and a parasocial relationship. The argument could be made that the high concept model promotes the achievement of a parasocial relationship through the perpetual consumption of the star image.

Ultimately, Evita illuminates the idea that a celebrity is a person who is full of ambition, drive, and emotion. By consuming representations of the celebrity, audiences come closer to the celebrity’s experience. The audience consumes the spectacle and life of Eva Perón as a Utopia. As Ché points out in the opening song “Oh what an exit/That’s how to go/when they’re ringing your curtain down/demand to be buried like Eva Perón.” Eva is similar to Joe Gideon and Sally Bowles, except that in the power of the high concept utopic spectacle the individual is catapulted.
to the status of icon – the ultimate individual that means many different things to many different people. In consuming this icon, the audience is asked to share and empathize with the hopes of celebrity sainthood. Under the high concept model, the audience can consume the spectacle as a Utopia of the individual because in American culture of the 1990s the Eva Perón depicted in the film represented a dominant cultural ideal. Just as Joe Gideon goes out on his own note, Evita pursues life on her terms. While Evita’s life is cut short by something out of her control, the tragedy and source of her sainthood is far more worthy of investment than a depiction of life and celebrity as meaningless. In the conservative political climate of America in the mid-1990s, it was easier for American audiences to believe in celebrity as achieving fame and fortune leading to lines of people passing by their glass-topped casket than to see celebrity as a lonely isolating existence that ends with the body being zipped into a body bag.

**High Concept’s Ramifications on Mass Culture**

Proliferation is a term that was long used to describe the Cold War buildup of nuclear weapons. The proliferation of high concept in Hollywood films succeeded in transforming the view of Utopia from one of social quality to one of a commercial and individualistic quality. In *Evita* and the animated Disney film musicals, high concept depicts a completely fantastic and spectacular view of the Utopia based on the ideal of the successful individual. The proliferation of high concept was not contained to the film industry. In fact, the influence of high concept marketing practices extended beyond the film industry. Despite scholarly disdain for Broadway blockbuster musicals such as *Cats* (1982), *Les Miserable* (1987), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988), and *The Who’s Tommy* (1993), these mega-musicals serve to remind the theatrical community that high concept values were just as integral to the proliferation of spectacle on the
stages of Broadway as they were to the screens of the suburban cinema metropoles in the late twentieth-century.

As I noted in the first chapter, Disney brought high concept to Broadway in the stage adaptations of their animated film musicals. Yet high concept was present on Broadway before Disney’s arrival in the 1990s. Jessica Sternfeld’s unpublished dissertation notes an important and overlooked aspect of Broadway industry’s status. Sternfeld notes that the mythic themes and relatively simple plots present in Broadway mega-musicals translated easily to different audiences around the world (Sternfeld 5). In other words, the plots and characters were so high concept that their acceptance was not bound to a specific society or culture. Instead, it ensured a global reception of ideas, just as Disney’s animated film musicals translated to other languages easily because they were not specifically based on any specific nationality or ethnic construction (except for Pocahontas). In the same way that high concept film musicals are marketed by image and music, “a megamusical makes an easy commodity to sell; the logo, the theme song, and the slogan [of] an exported show assure[d] a foreign audience that they would get exactly what they would get if they saw the Broadway production” (Sternfeld 6). High concept aspects of the megamusical are impossible to dismiss. Sternfeld’s work outlines the ways high concept film industry practice proliferated itself into other cultural commodities, especially the stage musical. The process speaks to the power of the combination of image and words, onscreen and onstage, to transcend cultural difference and promote consumption in virtually any language in any country because America is a hegemonic power not because American values are “universal.”

The high concept practice not only affected the production of musicals. Disney’s use of the industry model on Broadway also affected the reception of live theatrical practice. Dragan Klaic notes that theatre has always been utopic to some extent. He writes:
Theater can display conditions other than those prevailing in reality. By providing plausible, yet credible alternatives to reality, theater has functioned for centuries as a powerful utopian laboratory, instigating alternative models of thought and behavior, alternative modes of being, in relation to conventional forms of reality. (Klaic 60)

While Jill Dolan argues that theatre performance has the potential to achieve Utopia in its reception, the inclusion of high concept marketing in the creation of audience expectations of theatre reinforces the capitalistic nature of reception, especially in the musical. Disney is not the only musical producer guilty of presenting feelings of Utopia for consumption to the audience.

Disney’s adaptation of their animated film musicals to the stage requires observers to consider the influence of high concept models in the production and reception of contemporary Broadway musicals. Maurya Wickstrom notes that the use of Disney’s brand images on stage “suggest that commodities, in turn, can be brought to life” (285). In adapting the animated musical for the stage, no longer is the audience required to imagine their fantasies. Instead, the fantasy comes to life and is brought into utopic connection with an audience willing to believe in the magic of the theatre. Since the consumer can see the product live onstage and buy pieces of the product in the Disney stores, Wickstrom argues that “the mimetic interchange between consumer and commodity encourages the global tourist in Toon [Times] square to experience capital as the mimesis and embodiment of desire in commodities” (291). In offering authentically branded representations of the production, the individual has the power to buy the feelings of Utopia and act upon them in their own imaginations.

Yet, the continued mimetic nature of the commodification, as present in the promotion and consumption of high concept products, reaffirms the unattainable nature of Utopia. No
matter how hard consumers try to experience the Utopia, they will never be able to experience the actual Utopia, only the feelings of the Utopia. This ultimately reaffirms the power of capitalism over its subject not as a site of Utopia but as a site of oppression. It is easy to pick on Disney because they market to youth, who are easily influenced and indoctrinated. Yet, the big budget mega-musicals of 1980s, such as *Cats* and *Les Miserable*, did much of the same for adults in Times Square. Disney’s brand image brought automatic product recognition from an established audience already indoctrinated in the consumption of high concept spectacle. The American theatre was built and survived on its ability to produce spectacular entertainment for the masses. Steve Nelson argues that “The Astor Place riot notwithstanding, America’s theatrical traditions prior to Ziegfeld owed more to spectacular touring productions of *The Black Crook* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* than to anything most scholars would label as high theatrical art” (Nelson 76). Florenz Ziegfeld, George Gershwin, and George M. Cohan, the father of Broadway himself, built the legacy of spectacle theatre, and although “it is widely assumed that Broadway has succumbed to theme park aesthetics [with the arrival of Disney to Broadway], it is actually returning to its own traditions of spectacle” (Nelson 78). Yet, the revitalization facilitated by Disney’s move into the Times Square business turned an otherwise dystopic space full of strip clubs and vagrants into a utopic tourist theme park.

Many observers complain that Disney wants to “control” all aspects of reading, producing, and performance. However, Cohan, Ziegfeld, and Barnum did likewise. Picking up and moving, closing, staging productions dictated by what they saw as the public taste or need for consumption. New York City officials rezoned the Times Square district so that Disney could create a new theme park environment in the heart of Manhattan. Nelson calls “the perfect climate for Disney’s vision of 42nd street: a formerly indigenous theatrical district transformed
into a romantically idealized tourist version of its former self” (83). Nelson notes that the tourist nature of the Times Square space was originally a Utopia-like mecca for popular entertainment. Once the urban environment encroached on the space, the utopia turned to dystopia, only to be refashioned in the Disney image. Nelson argues against those who wished for the dystopic vision of the old Times Square:

Those who see Disney’s frequently banal aesthetics and bottomless pockets as the death of Broadway miss the point: Eisner is Dr. Frankenstein, not Dr. Kevorkian. Broadway is being re-membered with mouse ears and fireworks to belt out “Be our Guest!” Barnum would surely smile. (84)

Disney’s move to Broadway gave New York City officials a commercial reason for cleaning up the dilapidated area (Sussman 41). The result was the creation of an idealized public space based on continued consumption of art, culture, and society. New York city officials created a utopic space of consumption by pushing the adult theatres, peep shows, homeless people, drug addicts, and undesirable depictions of difference beyond the boundaries of Times Square. While the revitalization of Times Square might have been necessary, the high concept approach to the revitalization process included taglines, posters, and advertisements. The Times Square facelift became a destination for mass entertainment based on the individual’s desire to consume. The creation of a consumer’s Utopia recalls Bertell Ollman’s model of the ability of Utopia to be co-opted by capitalism. Ollman writes:

Capitalism, after all, has proven very effective in co-opting free-floating utopian impulses. Fashion, for example, is but one example of how our desires for happiness, beauty, and community are cynically manipulated and turned into a means for enriching the few. Lotteries, rock concerts, and mass spectator sports
are others. Given forms that are sufficiently distant from the main battlegrounds of the class struggle, even the most radical impulses can be rendered safe for the status quo. (Ollman 79)

In the “new” Times Square, every consumer is attracted by the ability to consume the mass spectacle of advertisements, lights, television screens, news studios, NASDAQ market tickers, restaurants, theatre, film, and society equally. Virtually every type of mass public transportation works its way through the Times Square district and helps guide the masses to the commercial Utopia. The constant presence of a New York City Police station in the center of Times Square serves to enforce the safety of the masses to consume. The presence of the police recalls David Harvey’s notion that utopias are built under authoritarianism. The lights of the Times Square spectacle define and illuminate the capitalist desires of the tourist/spectator/consumer. The experience is meant to be transitory. The audience consumes and moves on from the Times Square District with only the memories and products they chose to invest in as a memento of their utopic experience.

Yet while high concept has proliferated itself into overabundance, there has been an equally important counter movement that is too great to elaborate on in this project. Still one should note that the power of the live performance has helped Disney to reshape its own artistic practices. What was once an attempt to animate the animated film has shifted towards the development of live performance. Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario writes:

The diversity of Disney’s theatrical projects, both in terms of subject matter and the company’s collaboration with some of theatre’s more innovative practitioners, signals Disney’s capacity to develop in the theatrical context. What is often viewed as a conservative, economically driven presence in the theatre actually
exhibits a flexibility of approach that has turned actors into clocks, mounted prancing giraffes on stilts, and projected the Cathedral of Notre Dame onto cubes. Disney’s recent initiatives in musical theatre have increasingly shifted away from “in-house,” corporate-driven theatre. Contrary to some widely held critical preconceptions, the Disney corporation is becoming one of the mainstream theatre’s more innovative producers through its experiments in reanimating the animated. (Rozario 175)

What Rozario notes is the ability of Disney to adapt to the changing expectations of their audience. Not only does Disney adapt to audiences, but also high concept has taught the corporation to differentiate its products by technological innovation. High concept has turned a commercial production agency into a company that pushed its own aesthetic and artistic boundaries. Despite the overt commerciality of its theatrical productions, there are very few professional theatre organizations ruled exclusively by artistic practice alone. However, there is an understanding within the Disney Company that theatrical producing requires its own performance-centered approach. It may share, or be susceptible to some of the same market factors in production and reception, but the success of the theatrical venture almost exclusively rides on the connection between production/performer and audience, whether utopic or not.

Spectacle can help audiences find a place in the production but it can distance, destroy, and turn-off an audience. Getting audiences into the theatre and helping them leave wanting more belongs to the traditional theatre as much as it does to high concept. High concept gave legs to a dying musical form and helped it to find a place with contemporary American audiences, while high concept’s proliferation directly influenced all aspects of popular culture, especially as products created and marketed by corporate entities. In film and theatre, high
concept not only led to massive profits, it also influenced all aspects of popular culture. While the ideological precepts and pitfalls related to the mass consumption of capitalistic excess in popular culture are inseparable from high concept as a business model and an aesthetic form, its influence as a producer of Utopia extends well beyond the boundaries of the film musical form. As Americans entered the new millennium, the film musical turned again to self-reflexivity and criticism. Unlike the self-reflexivity present in films like *Cabaret* and *All the Jazz*, the film musicals of the new millennium would take on aspects of both branches of the film musical genre to produce new ways of integrating song, dance, character, and popular culture that promoted the culture of consumption and located the setting of Utopia wholly within the imagination of the individual.
The logic of high concept is endless proliferation. Eventually the constant need to differentiate products in the marketplace leads to all products employing the same techniques and posing the products as different. This homogenization has the potential to permeate all aspects of culture. The endless derivations of product tie-ins reinforce the interrelated nature of culture. High concept proliferation ties virtually all products to one another, thus making all products look alike. As the high concept aesthetic (the look of excess that fueled the front-end production of high concepts films) changed, studio distributors continued to build marketing campaigns based on product differentiation. As a former trailer and commercial producer, I noticed that in my own work homogenization created a set of narrative structures and even common marketing lingo. In the span of three months late in December of 2001, virtually every project included the term all new or new in the voiceover. As products became differentiated into oblivion, it became important for marketers to give the appearance of difference, whether the film contained something different or not.

Writing in the purported decline of the film musical genre in the 1980s, Rick Altman warned that the film musical must find a new way to reinvent itself, especially if it was going to connect with new audiences. He writes:

If the musical is to survive very far into its second half-century, rather than succumbing to its first cousins, MTV and the concert film (as monarchy, first cousins are always the most dangerous rivals), then it will have to look to its past – and to American musical tradition as a whole – in order to rediscover the
symbiotic relationship which once tied the musical’s canned entertainment to the audience’s potential for live, personal production. (Altman Film Musical 363)

The performance aspects of the musical made it a unique genre to begin with. The hopes and feelings of Utopia promoted in classical Hollywood film musicals gave audiences something in which to invest. As the film musical incorporated aspects of MTV, high concept, and media culture in an attempt to revitalize the genre, the spectacles grew and the visions of utopia and dystopia became more localized in the action of the individual. The focus on narration and the diffusion of politics by high concept filmmaking gave the film musical a glossy, canned aesthetic. In order to differentiate the film musical from other blockbuster films, studios would have to find a new way to expand the genre by returning to issues of performance under the creative imaginations of non-Hollywood auteurs.

As I have shown throughout this work, the film musical genre did not develop in a simple systematic evolution. In fact, the recent history of the genre is fraught by a division between the utopic high concept depictions of the world and the films that expose the world of the musical and society itself as a dystopia. In fact, some utopists believe that inundating audiences with competing utopias has a negative effect. Aurel Kolnai argues, “Utopianism is proved to breed isolation, increased selfishness, and cynicism, and so on. Prolonged utopian domination is likely to land in destructive crisis, owing to the necessary adaptation to reality and loss of magic accompanying the realization” (181). One can imagine, it was simply a matter of time before the genre that produced the spectacular utopias of the 1990s would swing back towards reflexivity and cultural critique. Until the 1990s, high concept business practices were incompatible with low concept filmmaking. However, in the never-ending proliferation of product differentiation, it was perhaps inevitable that Hollywood would find a way to combine low-concept self-
reflexive critiques with high concept marketing. The resulting shift in the development of the film musical would reveal a way to give audiences feelings of Utopia within a dystopic world.

As the film musical attempted to court audiences with utopic and dystopic visions, studios began to experiment with ways of combining low concept films with high concept business practices. In the new millennium, film musicals have drawn upon the past and sought to make new meanings for the present. The alterations of narrative technique in contemporary film musicals challenge the audience’s expectations and, in turn, reconceptualize the genre’s marketplace appeal. This is especially evident in the musicals *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and *Chicago* (2002) where star power combines with innovation not only to compete with major blockbuster Hollywood films but also critiques them. Both musicals employ high concept marketing practices, and each musical reframes the location and space of Utopia. Both musicals acknowledge that the real world is a dystopic mess. Instead of coping and living with dystopia, the millennial film musicals give the individual in the dystopia the means of designing a Utopia accessible to his or her own mind and imagination.

This Utopia is not the diegetic world of the musical but located in the mind of the lead character. No longer do whole societies burst into diegetically-bound expressions of song and dance. Instead, the new film musical challenges genre conventions by reformulating the nature of the integrated musical. These musicals, which are more integrated than their characters, go beyond the backstage musical to create a space, albeit an unattainable and fantastic one, in the film diegesis. In essence, these two musicals change the way songs unfold in the narrative. These changes shift the very nature of the integrated musical number from a diegetic, and albeit unrealistic utopic reality, to a hyper-realistic theatrical presentation of imagination and sense memory. Instead of bursting into song in the story world, characters burst into song in the realm
of their own mind. By placing the musical numbers within the mind, the film musical genre returns to the very roots of performance, the theatre. While the mind is not a conventional backstage theatre space, the narratological shift refashions the magic of the theatre by placing it within the magical imagination. The mind becomes a place not for realizing the truth of humankind, but a place for the characters to give unadulterated expression to individuality. Since the mind is subject to the influence of popular culture, the characters imagination becomes a site where they can

In order to help the audience accept the depiction of Utopia as imaginative, individualistic, and influenced by reality, most millennial film musicals are set in a nostalgic past far removed from the any recent memory of American consumers. In these film musicals, history is used as a metaphor for the present. Not unlike the dystopic and utopic representations present in *Grease* and *Cabaret*, historical events play out with the familiarity of the present. The use of contemporary framing devices depicts the pleasure of living life in the present rather than the past. The dystopic reality of the story worlds present in millennial film musicals gives rise to Utopian fantasy of imagination. Thus, imaginative utopias become the main coping device for living in a dystopic society. Despite the audience living in a dystopic society, the depiction of Utopia in the imagination gives the audience something and some place to celebrate. In realizing how life is, the audience is encouraged to find their own Utopia in their imagination and let it drive their life in the world. These millennial film musicals utopias exploit imagination through a strong connection to editing and performances inspired by contemporary high concept entertainment.

*Chicago* and *Moulin Rouge!* combine high concept practices with theatricalized visual spectacles to shift the very nature of the film musical itself. While *Moulin Rouge!* is an
amalgamation of cultural referents reformulated to critique the nature of the courtship ritual as a fantasy, *Chicago*’s use of song returns the musical to its theatrical roots and challenges the construction of musical genre as a patriarchal enterprise. In both, the individual’s rich fantasy life stands in stark opposition to the diegetic reality of the film. While both musicals show Americans in the Bush/Cheney era that the musical can provide an escape from reality, it is only an escape. The moment Americans open their eyes dreams can be gone. Moreover, as we look to fantasy as a maker of memory, the Utopia is not somewhere they can live the full life. It gives contemporary audiences the utopic hopes and expectations of the genre while providing artistic critique of aspects of ideology and culture.

*Moulin Rouge!* and the Memory of Utopia

Australian director Baz Luhrmann made a name with the low budget, independently produced film *Strictly Ballroom* (1992). Set in and around a dance hall and the stage of the Pan-Pacific Grand Nationals, *Strictly Ballroom* explores love between a prodigy ballroom dancer and a girl from the wrong side of the tracks.1 As the girl learns to dance, the boy learns to love. In breaking the rules of performance in a style where there are “no new steps,” the couple learns that dance, like love, is bound by conventional, romantic ideals. Luhrmann’s taste for over-the-top characters, music montages, rich color palate, art as expression of self, and a propensity for cultural referents made *Strictly Ballroom* a global hit.2 Luhrmann’s new found success opened the door to American audiences and Hollywood production budgets.

Luhrmann’s success with *Strictly Ballroom* led to the production of a trilogy of films planned by the director. Luhrmann’s “Red Curtain” cinema trilogy sought to tell the fantastic tale of love in various ways, and the trilogy is as much a parody of cinema and cinematic practice as it is a send up of the romanticized vision of love. While *Strictly Ballroom* was the
story of love through the expression of dance, Luhrmann’s second film would depict a classic tale of love through language. *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996) combined a big Hollywood budget with the auteuristic vision of Luhrmann. The adaptation of Shakespeare’s play relocated the tale to California’s Verona Beach. The film featured the high concept casting of teen idols, Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. Virtually every aspect of the film bears the mark of high concept filmmaking. The film features high-end production values and an emphasis on excess in visuals, emotion, and language. Courtney Lehmann notes that Luhrmann’s innovative directing style “encourages us, above all, to adjust our (mind)sets – to engage in an overdue process of adaptation ourselves, by accounting for provocative authorial practices that prove exceptions to our theoretical rules” (221). The “provocative authorial practices” include Luhrmann’s use of contemporary songs, news footage, and the depiction of the feud as something out of a tabloid magazine. Lehmann argues that Luhrmann’s innovative recycling of culture involves a pastiche of the works of Shakespeare. While Lehmann’s larger argument positions Shakespeare as an early “postmodernist” (208), there is an implicit acknowledgment by Lehman that Luhrmann’s directorial style expands film genres by reappropriating cultural elements. In recycling culture, Luhrmann examines not only the creation of culture but also the ability to make culture mean anew through cinematic practice.

Luhrmann’s final film in the “Red Curtain Trilogy” would be not only his most expensive, but also arguably his most popular. *Moulin Rouge!* would be yet another depiction of love. While in *Ballroom* the characters discover the joy of finding love, and in *Romeo + Juliet* that unattainable love is not worth living for, the lead character of *Moulin Rouge!* discovers that it is better to have loved once than never having loved at all. *Moulin Rouge!* is a modern adaptation of the Orpheus and the Underworld myth set on the eve of the twentieth-century and
told through a complex collage of contemporary song lyrics and performance styles, including stylized animation, computerized special effects, and Bollywood musicals. The film unfolds in a series of flashbacks that alternate between Paris in 1900 and Paris one year earlier, during “the summer of love.” Throughout the film, Christian, the young middle-class writer, narrates the writing of his story. As he tells of his descent into the underworld of Bohemian Montmartre at the turn of the century, the audience is treated to the expression of personal memory as an extravagant spectacle. The interweaving of contemporary songs and song lyrics provides a striking thread of familiarity for audiences as they navigate Luhrmann’s frenetic pacing and lavish aesthetics.

*Moulin Rouge!* is high concept in its casting and marketing. The film features the acting and singing talents of Nicole Kidman, Ewan McGregor, John Leguizamo, and Jim Broadbent. Despite the relative inexperience of the cast with musicals, the contemporary lyrics and songs give the actors the opportunity to put their mark on contemporary culture. While the emphasis in millennial film musical moves towards performance, the marketing of the film musical genre was bound by the high concept proliferation of product differentiation. Even as the spectacular utopias of Disney and *Evita* denoted the relative rebirth of the film musical, the high concept marketers were afraid of promoting *Moulin Rouge!* as a musical. In fact, the trailer for *Moulin Rouge!* did not show the film to be a musical. It showed some performance aspects, but the songs from the film used in the soundtrack to the trailer play more like conventional high concept music montages rather than integrated musical numbers. The trailer features a tag at the end to promote “new music” in the film from artists like David Bowie, Beck, Fatboy Slim, and Christina Aguilera. The trailer rides exclusively on the story of love as its single most marketable aspect. It also features plenty of emotive moments (without actually showing
singing) quickly cut together with the threat of destruction at the hands of the Duke. The elements of a Hollywood love story are set out in the trailer: lovers, an evil man who gets in the way, fame, stars, a period setting, and spectacle. However, the most telling aspect of the trailer is in one seemingly ubiquitous line of voiceover that simply states, “He entered a world where fantasy was real.” This one line ties the film to the Orpheus myth and sets up audience expectation that will blur the lines between fantasy and reality. The trailer attempts to differentiate the film from other conventional traditional romance films, by doing everything except calling the film a musical. The trailer is a good example of the lack of confidence on the part of marketers to call a film by its generic convention for fear that it may lead to another All That Jazz.

Since the story occurs as a flashback, the aesthetic of the film presents a conflicted view of the world where the dystopia of reality collides with the utopic memory of the writer. The entire film is an aesthetic collision of cinematic style. The cepiatone and black and white view of Christian’s (McGregor) loveless present stand in stark contrast to the colorful and lavish spectacle of his love-filled memory. The dichotomy between color styles establishes memory as something even more fantastic and less real in look than the present. This is further enforced through the incorporation of contemporary songs into the flashbacks. There is no singing in Christian’s present, only suffering and drinking. His memory, on the other hand, is full of excess – in color, song, life, drinking, friendship, and love. His memory of bohemia lives up to the Bohemian ideals of “Truth, Beauty, Freedom, and Love.” Christian is free to remember and write his perception of beauty of his love affair with Satine (Kidman). Whether it is the incorporation of Elton John, Dolly Parton, Nirvana, or classical music, the film depicts memory as a series of fragments. There is a narrative whole and if any one part is taken out of context it
will only cause confusion. It is the whole of memory at work in Christian’s writing that provides coherence.

Memory serves a utopic function in *Moulin Rouge!*. No matter how tangible the sense memory or the ability to relive the experience, memory is still a resonance of an experience, no more real than the imagination. In fact, the writing of memory is itself a process of editing and reinforcement. Christian’s story is Christian’s story, the way Luhrmann wants the audience to see and experience the character’s memory. The utopia of memory is a place of excess remembered in the way that Christian wants to remember. True to his death-side promise to Satine, Christian goes on to tell their story so that the world will remember their love. Since it is Christian’s memory, there is very little reason for the audience to believe the tale is real. After all, it is a musical, and despite the familiar song lyrics, the integrated nature of the communal songs evokes the communal aspect of utopia present in classical Hollywood film musicals. Yet, the framing device of memory refashions utopic space to be at the discretion and imagination of the individual. No longer is the world a Utopia, a place where the artist is able to express the truth of freedom, beauty, and love through song and dance. Instead, the world is a cold, dark dystopia cut off from true beauty by death. In writing the love story, Christian is able to draw memory, and the feelings of utopia in its recollection, to cope with life without his true love. In viewing the story, the audience can find in their own memory utopic feelings to cope with the disastrous events part of the Bush era. Despite its May 2001 release, the film’s expression of memory as a coping mechanism becomes even more prominent when read against the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The film relies on individual memory as a repository of popular culture. Co-screenwriters Luhrmann and Craig Pearce freely incorporated from a broad spectrum of
contemporary culture. However, they remake culture by creating new signifiers for the popular culture. Whether it is two men singing Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” or the refashioning of the solo hit (for both Dolly Parton and Whitney Houston) “I Will Always Love You” into a duet, the intrusion of popular culture onto the historical setting deliberately displaces any notions of a shared history. Rather than banking on audience’s ideas about what is appropriate to setting or convention, the writer and director force audiences to evaluate their own expectations and then make a judgments based on the filmmaker’s ability to display a consistent vision. Since the film is a fantastic tale of memory based on myth that incorporates contemporary culture, the audience is prompted to see the difference between the dystopic present and utopic memory. As Christian’s tale unfolds, the depiction of Christian’s present moves from alcoholic depression to a mature acceptance. The lighting and overall tone of Christian’s writing sequences changes from dark and brooding to lighter and less depressive. The audience understands that Christian works through his grief as he writes down his memories. By the last shots of the film, the audience sees that in telling the story, Christian has found something for which he can live.

The metaphor is powerful tool for understanding utopia and emotion. The feelings of love and emotion evoked by memory, no matter how painful, are expressions of the individual’s struggle with the unattainability of Utopia. Since happiness cannot exist in his present, Christian refashions his past in order to begin living in the present. The constant pain of the loss of true love (Utopia) creates isolation, but coping with those feelings can lead the individual to a richer and more mature understanding of life’s dystopia. It will not be perfect but it is certainly better than wallowing in the suffering of dystopia. In some sense, Christian is enacting Oscar Wilde’s notion that a map without Utopia on it, is not a map worth looking at. Investing in the film, the audience hopes to embrace the attainable Utopia of personal memory. The audience consumes
the spectacle of an individual’s love and memory of a perfect past and in turn receives the help to cope with their own contemporary dystopia.

The film’s use of popular cultural referents is such a piece-meal that the audience has very little real sense of communal memory, except as in Christian’s recounting of his experience. Christian hopes his story reaffirms his faith in love but he also hopes it can convince readers, a future of love relies on their ability to imagine a lavish and spectacular reality – for a moment. Just as Christian’s view of love is no longer a boyish obsession but a mature understanding of its fleeting and unattainable nature, the film depicts Utopia in a less authoritarian light. In locating Utopia in the individual’s mind, the ideal becomes an individual set of ideals shaped by the individual and his/her response to the dystopic real world. One component of this depiction of Utopia is the loss of community. Just as the spectacular utopias of the 1990s were fueled by the actions of the individual, the millennial film musical displays a view of Utopia as existing only in the mind of the individual. There are moments when we connect to community, but ultimately individual utopias are just that, individual. That depiction of Utopia can serve to breed dystopia and isolation because the individual is only responsible to his/her ideal rather than a communal ideal.

Yet audiences that comprehend the possibilities in the film’s message may find themselves within a new community. This new community is shaped by the influence of popular culture but also understand that, regardless of our perception of the past (perfect or not, individual or not), the experience of the past helps a person to cope with the dystopic present. In particular, the romantic notion of adolescent love, as an ideal of love from someone who has never been in love, becomes the ideal worth striving for above all else. It is an apolitical ideal that seems attractive because it seems “universal.” The film’s mobilization of romantic love
offers utopic feeling as a way to connect with a broad social demographic. The strategy is reinforced by the film’s use of popular music.

As romantic ideals untempered by experience, we could substitute Christian’s obsession with romantic love with the romantic notion of Utopia. The romantic ideals offered by that Utopia shares the same communal focus as the bohemian lifestyle. Utopia’s continued existence relies on the free worship of its subjects for love of the communal ideal. Christian has come to Paris searching for the purest form of existence. Even though he lives it, loses it, and re-experiences a heightened memory of the experience, the shared feelings between Christian’s experiences suggests the power of living romantic ideals. Despite Christian losing his Utopia in Satine’s death, Luhrmann depicts a world that is better because the character attempted to live up to the individualistic ideals of romantic love. For millennial audiences, the power of the film resides in its ability to display imagination as an active tool for coping with the unattainable and unsustainable nature of Utopia.

The depiction of memory as Utopia gives the individual a place in which to reconcile and deal with the present. The film suggests that the individual holds the key to living in the dystopic present. Just as Christian works through his existence in his recounting of the past, the film audience learns that the ideals of Utopia can exist if only in the hopes of the imagination. Still, the dangers of authoritarianism are present in Luhrmann’s aesthetic. Grace Kehler explains: “Working through double negation towards affirmation, Luhrmann pillories both the desire for packaged, easily purchased sentiments that masquerade as idealism as well as smug assumptions of superiority to purportedly debased commodity” (154). Kehler argues that Luhrmann’s use of parody to deconstruct the myth of Orpheus and modern notions of romance
cheapens the critical power of Utopia. However, as I have shown, the true critical power of Utopia was already debased by the high concept aesthetic.

Despite the potential pitfalls of recycling consumer culture, the film’s potluck of popular culture evokes not only songs but also past ideals of performance. This ideal of performance is often over-the-top, melodramatic, and, given where the film musical genre comes from, spectacular. Reviewer Marsha Kinder noted that the use of popular culture in a new context “suggests that this blatantly artificial genre may be the only realm where such love can still be found, let alone flourish” (52). The spectacle of artificiality in performance borrows from contemporary Bollywood, MTV music video styles, and classical Hollywood film musicals. Because Moulin Rouge! represents Christian’s memory, the film is allowed to invoke and represent whatever it can without violating the conventions of fantasy set up by the narrative structure. While Kinder focuses on the melodramatic aspects of the film, and perhaps even the musical genre, she notes that such use of culture as retold through a new lens “privileges performance over representation” (53). For Kinder, there is a performative aspect to the recycling of culture. This approach succeeded in not only reviving the genre but also refocusing the power of the film musical to convey performance.

Luhrmann’s casting of Kidman and McGregor in Moulin Rouge! fulfills traditional high concept ideals but it defies conventional film musical casting that seeks to fill lead character roles with performers who can sing. In the animated films of the 1990s, Disney was able to use singers to perform their songs, because the voices only needed to sound similar. Even a conventional studio era musicals employed signers to sing for stars. Not unlike Robert Altman’s use of stars in Nashville, Luhrmann cast actors who were not known for their singing and had them actually perform the songs. Instead of criticizing Kidman and McGregor for not being able
to sing, Luhrmann was applauded by critics for the vocal performances he got from the actors. The first time the audience hears McGregor sing he is singing a section from *The Sound of Music*. The invocation of a different musical seems out of place for a moment, but it sets up the rest of the film as a recycling of popular and classical music by non-traditional characters. Regardless of any issues of quality in the performances of the Kidman and McGregor, MTV and popular recording artists taught the audience that performance matters and “perceived authenticity” is more important than true “talent.” Since culture is recycled through the performance of amateur singers, the audience is given license to turn their dystopic realities into utopic imagination by becoming their own recyclers of popular music.

*Moulin Rouge!* is an example of how the performance of recycled culture requires a dual reading. The songs, the stars, and the feelings produced by the recycled material required the audience to make meaning of the cultural artifacts in a new context while simultaneously coming to terms with meanings linked to their initial interaction with the material. In this new context, stars and cultural works take on new meaning and acquire new functions in society. Nicole Kidman’s performance of “Diamond’s are a Girl’s Best Friend” is not only her performance of Satine, but it also carries meanings evoked by the performance of the song by Marilyn Monroe. Kidman’s performance even invokes Madonna’s “Material Girl” music video, which portrayed Madonna, dressed as Monroe, singing and dancing on a set that looked like Monroe’s original cinematic performance of the song. In *Moulin Rouge!*, the recycling is purposeful and nearly endless.

Whether it is McGregor’s first song lyrics, “The hills are alive with the sound of music” or Jim Broadbent’s version of “Like a Virgin,” the songs are played against their existing meaning and made to mean again. Even Broadbent and Kidman’s performance of the Queen
classic “The Show Must Go On” draws on composer/performer Freddie Mercury’s writing of the song after learning of his AIDS diagnosis, and Mercury’s fight with AIDS becomes a foreshadowing of Satine’s future fight with tuberculosis. However, Broadbent and Kidman’s performance of the song also contains another layer of meaning that allows those unfamiliar with the song’s history to continue to invest in the fantasy for the song functions as an integrated song to express Zidler’s resolve to make the show Spectacular Spectacular and Satine’s resolve to save Christian from being killed by the Duke. So on the surface, the song serves a basic narrative function, but it also serves a dual function as metaphor of the character’s and historical figure’s fights with a fatal disease.

There is pleasure on either level, but there is additional pleasure given to audiences well versed in American popular culture. Marsha Kinder argues that “Luhrmann’s film reminds us that no matter which genre, medium, or culture they hail from, all avatars (like melodramatic stereotypes and tunes) can be endlessly recycled at the ever-shifting point of consumption” (59). For Kinder, the recycled cultural references serves as avatars, symbols or signs, of culture reappropriated and morphed to fit a given narrative function. The cultural referents make new meanings; this reinforces an endless consumption of intertextuality. It is the ultimate form of high concept with endless product tie-ins placed together to form an entirely new way of differentiating Moulin Rouge! from other film musicals. Therein lies the high concept nature of Luhrmann’s relatively low-concept film musical. After all, marketers could not find a broad appealing way to promote the musical nature of the film, so the marketers reduced the entirety of the film to a “period love story.”

The film’s recycling of meaningful elements gives the recycled culture new life. The recycling serves as an endless product tie-in to original songs, performance styles, and even
myth. The communal repository of cultural memory called up by Christian’s imagination allows its audiences to see that the film musical is fantasy to be lived and relived. The memory is Christian’s, but ultimately it is American society’s cultural memory playing itself out in the mass entertainment spectacle of the film musical. Ultimately, audiences are never going to be able to dance across the rooftops of Paris to a Méliès moon to the voice of Placido Domingo, but they can access the feelings of communal Utopia present in the repository of cultural memory. Utopia may not exist in the present, it never existed in the past, but Americans experience in popular culture refashioned for consumption is offered up as a way to deal with dystopia.

Luhrmann’s ability to work inside and outside of the Hollywood mainstream serves as its own form of product differentiation. As an independent filmmaker, Luhrmann was able to tap into “gaps in the consumer market that Hollywood had not spotted” (Rojek 141). Luhrmann’s ability to tap into adult and teen markets reminded industry executives that the film musical genre could have broad appeal. Reviewer Rupert Mellor notes that Moulin Rouge! has “turned on a generation fed on MTV to the possibilities of celluloid song and dance” (5). The film demonstrated that a film musical could engage a broad audience demographic. The film drew in teenagers, young adults, culturally literate and educated adults. In doing so, the film reopened the marketplace for the film musical. John Kenneth Muir argues, and rightfully so under industry business practices, that “Without Moulin Rouge [sic], there could have been no Chicago” (164).

The Fantastic Utopia and a “Return” to Performance in Chicago 6

With its original premiere on Broadway in 1975, the Kander and Ebb musical Chicago criticized an American society that creates celebrities out of murderers. The Bob Fosse directed stage musical framed the story of murder, greed, and corruption against the backdrop of a
Vaudeville show. While ultimately eclipsed by Michael Bennett’s ode to the Broadway dancer, *A Chorus Line*, Fosse’s cynical vision of 1920’s Chicago ran for a respectable 898 performances. The 1975 musical spawned a 1996 Broadway revival that is still running. While the revival, (directed in the “style of Bob Fosse” by Ann Reinking) shared an intertextuality between its 1930s setting and American society in 1990’s, contextual historical events such as the O.J. Simpson trial and the capture of the Unabomber gave the musical’s historic setting a contemporary relevance.

It could be argued that the change in historical context, not necessarily the musical performance itself, made *Chicago*’s revival a more profitable production than its original. For example, without the rise of celebrity television shows and reality television, *Chicago* might not have been able to connect with a contemporary audience. While the historical nature of corruption, both politically and legally, influenced the shows original reception, the constant revelations of fraud, whether it is Enron, Iraq, or the justice system, fuels the stage productions of *Chicago* with a nearly endless source of cultural energy. In contemporary American culture, the continued development of reality television gives a new outlet to the ordinary person. Whether someone appears on *The Jerry Springer Show, Survivor*, or MTV’s *The Real World*, it is possible for nearly anyone to receive their “fifteen minutes of fame” or at least media exposure. In the wake of reality television, the individual has the opportunity to become famous, if only for a moment. Since Americans can see instant fame as a possibility to existence, it is understandable that *Chicago*, which capitalizes on the performance of celebrity, would find a way to entertain individuals with the kind of fantasies of Utopia endemic to Bush era dystopia.

Like *Moulin Rouge!*, high concept marketing and casting practices directly affected *Chicago*’s film production. Harvey Weinstein, then President of Miramax (a subsidiary of the
Disney Corporation), sought a way of capitalizing on the tremendous popularity of the stage musical revival. Even with the success of *Moulin Rouge!*, Miramax sought the right package to bring a high concept film version of *Chicago* to the box office (Miller 67). Like Baz Luhrmann turning down the director’s position with the film, Miramax took the risk of hiring a rookie filmmaker. Rob Marshall, a relative rookie to filmmaking, but no rookie to directing musicals.

It was Marshall’s unique approach to integrating the show’s vaudeville style songs into the narrative structure of *Chicago* that not only secured the job but also gave Miramax a way of differentiating the film from conventional film musicals. The portrayal of the music, the film’s differentiation from other musicals, and the film’s marketability all worked together to give Marshall and Weinstein the film for which they were looking: an “all-new” high concept musical.

In the 2002 Oscar winning film version of the popular stage revival, director Rob Marshall’s construction of the film’s narrative structure challenged the traditional conventions of studio era film musicals. Instead of characters bursting into song as in many popular Hollywood musicals, Marshall drew upon the vaudevillian theatrical style of the original stage production. Instead of having the vaudevillian acts play out as separate numbers strung together with a plot (as it does on stage), Marshall returned performance to the stage. While the songs play out on a theatrical stage with theatrical style choreography, lighting, and performance, the stage is not located in a literal theatre. Instead, the stage is the theatrical imagination of wannabe actress, Roxie Hart (Renée Zellweger). By situating the songs in Roxie’s mind, every production number is completely integrated the song within the film’s diegesis. While *All That Jazz*, *The Pirate Movie*, and *Moulin Rouge!* depict songs as expressions of the individual’s innermost desires playing out in the mind, Marshall found a way to integrate *Chicago*’s songs into the story
world. The result is a depiction of music and performance as an internal experience of the individual. Instead of songs being an outward expression of the innermost desires of a character, the audience is given a direct window into the innermost psyche of the individual. In turn, the world of fantasy is given roots in reality, and the performances have the ability to blur the lines between fantasy and reality and to be part of one coherent narrative (Burlingame A12). Mark Miller notes that the framing device “permits the linear, realistic story that movie audiences expect, while retaining the showstoppers from Bob Fosse's 1975 stage production” (67). So instead of the audience having to accept the world of the film as a place where people can and should burst forth into utopic expressions of song and dance, Chicago’s songs and performances are Roxie’s internal dialogue that not only helps the audience to see the story world as she does but also helps to comment on contemporary society.

Marshall’s approach to integrating songs into the film’s narrative was neither unique nor marketable. Even with its reputation as an independent studio, Miramax relied on high concept casting and marketing to build audience expectations for the film. Like Moulin Rouge!, the marketers for Chicago sought to suppress the fact that the film was a musical. Instead, Miramax chose to focus on the high concept cast, which was not necessarily the same as a musical cast. Despite the box office appeal of Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Richard Gere, the producers sought out the talents and teen appeal of performers such as Queen Latifah, Mya, and Lucy Liu. Then to appeal to a musically literate audience, the producers brought in Chita Rivera, the stage star who originally played Velma Kelly. With the casting in place, Miramax began to capitalize on the musical’s focus on fame, murder, and celebrity in 1920’s Chicago instead of the musical aspects of the film. This is evident in the film’s tagline that graced posters across the country: “If You Can’t Be Famous, Be Infamous.” The posters featured the trio of
Gere, Zellweger, and Zeta-Jones standing seductively and god-like over the tagline and the Chicago skyline. To convey the idea that fame is everything. While theme, even as a marketable aspect, does not inform audience expectations as effectively as genre, Miramax marketing executives still chose to obscure the musical nature of the film in the media campaign.

The television commercials for the film focused on the issue of becoming famous rather than being musical (Muir 203). If audiences were not familiar with the original musical, then they would find it hard to believe that this new film about murder in 1920’s Chicago actually featured singing and dancing. Rob Marshall told Newsweek’s Mark Miller that the marketing campaign was a deliberate attempt to preserve the genre. He noted, “You think, ‘Oh, gosh,’ if this doesn't work, then they'll say the genre is dead” (qtd. in Miller 67). The marketing campaign can also be read as an attempt to save the film. In the end, the gamble paid off. Once the opening weekend returns came pouring into the studio, the musical elements became the focus of post-release promotions. The true nature of Chicago’s narrative construction, and the ideology promoted within the structure, reinforced the popularity and power of the film musical to act as a source of pleasure and a source of cultural critique. Yet no matter how strong the critique, the expectations of performance in the musical as an evocation of Utopia combined with the polished high concept aspects of the film would preyed on the audience’s need to escape the present social dystopia of a failing healthcare system, an unstable stock market, a looming crisis in social security, and a weakening of America’s global economic domination.

Marshall’s framing device and seamless transitions between reality and Roxie’s performative imagination about fame and fortune draws on Americans’ culturally constructed need for fame and fortune. Not only did audiences welcome the chance to sing and dance like Roxie, they also saw a way to satisfy their own needs by escaping into their own imaginations.
The film offers a critique that was not possible in the original 1975 stage production, for at that time critics simultaneously praised and criticized Fosse’s extremely cynical depiction of celebration for a society that would exalt killers and execute innocent others. But in the film, the wry cynicism seemingly inherent in the stage musical is given a glossy sheen. It is no longer the gritty, vaudeville style of 1975 version. Nor is the film a sleek, pared-down, depiction of style and raw cynicism of the 1996 stage revival. Instead, the film is a spectacle of imagination and performance, and the 1920’s setting is pale in comparison to the rich theatre of Roxie’s mind.

Marshall’s ability to transition seamlessly between the real worlds of 1920’s Chicago and the imaginative nowhere of Roxie’s imagination reinforces the experiences of American audiences. In millennial culture, the diffusion of popular culture into virtually every aspect of daily life and the virtually endless consumption of culture in daily life blurred the lines between fantasy and reality. This gave audiences a way to immediately understand that imagination could help Roxie cope with the dystopic day-to-day existence of 1920s Chicago. However, much like Cabaret, Marshall gives Roxie an audience for her imagination and performance. With fantasy sequences constantly unfolding on large stages and empty theatres being shot from low angles, the audience could not help but become a receptor for Roxie’s fantasies. The glossy, seamless line between fantasy and reality in the world of the film sutures the audience into the performances unfolding in Roxie’s mind. By becoming a complicit member in Roxie’s fantasy, the audience comes to share the same hopes and ideals as Roxie, understanding why she shot Casely (he was a manipulating, adulterating, philanderer) and why she pursues fame. The broadly appealing fantasy world illuminates the imagination’s ability to justify real world acts.

Yet because it is Roxie’s fantasy, a dual reading is available to audiences. Despite its high concept aspects, the audiences could not help but read Chicago as a depiction of
consumption present in contemporary American culture. Reading the film in light of the present, audiences could consider their role in the creation, consumption, and perpetuation of celebrity culture by imagining themselves as famous. In “All That Jazz,” Roxie’s imagines herself in Velma’s place. The opening number, complete with the brief intrusion of fantasy into reality, not only crystallizes Roxie’s motivation for all of her future endeavors but it also sutures the audience into the integrated narrative structure of the film. The alienating displacement of Velma by Roxie sets up a potential dual reading of all fantasies. The audience is asked to examine the process of projecting oneself into the role of another (even if it is done in fantasy), in part because they even see her fantasy reaction to causing others pain through Amos’s “Mr. Cellophane.” Like Roxie, the depiction of Amos as a sad clown that nobody knows is there is not an attempt to create empathy, but instead Roxie and the audience pity a man with little understanding as to how the world really works.

The final and most telling critique comes in the transition into the “Hot Honey Rag/Finale.” As Roxie and Velma find themselves dealing with the fleeting nature of their infamy, they decide to team up. Every fantasy number up to the final sequence is facilitated by a transitional shot, such as an extreme close-up of Roxie’s eye or the conductor’s superimposed head floating through theatrical space, or the appearance of a theatrical spotlight in a “real” world environment. These transitions blur the boundaries between imagination and reality. However, the transition to the final sequences includes a tracking shot that moves towards Zellweger, a cut to tracking shot moving towards Zeta-Jones, and a cut back to a continuation of the tracking shot ending with Zellweger’s raised eyebrow. As the second cut occurs, there is a strong music hit (complete with drum roll) and the conductor’s voice begins to announce Roxie and Velma’s entrance. The conductor’s voice plays over a brief sequence of shots of the theatre,
the audience, and the title of the film. What is apparent is that this could be another fantasy sequence, or something else. Marshall has never explicitly stated whether he believes the final number is another fantasy, and audiences are allowed to make their own decision.

On the surface, the final fantasy sequence is a “Hollywood Ending.” It is a classical Hollywood film musical ending complete with a large orchestra, huge dance number, and a theatre audience full of fellow characters applauding the success of the lead characters. While the audience is not singing along with the characters, they still invoke a potentially utopic ending in that they willfully applaud and take pleasure in the success of the infamous celebrities. The ending acknowledges the reality of the phrase, “there is a sucker born every minute,” but it also allows the audience to “look back with a wry smile, without having to engage our moral judgment” (Crompton 25). Whether the ending is a story world event or an act of Roxie’s imagination is irrelevant to the ideology of the film. The ending celebrates Roxie and Velma’s actions and criticizes the audience’s willingness to invest in and promote their infamy. American audiences are invited to revel with the story world audience without feeling sorry that they are celebrating the individual’s socially inappropriate actions. The ending is a historical depiction of twenty-first century American culture.

Below the glossy high-concept surface of Chicago lies a strong cultural critique that lends insight into cultural consumption in the Bush era. The audience is never confronted with the question of whether or not Roxie and Velma deserve their “Hollywood Ending.” By moving the songs and performative aspects into the imagination, the audience no longer has to justify the integration of songs into the film’s narrative. The narrative structures promoted by Moulin Rouge! and Chicago make the integrated songs and performance in film musicals plausible for millennial audiences (Maddox 41). The film enforces the audience’s need to escape from
dystopia by fantasizing that they have control over their situation. Richard Blake notes that by
the end of Chicago, “We want [Roxie] to play rough in a rough game and win. That is why her
finale works so well. It’s hokey, and we see it coming, but love it anyway” (Blake). The ending
is inevitable. The individual can live his/her dream, but only in America. Blake notes the
timeliness of the films escapist tendencies. He writes, “In an age of uncertainty such as this, we
can’t escape from our problems, nor deny them. Amid wars and rumors of wars, we desperately
need something to celebrate” (24). Through the process of consumption, the audience receives
hope that they can achieve Utopia, if only in their imagination. What they do receive, as
promised by the legacy of high concept Hollywood filmmaking, is the chance to celebrate the
power of the individual to imagine and escape dystopia.

In Moulin Rouge! and Chicago high concept marketing and business practices combine
with narrative innovation to bring together two disparate sub-generic evolutions of the film
musical. Chicago was the first musical since Grease to break the $100 million mark at the U.S.
box office (Hernandez). In fact, the high concept approach that Miramax took towards the
production and distribution of Chicago grossed more than a $300 million dollars at the box
office, joining 23 other films released in 2002 that grossed more than $100 million at the box
office. With such high commercial stakes in both production and distribution, it is easy to see
how many films have adopted the high concept approach to film making. However, Chicago is
not just another high concept film; it is one of the few high concept films to be nominated for
thirteen Academy Awards, and the film received six Oscars, for Best Art Direction,
Cinematography, Editing, Sound, Costume Design, Supporting Actress, and Best Picture. The
accolades of the Academy for this high concept musical could not have been possible without a
shift in culture.
Sarah Maddox notes the increasing global awareness of the Hollywood high concept mentality propagated by product tie-ins (signs of the high concept post-apocalypse) present in the making and marketing of millennial films. She writes:

[O]ne phenomenon, whether it be the latest reality television programme, the youngest teenage boy band, or a feature film with a bankable star. Not only do consumers get the film, they can get the best selling soundtrack, with a couple of number one hit singles, numerous glossy magazine covers, a web site with interactivity elements and, if they are really lucky, the spin-off cable television show. (40)

The proliferation of high concept product tie-ins present in the film musicals of the new millennium affected global culture by synthesizing high concept business practices and reading formations with innovative narrative structure and creative cinematic techniques. One could make the argument that there is very little innovation in the film’s narrative techniques and that the films simply present culture and aesthetics in a new box. While Moulin Rouge! and Chicago challenged other film musicals to continue the revival of the genre, and despite the equally spectacular settings of film musicals that followed, none would be as critically or profitably popular. Even though critics would announce that the genre, that never went away, was back, musicals such as The Phantom of the Opera and Rent failed to find their own way to differentiate their depictions of performance and spectacle to the same degree as the millennial films.
- CONCLUSION -

STUDYING FILM MUSICALS AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

No cultural product exists in a vacuum. This is especially true for an industry product that seeks to target specific consumers. Whether it is the food industry or Hollywood, the social milieu surrounding any consumer has a profound affect on the consumer’s ability to invest in the industry’s product. First and foremost, Hollywood is an industry that seeks profits and returns on investments. While Hollywood relies on the talents of a diverse group of artists to produce product for an even more diverse consumer base, the Hollywood industry is nevertheless driven by a need to produce art that is ultimately a commercial product. Despite the relative box office failures of film musicals produced in the late twentieth-century, audiences, artists, and industry returned repeatedly to the genre as source of revenue, artistic exploration, and representation of contemporary culture. While the film industry sought to adapt to changing audience expectations for their products, the emergence of industry business practice kept audiences, marketers, industry executives, and artists in a constant state of exploration. In the face of these changing dynamics, the late twentieth-century film musical sometimes connected to audiences but never achieved the broad genre appeal of Hollywood studio era musicals. Yet, this study has endeavored to show that the development of the film musical genre as both a product and an ideological framework offers insight into contemporary American society.

Throughout this project, I have sought to fulfill two broad goals. First, this study reveals that despite major changes in the genre, Hollywood continued to produce film musicals. While the overall number film musicals produced dramatically decreased during the last thirty years of the twentieth-century, the same can be said for the overall number of films being produced. Second, this study has sought to establish a methodological framework that can address the interdisciplinary nature of the film musical and the ideologies created in the production and
reception of film musicals. It examines recent trends in scholarship and how ideas contained in the works of Rick Altman, Thomas Schatz, Richard Dyer, Jane M. Gaines, and Douglas Gomery have laid a framework for looking at film musicals as products of capitalism and as purveyors of utopic feelings. Recognizing that stage musicals evoke similar audience expectations, the study frames film musicals as an interdisciplinary genre that can be studied using both film and theatrical aesthetic criticism. Yet, aesthetic criticism is not enough to explain how products of mass entertainment (onstage and screen) have specific consumptive ends. Given that film musicals are created by the entertainment industry for targeted audiences, the model requires that films be studied in their cultural context of creation. In other words, it is as important to note that a specific film is a product of a historical moment as it is to prove that the film has an ideological meaning, because that ideological meaning is influenced by the creation and the reception context. Given that films are constructed towards the ends of making profit for studios by offering pleasure to the audience, it is important to examine how the film musical enticed American audiences of the late twentieth-century to invest in a wide variety of Utopian visions. Given that film musicals have sought to affirm utopic ideals, it is even more important to look at how specific films either reaffirmed utopic views of society or produced dystopic visions of society. In the social instability of the late twentieth-century, it becomes apparent that the same cultural context is capable of producing film musicals that depict both Utopia and dystopia as a means of either reflecting social values or coping with them.

Throughout this study, I have illustrated a profound shift in the narrative construction of the film musical genre that sought to incorporate classical audience expectations of the film musical with emerging Hollywood business practices. Drawing on the high concept business model as defined by Justin Wyatt, I discussed how changes in American audience demographics
laid the foundation for the emergence of the model. Moreover, I showed how high concept business practices and aesthetics relies on a function of mass entertainment as an escapist Utopia. I discussed how film musicals such as *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* displayed early tendencies towards high concept filmmaking. While these films more clearly expressed the anxieties of the Vietnam era, they did lay the groundwork for the quintessential high concept film musical, *Grease*. The ensuing high concept musicals (*Xanadu, Popeye, The Pirate Movie, Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, and A Chorus Line*) offered audiences competing visions of Utopia that were the result of a mix of cultural context, dominant conservative ideals, and high concept business practices. High concept filmmaking afforded audiences a share of Utopia through their product tie-ins (such as soundtrack, food products, and the owning of the film on video) and intertextualities created by the film conveyed a world that was better than the present.

The development of high concept business practices led to a division of the genre between two basic subsets of films: those that incorporated high concept practices and those that did not. While high concept films appealed to mass audiences, the development of low concept films found another niche in the entertainment market. I examined the roles *Cabaret* and *All That Jazz* played in depicting post-Vietnam American society as a dystopia in which individuals do what they can to achieve pleasure more so through survival rather than in search of a larger social ideal. In these low concept film musicals, the experiences of the lead characters display the unattainable and oppressive nature of utopian ideals. The ensuing alienation that develops from this confrontation is a closer representation of the contemporary American culture than high concept films. The reminders of dystopia present in the cultural context made these films less worthy of box office investment and more worthy of critical praise.
In the 1990s, the continued use of the high concept business model by Hollywood gave way to a new vision of the film musical as a spectacular Utopia. Film musicals such as Beauty and the Beast and Evita obscured ideology behind the consumption of spectacle and the high concept practice permeated virtually every aspect of American culture. The study examines the self-perpetuating and proliferating aspects of the high concept business model to promote the consumption of Utopia in other aspects of cultural production. The proliferation of high concept films according to the ideals of Utopia promoted as products rather than works of art changed not only the products for consumption but also the very spaces in which these products were consumed. While theatre scholars decry the incorporation of these business principles into the contemporary construction of stage musicals, the high concept practice ensures a virtually endless supply of similar product that in turn must be differentiated from its competitors in order to survive in the contemporary mediated marketplace.

Finally, the study examined the seemingly disparate branches of the film musical genre as they found a synthesized form in both Moulin Rouge! and Chicago. While both film musicals incorporated aspects of high concept business practices (such as casting, product tie-ins, and the appearance of Utopia), the result was a depiction of Utopia accessible only through the memory and imagination of the individual. The accessing of Utopia in the imagination serves to fuel the real world hopes of succeeding in a capitalistic society. By completely integrating songs into the film’s diegesis and the imaginations of the lead characters, these films act as devices to help audiences cope with their dystopic world. They depict contemporary American society as a dystopia to be escaped from by accessing imagination. Without imagination, there is little hope for living in a dystopic American society. By giving birth to a new type of integrated film
musical narrative, audiences can consume the product tie-ins and preserve their own personal hopes to Utopia.

With the fluid boundaries between theatre and film, it becomes increasingly important to talk across disciplines. As more artists continue to move between the two mediums, it is increasingly difficult to locate hard and fast boundaries between the two. By seeing the film musical as a bridge, we can understand how business practices come to bear on the creation of artistic works in both fields. While both mediums might argue that the other steals ideas for their own gain, there are interdisciplinary ways of charting how and why productions are created and consumed within the same cultural context.

While some scholars believe the genre all but disappeared after the studio era, film musicals adapted to the growing demands of business, art, and commerce. As represented by Grease, the rise of the Hollywood blockbuster changed the way large-scale musicals were produced. While Grease appears to fit the definition of existing film musical scholarship, the film musical genre actually went beyond the notion that the film musical as simply a capitalistic courtship ritual representative of Utopia. While scholars like Richard Dyer and Rick Altman suggest that their theories apply to all musicals, film musicals like Cabaret and All That Jazz contradict and confound the narrative boundaries they describe. The narrative changes in Fosse’s two film musicals show individuals making tough choices just to survive, much less strive for commercially utopic possibilities. As some film musicals moved towards a more individualized focus in dystopic musicals, musicals like Evita continued to perpetuate Utopia in the narrative. These spectacular film musicals were constructed to overwhelm the audience with the spectacle of technology, design, and star power. The resulting combinations of spectacle and entertainment seem to compound, confuse, and diffuse the embedded politics of the narrative.
Just when the evidence of musical spectacles seems to draw exclusively from business practice rather than artistic inspiration, *Chicago* and *Moulin Rouge!* provided proof that is possible to combine artistic vision with business practice to innovate form and compete in the marketplace.

This study opens up many future areas of exploration. Having looked at the films and industry practices that shaped the development of the film musical in the late twentieth-century, it is clear that future work needs to explore the contributions of individual directors, producers, designers, and actors on the film musical and how the actions of those individuals forwarded the ideologies present in the films. Work needs to examine how films can become treatises on Utopia or dystopia. Given the interdisciplinary nature of theatre and film, studies could look at the cultural and societal trends and events that have influenced both industries, considering, for example the politics and economics behind the incorporation of specific music styles and artists’ into a film or theatrical product. New studies could examine the implications and expectations of audiences for films that feature specific types or styles of music. Other studies could explore how Hollywood business practices help to build expectation in both the film and music industry. Given the current trends in theatre and film towards musical development, it would be useful to continue to look at how the musical continues to make sense of the world. Given the current box office failures of film musicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera, Rent,* and *The Producers,* what has changed in Americans’ recent expectations of the film musical, are these musicals still attempting to ride the popularity of *Chicago* without taking up the foremost premise of high concept, product differentiation, or are they, like *A Chorus Line,* unable to adapt low concept themes with studio production practices?

When I began this project, I had hoped to find a way of connecting to disparate past professional careers. The more I move between film and theatre, the more I am reminded of
their similarities. Despite the seemingly disparate artistic forms, both have strong ties to culture and history, draw on audience expectations, and are sometimes at the whim of American corporate objectives. The musical continuously attempts to blur the line between the two. The more film and theatre attempt to differentiate themselves, the more they tend to look the same. The more similarities they hold the less they ask of their audiences. Theatre scholars have complained that theatre audiences have lost their ability to engage in an ideological dialogue with theatrical works. Film scholars note the changes in film production have led to an increasingly homogenized body of film works that evoke the same viewing practices. As artisans (actors, directors, and designers) begin to move between mediums the more the ideals of film and theatre begin to interpenetrate and change the way each not only produces works but also creates a reception context for those works. While I had hoped to find a way to patch my fractured existence in these two mediums of film in the musical, I have learned that the mediums of film and theatre, no matter how different, continue to help me and audiences in general make meaning of the world. The way we make meaning is as much dependent on business practice as it is on artistic expression. As my experience in the entertainment industry has taught me, the bottom line can often mean more to the industry than the product itself. This is especially true of film musicals from 1970-2002.
Rick Altman disagrees with the use of the term “integrated” because he believes that the term implies a realistic styling to the musical (Film Musical 15). Altman does not believe that realism is the goal of the musical and fails to acknowledge the whimsical nature of the musical. Such a view fails to take into account the purpose of the integrated number in stage musicals. Such theatrical productions often do not seek to transport the audience out of their social situation but to “suspend” the disbelief – because theatre in the twentieth-century moved beyond the issue of transport and towards an emphasis on artistic creation.

See also Stephen Greenblatt’s “Towards a Poetics of Culture” and Shakespearean Negotiations. New Historicism has been criticized because the scholar is creating links between texts that are not explicit, and therefore subject to debate. However, the intertextuality revealed through New Historicism has helped scholars understand larger cultural and societal contexts for a set of given texts. Even though New Historicism relies on literary traditions, scholars like Greenblatt have utilized New Historicism to illuminate the theatrical traditions of Elizabethan England. Theatre scholars have applied the tenets of New Historicism to dramatic literature in performance on the page and the stage. We can extrapolate the theories of the movement further to allow musicals, as both literary and performance texts, to be read across the mediums of film and theatre. Likewise, one can look at other cultural artifacts such as books, films, music, and television to understand, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, the “social energy” at work in several different texts simultaneously (Greenblatt Shakespearean 6). The social energy discovered from this type of research helps to define what Greenblatt calls “poetics” of a given culture.
Notes for Chapter I

1 The idea that communal performance can lead to expressions of Utopia has begun to surface in recent theater and performance studies scholarship. See Jill Dolan’s “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative.’” I will discuss this idea in more detail in chapter III.

2 Utopia is found throughout this study as capitalized when it refers to the capitalistic vision of Utopia as defined by Richard Dyer. Utopia is a vision of capitalistic excess where money and spectacle trump and manage all conflicts. Capitalism can buy happiness in Dyer’s understanding of the Utopia of the film musical. Dyer relies heavily on classical definitions of Utopia. Utopia, as originally defined by Thomas More” is essentially “nowhere.” Since the musical is a form that by its nature can be entertainment about a world where it is realistic for characters to burst into song, the musical unfolds in “nowhere,” a completely contrived, yet according to Dyer, a utopic performance space with its own rules and expectations. Whenever, the term utopia appears, it is being used as a broadly defined societal concept, as originally conceive by More, and not the musical place of capitalistic excess. In contrast, the term dystopia, as it relates to film musicals, refers to work that presents visions other than communal, capitalistic happiness. For argument’s sake, utopic film musicals represent idealistic “no wheres” while dystopic film musicals represent realistic “somewheres.”

3 In “Hollywood as Industry,” Gomery challenges and contextualizes the development of industry studies within the film industry. Gomery’s conclusion is that finance and issues of capitalism do not control the industry explicitly. Instead, Gomery shows that the film industry is a complex group of business and cultural enterprises (“Hollywood” 253).

4 Jones’s work symbolizes a recent explosion in musical theatre scholarship. See bibliography.
See also Wickstrom who charts the effects of Disney’s purchase and renovation of the New Amsterdam Theatre, specifically, how Disney has turned the theatrical performance into a commercial space complete with souvenirs of the transitory nature of performance. The implications of this on the film musical will be discussed at length in chapter IX.

Each of these musicals was nominated for multiple Tony awards including Best Musical. *The Producers* and *Spamalot* received fifteen and fourteen nominations respectfully.

Notes for Chapter II

1. For a more complete list of box office grosses for film musicals from 1970-2002, see Appendix A.

2. John Sedgwick’s economic analysis of films released by studios from 1950-1965 charts the film musicals power as a genre to draw top-dollar. By 1965, Sedgwick notes that the musical genre was drawing in revenue at an average ratio of 15:4, or roughly 4:1. For every one dollar earned by the action adventure genre, the musical earned four dollars (698).

3. For a materialist view of historical events, see William Chafe’s *The Unfinished Journey* *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. Chafe devotes an entire chapter of his book to 1968. He posits the year as worthy of reviewed in this light of the inability of most students of history to recall the names, faces, and events of the late 1960’s as readily as they might recall events from the Revolutionary War. For a longer account of the changes in the Hollywood Production Code see Ernest Giglio’s *Here’s Looking at You: Hollywood, Film, and Politics*.

4. See also Levy Emmanuel’s two seminal industry studies of the Academy in *And the Winner Is...: The History and Politics of the Oscar Awards* and *Oscar Fever: The History and Politics of the Academy Awards*. Even more prominent note, in 2005 the Academy “outlawed”
the practice of campaigning for nominees. According to the Academy, the practice produced an uneven playing field for all performers, especially those acting in independent films. However, the move to stop campaigning produces the opposite effect, because independent features do not benefit from the wide release of major studio films. Until the rise of home video and DVD technologies, independent films used to have less opportunity of being seen by voters. Until the early 1990s, the Academy system held an institutional privilege for large studio releases. A revealing *New York Times* article by Vincent Canby profiles some of the unpredictability in the Academy nomination and awards voting process. Canby notes the relative unfamiliarity of some voters with the nominations and award winners. Canby argues that a large part of the unpredictability lies with a portion of members, such as Mary Livingstone (also know as Mrs. Jack Benny), whose relative inexperience, or lack of care for the industry as an artistic endeavor, makes them more likely to vote *Fiddler on the Roof* for Best Sound over an effects-driven spectacle like *The French Connection* ("Oscars” 1). Canby’s candor proves that, historically, voting in the Academy is as much personal taste as it is industry standards or “deserved” recognition. It is a standard that would change to some degree during the 1990s as independent films began to market themselves directly to Academy voters. The Academy further “discouraged,” through the threat of disqualification, the direct marketing of films to voters, thus attempting to end independent lobbying process and again privilege the major studios’ widely released features.

5 For in-depth analysis of the rise of new Hollywood business practices see Thomas Schatz’s *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art, and Industry*. For a more cursory look at the scholarly response to the rise of new Hollywood filmmaking, see Peter Kramer’s “Post Classical Hollywood.” Kramer’s article expands upon David Bordwell’s model of historical
poetics to call for larger bodies of analysis that move beyond the concerted analysis of singular films. As an introductory look and somewhat more accessible version of new Hollywood business practices can be found in Geoff King’s *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. King’s work is admittedly an introduction so it lacks some of the explication and industry analysis of Schatz. King’s work does take into account the work of both Schatz and Wyatt and summarizes both effectively.

6 As a film industry professional, I witnessed first-hand how specialized the demographic brackets were. Often times the brackets were broken down into as small as three-four year increments. While most will argue that there is a big difference between age sixteen and age twenty, others will argue that there may not be as much difference in the marketing of a “G” rated film to children two to five and five to nine as to warrant the division of a campaign into two brackets. However, just as the film may be marketed to two different children’s brackets, the marketers might also consider trying to tie the campaign spots to target the mothers (not both parents, but specifically the mothers) of these two separate groups.

7 Bordwell notes that there are four distinct influences on the “Intensified Continuity” style of contemporary films. Editing, Bordwell notes, was one of the major innovations of 1960s and 1970s. The other facets of the style include the mixing of extremes in lens length, closer dialogue framing, and the free-ranging camera within the same shot or sequence. While some of these techniques found use in the 1970s, the techniques themselves became more common, almost essential, to filmmaking in the late 1980s and 1990s. As such, the four techniques continue to crystallize and form contemporary audience expectations and reading patterns. These techniques and the implications on the narrative construction of film musicals will be discussed further in chapters VIII and IX.
See David Cook’s explanation of *Star Wars* and *Grease* as two of the first movies to utilize Dolby Optical Sound. Cook postulates that the use of high quality sound was one of the reasons for *Star Wars’* success ([Lost Allusions](#) 217).

It is important to note that some scholars use the term “high concept” and “blockbuster” interchangeably to describe films that were popular at the box office. Wyatt points out that the term “high concept” refers to the industry practice of producing and marketing films. “Blockbuster” is a term that describes the anticipated or actual performance of a film at the box office. While most anticipated blockbusters have large budgets, they are made in hopes of achieving the fiscal return of the front-end investment at the box office. On the other hand, a film can be blockbuster by actual performance rather than their anticipated production style. For example, *Waterworld* (1995) was an anticipated blockbuster based on its star, Kevin Costner, and its $100 million dollar budget. Yet the film was a box office failure. We can contrast the performance of *Waterworld* with the 1999 sleeper hit *The Blair Witch Project* that was made for $35,000 and raked in more than $140 million at the box office. For the purposes of this work, when I refer to a film being high concept, I am using Wyatt’s model for the film as produced and marketed film under a specific business and aesthetic model. If I refer to film being a blockbuster, I am referring to its actual performance at the box office rather than its anticipated status. Oftentimes, the anticipated blockbuster film is tied directly to high concept narratives and marketing, such as *Jaws* (1975) or *Star Wars* (1977).

The concept of product placement can be seen in the use of Reese’s pieces in *E.T.* or the continued fight between Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Seagram’s and Budweiser to insure their products get attached to large film projects. Product placement is rarely free, and no matter the cost, the use of a product in a film is always considered a marketing expense.
A good example of measuring success of a blockbuster by its tie-ins is *Godzilla* (1998). The film began as a film about effects and selling toys. The film received sharp criticism for being more about toys than filmmaking. Ironically, *Godzilla* was one of the top-ten grossing films for the year, but its line of toys failed to connect with consumers. While the U.S. domestic gross was barely more than its $130 million dollar budget, the film achieved its blockbuster status by including its global box office revenue. The toys marketed with the *Godzilla*’s May release in the summer were still on shelves (and in bargain bins) in December. Look at the *Star Wars* films by comparison which continued to sell toys and product lines throughout the development of the saga. The toy line became a point of brand identification for the films, and led to increased audience anticipation for the upcoming film prequels.

The outside influence of social events has a direct effect on marketing. As a commercial producer in Los Angeles, I personally was called to fix commercials after 9/11. This included removing or editing sequences from advertisements and promotions that contained the World Trade Center towers or airline disasters/problems/issues. The marketing lines at the time were meant to neutralize the political implications of this imagery in favor of providing escapist entertainment.

Notes for Chapter III

Scholars note that the idea of Utopia is contextual to the context of its inception. For example, More’s island of Utopia serves to comment on the hypocrisy and non-Christian-like behavior of Puritanism and the Church of England. H.W. Donner notes that for More, the island of Utopia, as a uniquely Christian ideal, where man can live in harmony with each other and God (Donner 39). Still other scholars, like Russell Ames, note that although *Utopia* served as an ideal for Christian living, it was still a product of More’s upbringing and context. Ames argues that
the work is so much a product of context that *Utopia* is “republican, bourgeois, and democratic – the result of More’s experience as a man of business, as a politician, and as an Erasmian reformer” (Ames 53).

2 See Douglas Gomery’s “Motion Picture Exhibition in 1970s America.” In this article, Gomery contends that the largest possible audience during the 1970s was the maturing baby boomers who were raised in a culture of movie exhibition and returned to the cinema to seek out their favorite leisurely past time (“Exhibition” 398).

Notes for Chapter IV

1 See part II of Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud’s anthology *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. The authors in this section mark a definite change in film production during the 1980s that attempted to revision recent American history in regards to Vietnam. While there were films, such as *Platoon*, that were critical of the America’s role in the war, the authors show that mainstream Hollywood blockbusters helped to reinforce conservative politics and gave contemporary audiences hope that despite the loss in Vietnam, we could still win the Cold War.

2 Twenty years after film’s release, the new *The Twentieth Anniversary Recording of Jesus Christ Superstar* went platinum in 1995 (RIAA). The success of the musical soundtrack continued long after the original premieres of the film and stage musicals.

3 Interestingly, this final moment of the stage musical was changed for the twentieth anniversary tour to include a resurrection sequence that ultimately attempts to appeal to the Christians instead of the hippies. The twentieth-anniversary tour, which toured for a better part of the 1990s, changed and updated the style of the production. In this touring production, the story takes place not in Biblical times but in a post-apocalyptic nowhere. The post-apocalyptic
setting was far more metaphoric and less didactic than the original Broadway production. Throughout the production, Judas is hounded by “demon dancers” that tempt him to serve the guises of evil versus the innate good of Christ. Following Judas death, Judas ascends from the mouth of Hell rather than descending from Heaven to sing “Superstar.” What was once a liberal-humanist interpretation of messianic myth making is turned into a moralistic tale more palatable to Christian audiences. The ending of the show was changed as well to include a resurrection sequence. Following Jesus’ crucifixion, the score reverberates and there is a growling bass sound as Christ ascends from the cross to heaven. The ascension leaves behind a glowing white cross. Obviously, the production was changed to assuage criticism of both Jewish and Christian organizations.

According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), The Who have generated twenty-two gold, twelve platinum, and five multi-platinum recordings. Two of the multi-platinum recordings are credited to Tommy and The Who’s other rock opera Quadrophenia. (RIAA)

The use of mirrors to reflect audiences was also used in Bob Fosse’s Oscar winning film, Cabaret. See chapter VII. Fosse employed the use of a mirror on the stage of the cabaret to reflect the intrusive presence of Nazis in the cabaret audience. In fact, the shot is the last shot of the film. In Cabaret, the mirror is not used as a metaphor for the sleek style of modern living. Instead, the mirror is a device for critiquing the audience.

Notes for Chapter V

As of June 2006, the League of American Theatres and Producers listed Grease in ninth place on the top ten list of longest running Broadway shows. Grease is listed behind musicals such as Phantom of the Opera, Cats, Les Miserable, and A Chorus Line
(LiveBroadway.com). The League’s official website is a wealth of information, including reports on touring shows and economic studies on the impact of Broadway and Touring productions on local economies.

2 Tony awards for 1972 saw six musicals nominated for Tony awards. The nominees included *Grease*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Follies*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Two Gentleman of Verona*, and *Innercity*. While *Grease* nominated for awards in every category, it was effectively shut out by two Stephen Sondheim musicals, *A Funny Thing Happened...* and *Follies*, and a musical based on Shakespeare, *Two Gentleman of Verona*.

3 It becomes increasingly interesting that those scholars who are increasingly interested in larger theoretical issues that formulate genre analysis (Altman, Schatz, Wyatt, and Jones) in film and theatre spend a good deal of time discussing the implications of *Grease* on the genre, especially as a vehicle for popular culture, historical memory, and nostalgia. Those scholars interested in chronicling industry artistic practices and culture influences (such as Flinn and Muir) spend very little time discussing *Grease*. While neither camp makes an inference as to why this is the case, I would conjecture that it is *Grease*’s blockbuster status and reproduction of cultural kitsch (often seen as an example of unoriginal artistic development) makes chroniclers uneasy to lend credence of the musicals relative ease to produce in Fredric Jameson’s words “pastiche.”

4 The idea of nostalgia was not lost on the editors of the Hollywood reporter reprinted Arthur Knight’s 1978 review of the film musical *Grease* as part of a “Deja Review Series” in the trade publication.

5 While the casting of Travolta and Olivia Newton-John sought to attract teens, the film musical also included the television and film talents of more “adult” oriented stars, such as Eve
Arden, Sid Caesar, and Mr. Beach Blanket Bingo himself, Frankie Avalon. The inclusion of these stars enacts the high concept model’s attempt to appeal to large and broadly defined audience demographics.

6 While high concept films would use illusion as a crutch, low-concept films would smash the illusion in favor of strong cultural critique and genre deconstruction. This is an idea that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter VII.

7 The revival of *Grease* originally starred film and stand-up comedienne Rosie O’Donnell. However, as the show continued to run, the producers brought in a long list of celebrities to fill various roles in an effort to extend the show’s run. The stars brought into the cast included: Brooke Shields, Joe Piscopo, Linda Blair, Debby Boone, Mickey Dolenz, Domonique Dawes, Deborah Gibson, Al Jarreau, Lucy Lawless, and Adrian Zmed (star of the film *Grease 2*).

Notes for Chapter VI

1 *Xanadu* is a cultural and film narrative link between the high concept film musical in *Grease* and the high concept film musical as it appears in the animated musicals of the 1990s. The focus of the film as art, or rather popular culture, is a fractured amalgamation of history, music, style, and spectacle. The mix of nostalgia and historical stylings coupled with the technology of animation and rock-n-roll spectacle provides a shift in the generic development of the film musical.

2 Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta would star opposite each other in the 1983 box office flop, *Twist of Fate*. The two stars portray a bank teller and an inventor who team up to convince God that the human race is worth saving.
3 Robert Altman’s snide send up to major Hollywood studio business filmmaking, *The Player* (1992) makes a pointed and artistic pummeling of the high concept business model. The director is especially critical of “the pitch” of a film that equates the boiling down of a film to its most marketable concept “the pitch statement.”

4 *A Chorus Line’s* record number of performances fell behind other mega-musical productions including *Cats* (7,485) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (7,700 performances and counting). It is highly ironic that as we look at the evolution of the musical on film, the musicals on stage seemed to promote similar aspects of bigger is better. Despite *Chorus Line’s* use of rock-n-roll style concert lighting and amplified performer voices, the stage show is about the body of the performer in the empty space of the theatre and the power of theatre to transform the individual into a communal. The big budget mega-musicals would eclipse the show that could be described as the theatrically self-reflexive stage musical.

5 The simple choice of marketers to promote the phrase “The Movie” over the title of the musical serves to show that the marketers did not understand or conceive of a way to promote the complicated nature of the musical. This is further complicated by Attenborough’s direction that fails to capture the true charm of the stage version, the individuality of the characters, and the universality of their personal experiences.

Notes for Chapter VII

1 For Lareau, “[the cabaret] was one big compromise, an attempted synthesis of high and low which did not add up. It wanted to break out without becoming an outsider, to revolt without paying the consequences” (490). Curiously, *Cabaret* can also produce a reading of not adding up, especially in the performances of Liza Minnelli in the cabaret. At times the mix of historical setting, Fosse’s non-period choreography, and seventies fashion influence on
Minnelli’s cabaret costumes, in numbers like “Maybe This Time” written for the film, seems more like a New York cabaret performance from the 1970s than Berlin in the 1930s.

2 See also Susan Manning’s “Ideology and Performance between Weimar and the Third Reich.” In this article, Manning looks at the dance and choreography of Mary Wigman. Manning argues that as an artistic figure Wigman was forced to change her choreography styles to fit in with the rise of the Third Reich culminating in Wigman’s staging of Totenmal. Manning shows how Weimar performance practices became starting points for Third Reich performance. Fosse is critical of this view that the transition from freedom to fascism was an easy one.

3 Randy Clark notes that the MoC’s presence is a mediator between three audiences “Broadway, diegetic, and film” (Clark 57). Clark implies that the audience is involved a three-tiered system of decoding the ideology of the film, the world of the film, and the MoC’s direct address to the audience. The approach asks a lot of an audience that supposedly could not to handle too many subplots, much less double and triple layers of narrative ideology.

4 Notably, Scheider was the second actor to accept the role of Joe Gideon. Originally, Fosse and 20th Century Fox the film’s distributor and source of finance tapped Richard Dreyfuss for the lead. Dreyfuss quit the film a week into production. It was not until Scheider shared his extensive amateur stage background with Fosse that the director was willing to consider Scheider for the role (Scheider).

5 What is especially interesting about Scheider’s casting is that despite his picture personality, it was Scheider’s stage background that got him an initial meeting with Fosse. His subsequent devotion to working one-on-one with Fosse secured the part (Scheider).

6 Darren Aronofsky’s independent film Requiem for a Dream (2002) depicts the use of drugs as ritualized behavior that then begins to pervade and distort the user’s view of reality. It
pays homage to *All That Jazz* in the repetition of drug use sequence including the drug usage and an extreme closeup on the eye as the drugs hit the system. In each film, the sequences are meant to alienate the audience by encapsulating and fragmenting the ritualization of addiction into a repeated system of images and action. The real difference between the two is in the final shots of the drug use sequences. While *Requiem for a Dream* ends with the warping of the users reality (there are three primary users in the film), *All That Jazz* returns to a shot of Gideon saying, “It’s showtime!” in the mirror. After each sequence, we see Gideon’s physical degradation. In each successive sequence, Gideon’s eyes get hollower, his skin is more pallid and lifeless, and his cigarette droops more and more until the Gideon is virtually a shell emptied of everything except the addictions and the drive to perform. In watching himself in the mirror as part of the ritual, Gideon is able to see decline of health from perpetual forms of chemical and psychological addictions.

7 Steven Spielberg told both Scheider and Fosse that a film could never end with the protagonist “dying.” Spielberg told Scheider, “The audience will hate it” (Scheider).

8 Ironically, this footnote itself serves to discuss the perpetuation of Fosse’s legacy through two Broadway productions. Both *Chicago* (1996) and *Fosse* (1999) were choreographed “in the style of Bob Fosse” by Fosse’s own former dancer and lover, Ann Reinking. Inevitably, Reinking plays a depiction of “herself” in *All That Jazz*. Fosse’s legacy is still apparent today. As of July 4, 2006, *Chicago* is still playing on Broadway.

Notes for Chapter VIII

1 In his work on the psychology of celebrity consumption, David Giles calls the one-sided relationship between the artist and audience in the process of mediated communication a para-social relationship. It is parasocial because it extends beyond the normative social
interactions between two individuals in a society. According the Giles, parasocial relationships require three things: a certain predictability based on the amount of information the audience receives about the artists; reading formations unique to each individual in a given social circumstance; and a perceived similarity between the exchange of the artists’ work and a normal social relationship (63). The power lies in the audience’s consumption of the relationship. The audience invests in the relationship as they would any normal relationship, despite not being recognized personally by the star. This becomes dangerous when the individual begins to treat or perceive the parasocial relationship as a “normal” social relationship. It becomes equally dangerous for stars who attempt to redefine themselves because they are seen as betraying the perceived predictability in the relationship with the audience. However, stars or artists can use the shift in predictability to their advantage by portraying it as a form of product differentiation (for example, the country crossover artist Shania Twain).

2 Disney’s success in the marketplace allowed for the entrance of many competitors. All the while Disney was incorporating computer animation into a relatively two-dimensional environment; Disney was working with the, then independent, Pixar studio to develop full rendered three-dimensional animated worlds in the forthcoming film Toy Story (1995). There is a distinct difference between Disney and Pixar’s films, especially during the late 1990s. The main difference being that Disney still utilized two-dimensional animation techniques placed within three-dimensional environments (example – the ballroom sequence in Beauty and the Beast) while Pixar worked to create three-dimensional characters in three-dimensional environments.

3 Beauty and the Beast was preceded by another Disney animated feature The Little Mermaid. While that film also featured an award winning hit song from a largely integrated
musical soundtrack, *The Little Mermaid* lacked the technological achievements of *Beauty and the Beast*. *The Little Mermaid*’s score featured a hit song (“Under the Sea”), but *Beauty and the Beast* plays much more like a classic film musical than *Mermaid*. *Beauty and the Beast* drew in a far larger cross-section of audiences and earned $350 million dollars, almost three times the box office revenue of *The Little Mermaid*.

Notes for Chapter IX

1 Jonathan Pryce was far from an A-List film star. However, Pryce earned many critical and industry awards for his stage work, including originating the role of the Engineer in *Miss Saigon*. While Pryce was lauded for his performance as the Vietnamese pimp in *Saigon*, Asian-American groups criticized Pryce for playing someone outside of his own race. Subsequently, performers of Asian descent have portrayed the role of the engineer. It is interesting to note that in *Evita* Pryce again plays someone of a different ethnicity in the Argentine President, Juan Perón. Banderas’ casting was slightly controversial because of his relative unknown vocal talents. Banderas’ performance as Ché wowed critics. Banderas also went onto star in the Broadway revival of *Nine* (2003).

2 The classical Hollywood studio system sought to control every aspect of a star’s public image. Often the studio constructed the public display of the private life to reflect the image of the star onscreen. In other words, “The real hero behaves just like the reel hero” (DeCordova 27). It is important for me to note that DeCordova’s analysis focuses on the classical Hollywood studio system of manipulating the public lives of the stars under contract. This constructed image was an often highly conflicted one. While the studios attempted to publicly portray their stars as “reel” heroes, the stars themselves suffered great personal turmoil over their lack of control. This is especially true in the areas of love and marriage. As stars sought freedom from
their onscreen personas, the studios worked even harder to maintain control. This is evident in
the sham marriages/relationships of the 1950’s & 60’s. Rock Hudson is a great example of a
studio constructed public persona. In public, Hudson was the “reel” hero, but Hudson’s private
homosexual relations would have doomed his celebrity status with the public. In order to sell the
“reel” hero at the box office, the studios constantly promoted his artificial public heterosexual
relations to obscure Hudson’s private self.

3 See also Richard Zoglin’s pre-release article. Zoglin outlines the film as the
embodiment of marketing and celebrity critique.

4 Jean Graham-Jones’ work outlines the pitfalls and potential sites for analyzing the
portrayal of Eva Perón as historical figure and site of cultural mythology.

5 There are many scholarly accounts that chart the differences and ideological
representations between the various public constructions of Eva Perón. The foremost of these
includes Victoria Allison’s analysis of the Perón’s legacy in light of the Peron’s ties to Nazi
leaders who found refuge in Argentina following their defeat in WWII. Allison poses the
question as to whether or not anyone might be tempted to refashion Evita’s image to reflect this
negative aspect.

6 It could be argues that the perceived legitimacy of conquering two mediums can have a
lasting effect on the celebrity image. Billboard magazine noted that the film training
permanently changed the signing and artistic merit of Madonna’s image. The magazine’s review
of Madonna’s “Beautiful Stranger” described the quality of the song in terms of the film; “think
her Evita voice-complete with a chorus that will pop into your head and dance around there until
you feel madness setting in” (“Madonna”). Celebrities have the potential to be defined by their
ability to maintain, contain, and reconstruct their image in light of new artistic endeavors.
Enrique Krauze, Argentine scholar and artist muses that Ché’s lyrics illuminated the public and private perception of Eva. Krauze writes, “Eva Peron would certainly be pleased by the spirit of deification in *Evita*, by the derangingly sumptuous production values, the crude lyrics of Tim Rice and the charine music of Andrew Lloyd Webber, by the demagogy and the high-budget populism of the screenplay co-authored by Oliver Stone, even by the performance of Madonna, vigorous but never charismatic” (33-4).

New York’s transformation of Times Square not only pushed the adult entertainment venues of the square to the east side but also sought to remove the homeless to areas elsewhere. New York city officials were accused of promoting the mass bussing of the homeless off the island of Manhattan. In managing the problems of homelessness, poverty, and exploitation by pushing outside of the newly zoned Times Square area, NYC officials created an uneasy tension between the newly cleansed space and the other areas beyond attention.

Notes for Chapter X

1 Luhrmann’s parents were competitive ballroom dancers. While the film is a story of love through dance, the film can also be read as a biographical send up to his parents.

2 *Strictly Ballroom* virtually swept the AFI (Australian Film Institute) awards. The film was popular at many film festivals, including the Cannes Film Festival. While it was originally produced for $3 million dollars, it grossed over $11 million in the US, let alone what it made domestically in Australia and around the world.

3 Historically speaking, Fred Astaire was not a “singer. Instead, the actor/dancer chose to “sing speak” his lines. Robert Preston could neither sing nor dance prior to his performance in *The Music Man*. Yet, Preston received rave reviews for his performance. Likewise, MTV, music videos, and contemporary concert performance have brought on new questions of
“authenticity.” A music video is a performance in which performers lip-sync to their own-recorded voice. Therefore, the pervading notion of “authenticity” in performance is called into question by contemporary reading practices. While some theatre purists would have us believe that theatrical performance is more “authentic” than other performance types, they fail to note the pervasive use of synthesized soundtracks in some Broadway musicals. For more on authenticity in mediated live performances see Phillip Auslander’s *Liveness*.

4 See also Cynthia Baron’s “*The Player’s* Parody of Hollywood.” Baron notes that the seemingly endless use of star cameos “disrupts the classical-realist conventions that mask the performative work of actors” (35). In other words, audiences see the stars for their role in society as stars rather than any meaning they have in forwarding the action of the film. Baron writes: “[*The Player’s*] excessive intertextuality, more intriguing than the narrative itself, becomes a game that rewards insider knowledge and multiple viewing” (25-6). The same can be said for *Moulin Rouge!* in that audiences can view the film as a game wondering what references will be made or the ability for the screenwriter to invoke seemingly innocuous connections between the referent and the world of the film.

5 While Rojek is writing specifically of independent film production made popular by studios like Miramax and others, his comment articulates an industry return to acceptance of smaller production that did not always fulfill the ideals of high concept industry practice. In fact, without films studios such as Miramax, Lions Gate, and Touchstone, there may not have been a hope for *Moulin Rouge!* The independent studios and independent films help to find niche markets and open up new techniques of filmmaking. Without the promotion of foreign made films by independent studios, like Miramax, Luhrmann’s *Strictly Ballroom* may never have made
it to distribution in the US. Without the popularity of his past films, there would never have been enough industry interest to produce *Moulin Rouge!*

6 Special thanks to Dr. Michael Ellison for his contribution to my analysis of *Chicago.* Some of this chapter’s exploration of the film musical is the result of work co-authored and presented at two different conferences. While our original papers explored the relationship between historical productions of *Chicago* and the consumption of celebrity culture, our conversations in regards to the film extended beyond celebrity culture to the construction of narrative and ideological readings present in those constructions.

7 The revival of *Chicago* premiered on Nov. 14, 1996. As of Sept. 18, 2006, the stage musical revival of *Chicago* had run for more than 4,100 performances.

8 See Chris Gardner’s “Mya Locked up For *Chicago.*” The casting of the hip-hop star was a deliberate attempt to appeal to a broader teen demographic. Mya performed the song “Lady Marmalade” with Pink, Missy E., Christina Aguilera, and Lil’ Kim. While *Chicago* producers cast Mya and Lucy Liu for teen appeal, they also cast Queen Latifah for an older hip-hop/UPN demographic. Ultimately, the entire casting of the film is designed to have high concept appeal. Very few cast members displayed outright musical or dancing talents. This is most notable in the casting of Zellweger and Gere. Neither of the stars really danced (Gere was in a touring production of *Grease*), but Marshall’s choreography and Martin Walsh’s MTV style, quick-cut editing give the appearance of the actors being nearly on step and in-sync at all times. Such is the beauty of quick-cut editing. The camera never lingers too long on any particular shot. Given that the cuts then occur in time with the beats of the music, the act of movement seems to accentuate the time of the music. In this style rarely does the audience actually see a full combination. Instead, the editing crosscuts between shots and employs jump cuts to insure
that the performer hits the step in time with the music. Contrast this with the extended shots of virtually any classical Hollywood musical, especially Busby Berkley’s work or even as recent as *Cabaret* or *A Chorus Line*. While *Chicago*’s editing style is reliant on MTV aesthetics and reading practices, it also parodies contemporary reading practices created through home computer editing, where virtually anyone can dance to music and appear to be in time with the music.
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- FILMOGRAPHY -
Case Study Films


Representative Films and Film Musicals


## - APPENDIX A -

### BOX OFFICE REVENUES FOR FILMS REFERENCED IN THE TEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>FILM MUSICAL</th>
<th>U.S. Domestic Gross(^1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td><em>Woodstock</em></td>
<td>$32,825,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>On a Clear Day You Can See Forever</em></td>
<td>$14,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td><em>Fiddler on the Roof</em> (^\dagger)</td>
<td>$38,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td><em>Cabaret</em></td>
<td>$20,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td><em>Jesus Christ Superstar</em></td>
<td>$13,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td><em>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</em>(^2)</td>
<td>$35,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Tommy</em></td>
<td>$18,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Nashville</em></td>
<td>$9,984,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td><em>A Star is Born</em></td>
<td>$37,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td><em>Grease</em> (^\dagger)</td>
<td>$96,300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td><em>The Muppet Movie</em></td>
<td>$65,300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>All that Jazz</em></td>
<td>$20,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Hair</em></td>
<td>$15,284,643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>The Blues Brothers</em></td>
<td>$57,229,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Popeye</em></td>
<td>$49,823,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Xanadu</em></td>
<td>$22,762,571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Fame</em></td>
<td>$21,202,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td><em>Pennies from Heaven</em></td>
<td>$9,171,289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><em>The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas</em></td>
<td>$69,701,637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Annie</em></td>
<td>$57,059,003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Victor/Victoria</em></td>
<td>$28,215,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Grease 2</em></td>
<td>$15,171,476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Pirate Movie</em></td>
<td>$7,983,086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td><em>Flashdance</em></td>
<td>$92,921,203</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Yentl</em></td>
<td>$40,218,899</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Pirates of Penzance</em></td>
<td>$694,497</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>A Chorus Line</em></td>
<td>$14,202,899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Little Shop of Horrors</em></td>
<td>$38,748,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Labyrinth</em></td>
<td>$12,729,917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Oliver &amp; Company</em></td>
<td>$20,872,291</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>The Little Mermaid</em></td>
<td>$84,355,863</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>Beauty and the Beast</em></td>
<td>$145,863,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Aladdin</em> (^\dagger)</td>
<td>$217,075,178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Newsies</em></td>
<td>$2,751,298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>The Lion King</em> (^\dagger)</td>
<td>$312,855,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Pocahontas</em></td>
<td>$141,579,773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td><em>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</em></td>
<td>$100,138,851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Evita</em></td>
<td>$50,047,179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td><em>Tarzan</em></td>
<td>$171,091,819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>South Park: Bigger, Longer, Uncut</em></td>
<td>$52,037,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td><em>Moulin Rouge!</em></td>
<td>$57,386,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td><em>Chicago</em></td>
<td>$170,687,518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
† Denotes film musical that was also the top-grossing film of the year.

1 U.S. Domestic Gross figures reflect the amount of money earned by that film during the year. These figures do not account for inflation, increase in ticket prices, revenues made during re-releases, nor home video sales. After 1975, the figures are the official total of US Box office revenues. All figures are according to weekly box office receipts as reported by Nielson EDI and Variety.

2 The Rocky Horror Picture Show earned modest revenue during its initial release. However, in the three years that followed the film grossed over $100 million dollars.
### Appendix B: Case Study Films and Representations of Utopia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>U/D</th>
<th>Representations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Cabaret</td>
<td>Dystopia</td>
<td>Community represses the individual (Dystopia because it is from the perspective of the individual alienated by the rising Nazi Utopia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Jesus Christ Superstar</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Community prospers at the expense of the individual (Dark Utopia - because it is from the perspective of the community/Utopia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Individual can rise to lord over a dystopic world (Dark Utopia because the world is essentially a dystopia until ruled by a &quot;pure individual&quot; - Individual will always survive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Grease</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is High School Community (Classical Utopia - Dystopic Society pushed outside the walls of high school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>All That Jazz</td>
<td>Dystopia</td>
<td>Community destroys individual (Dystopia - because it is from the perspective of the individual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Popeye</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is an Island Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Xanadu</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is contemporary culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is enforced by the loudest voice (Dark utopic parody)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>The Pirate Movie</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia can be controlled by the wishes of the &quot;Good&quot; Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>A Chorus Line</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is performing (Dark Utopia because the individual consciously chooses to be a part of the faceless capitalist-serving chorus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Beauty and the Beast</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is the restoration of inherent good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Newsies</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>A workers Utopia through revolution (Never really realized because the commerciality of the project and its producers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>The Lion King</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is natural order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Evita</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia of stardom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Moulin Rouge!</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is imagination &amp; popular culture (Dark Utopia because community is created in the mind)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>Utopia is the mind, the ultimate performance space (Dark Utopia because community is created in the mind)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>