

(Beyond) The Pleasures of the Hollywood Musical Film: A Re-Viewing of Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York*

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The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none.¹

--Jean Baudrillard

Pastiche is . . . speech in a dead language.²

--Fredric Jameson

[Valéry] is not, he writes, overly fond of museums. . . . Dead visions are entombed there.³

--Theodor Adorno

I. On the Reviewing of *New York, New York*

In 1977, there were great expectations for Martin Scorsese's new film, *New York, New York*. It was, after all, Liza Minnelli's first musical role since her diamond hard performance in *Cabaret* (1972). Minnelli, taking on the mantle of both her father and mother, seemed destined to be the keeper of the flame of the classic Hollywood musical.⁴ Moreover, Scorsese, trading on the success of *Cabaret*, hired its composers, John Kander and Fred Ebb, to add new songs to a score of period classics. Adding to the prospects, Minnelli was

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paired with America's most electrifying new actor, Robert De Niro, fresh from his success in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). High expectations seemed justified. Using the finest of ingredients, Martin Scorsese, having revived the *film noir* in *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), seemed about to resurrect the classic American musical film. (For readers who are unfamiliar with *New York, New York*, a plot summary is provided in an Appendix to this article.)

In fact, *New York, New York* proved to be a major disappointment to critics and public, alike, as well as a costly failure for United Artists. If *New York, New York* was to have been an homage to the "golden age" of the Alfred Freed-Vincente Minnelli-Stanley Donen MGM musical, something seemed terribly wrong. Whereas MGM's Freed Unit films glittered on the screen, *The New Republic's* critic, Stanley Kauffman, complained that Laszlo Kovacs' cinematography for *New York, New York* had the "vicious, depthless quality of tin." Kauffman concluded: "N.Y., N.Y. is occasionally repellent but mostly tedious and trite."⁵ In the *Saturday Review*, Judith Crist accused the film of being "rift with factual and cinematic anachronisms."⁶ *The New Yorker's* Penelope Gilliatt declared the film to be "fatally unknowing about its second-hand mode."⁷ Andrew Sarris dubbed the film, "Meet Me on Mean Streets."⁸

If the classic American musical was emblematic of American vitality, *New York, New York* proved a pastiche drained of all energy--like a bottle of champagne left open overnight or like a musical note played off key--*New York, New York* seemed unbelievably flat. On the one hand, the critic's barbs were right on target; on the other hand. . . .

II. On Re-Viewing *New York, New York*

Over a decade has past since *New York, New York* opened to unsympathetic, indeed, to overwhelmingly negative responses from the popular, bourgeois press. Meanwhile, in academic circles, critical interest in the musical genre has advanced considerably with the work of Jane Feuer, Rick Altman, Gerald Mast and others. Still, as though confirming the initial critical hoots of bourgeois critics, on the whole, film theorists have continued to neglect the film. The most stimulating theoretical work on the musical, The British Film Institute's *Genre: The Musical* (1981)⁹ does not refer to the film. In Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical* (1982), *New York, New York* is given only slight attention. Feuer notes: "the plot of *New York, New York* reprises *A Star is Born*. . . . to perpetuate the aura of the MGM musical."¹⁰ Michael Bliss, in his 1985 study of the films of Martin Scorsese, refers to the film as "a well intended failure."¹¹ In the 1987 book, *Can't Stop Singing*, Gerald Mast relegates his only comment to a footnote. Mast writes: "*New York, New York* . . . [is] unsympathetic toward or ignorant about the power, meaning and value of musical performance. . . . Scorsese [is a] stranger to the particular power of musicals."¹² I find Bliss's and Mast's negative evaluations particularly

thought provoking. Buried within their comments are assumptions on which, with a turn of the screw, I would like to propose a very different reading of the film and in so doing, pose some questions that do not beg the question.

Bliss, clearly, uses the phrase "a well-intended failure" as a negative judgment against the film's aesthetic value. I assume Bliss means: Scorsese meant well, but failed in his intentions. But what if, instead, *New York, New York* creates itself as a failed musical and by doing so not only comments on but finally ruptures the genre, even as Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* (1966) ruptures the Western genre, opening up a rift between the Western as genre and American myth?

Could, after all, *New York, New York* be read as a successful "failure," an accomplished desecration, if you will, of the Hollywood musical genre? If this be the case, then, certainly, the film does not, as Jane Feuer suggests, set out to "perpetuate the *aura* [italics mine] of the MGM musical." Quite to the contrary, *New York, New York*, rather than being Scorsese's attempt to resurrect the classic American musical, is more like an autopsy he conducts upon the body of what had been the most magical of American movie genres. Indeed, it is the "aura" of the musical that *New York, New York* constantly denies.

The film is, to that point in Scorsese's career, his fullest departure from realism. Opening on V-J Day, the beginning of that now distant, forever lost, decade known as The American Celebration, the first sequence takes us to an elegant New York roof-top nightclub, The Moonlit Terrace. But the film's set is an obvious studio re-creation, a simulation complete with a highly stylized skyline of New York City. Playing on the nightclub's bandstand is a remarkable imitation of Tommy Dorsey and his Band. Standing within the unmistakably fake setting, the hyperreality of the Dorsey facsimile takes on an uncanny (*unheimlich*) wax museum quality. The camera moves up and up, higher and higher, to give a bird's eye view of the band and the room. The scene is viewed as by the eye of a distant observer. We seem, then, far removed from the film's time and place.

This Brechtian distanciation thus places us somewhere far outside the film's text. *New York, New York* may re-enact the past, but we are viewing it from some distant point. Scorsese's hyperrealism is not verisimilitude, but reproduction, facsimile, copy, a simulacrum. *New York, New York* is not, then, a reviving of the classic musical film, but rather, a film about the Hollywood musical--and our distance from its myths and dreams. The stylization and departure from realism thus opens us up to the film's reflexivity.

Indeed, by beginning on V-J Day, *New York, New York* begins with the extra-textual happy ending that might logically complete Stanley Donen's *On the Town* (1949). (The intertextual relationship of the two films can hardly be missed with both films revolving around songs titled "New York, New York.") Scorsese's film does, indeed, seem to begin at the end of *On the Town*, only to run in reverse. Scorsese's studio sets, likewise, seems an act of bad faith

toward the *mise en scène* of Donen's *On the Town*. For Donen, in fact, had bragged:

It was only in *On the Town* that we tried something entirely new in the musical film. Live people get off a real ship in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and sing and dance down New York City. We did a lot of quick cutting--we'd be on the top of Radio City and then on the bottom--we'd cut from Mulberry Street to Third Avenue. . . . This was one of the things that changed the history of the musical more than anything.¹³

Scorsese seems intent on turning Donen's leap toward verisimilitude back on itself. In Scorsese's *New York, New York*, MGM's lively postwar panegyric to the secular city (*On the Town*) and to technology (*Singing in the Rain*, 1952) are turned to stone. Reflecting Benjamin's view of "art in the age of mechanical reproduction," Scorsese's American musical facsimile is consciously absent not only the "aura" of art, but as well, in Feuer's sense of the word, the "aura," that is, the old Hollywood magic, of movie musical entertainment. *New York, New York* is, thus, like a museum of long lost artifacts left over from a hundred half-remembered, half-forgotten American musicals. A museum where, as Adorno quotes Valéry, "dead visions are entombed."¹⁴ Scorsese's film is not unlike, as Foucault notes, the works of Flaubert and Manet:

Flaubert is to the library what Manet is to the museum. They both produced works in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings or texts. . . . they erect their art within the archive. . . . to unearth an essential aspect of our culture. . . . all literary works are confined to the indefinite murmur of writing.¹⁵

In Scorsese's museum of dead visions, there is, likewise, the indefinite murmur of past musicals. Early in *New York, New York*, Jimmy (Robert De Niro) walks alone through the streets of Stanley Donen's "wonderful town." Jimmy, climbing the steps of an "El" platform, looks down upon the street. There he spots a dreamy sailor and his "girl" dancing in the street (like left over characters from *On the Town*). But no extra-diegetic music plays, the soundtrack of the film only records the rumble of a distant train running into the night. As Jimmy watches the couple pantomime their strange dance, they appear like a dim memory of some musical, lost. It seems the *uncanny* spectacle of a ghost dance. *New York, New York* is, as we shall see, a musical haunted by a return of the repressed, a compulsion to repeat, a musical devoid of Eros, in the throes of Thanatos, what Gaylyn Studlar, following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, has identified as a pre/anti-Oedipal "masochistic text" which, she writes, "presents the spectator with a self-reflexive, anti-illusionary discourse."¹⁶ Masochistic films, Studlar finds, have a "caustic

detachment' that results in the films' cold, aloof, cryptic quality,¹⁷ wherein the texts display "the 'frozen' quality of masochistic repetition."¹⁸

III. *New York, New York*: Beyond the Pleasure Principle

The possibility of reading *New York, New York* as a "masochistic" text raises intriguing questions concerning the aesthetics of the classical musical film and what today we recognize as the anti-aesthetic of postmodernism. In relation to *New York, New York* let me raise the issue this way. If the function of the classic musical film is to give pleasure, and if *New York, New York* fails to give pleasure, how are we to evaluate a musical film that denies the pleasure principle? I can ask this question a final way: can *New York, New York* be read as a text "beyond the pleasure principle?"

By introducing this (not too) subtle reference to Freud, I suspect I have shown my hand. My desire to give a "postmodern" reading to *New York, New York* is not first and foremost to simply "redeem" a vilified and perhaps misread film. I would like, rather, to use Scorsese's film as an occasion, and site (of representation) to raise the question of art beyond the pleasure principle--what today appears as a postmodern anti-aesthetic, the art of unpleasure.

The nature of aesthetics and its relationship to pleasure (and the pleasures of representation) has plagued modern philosophy from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard thru Marx and Freud to Brecht, Artaud, Benjamin, Deleuze and Derrida. Freud is, indeed, at the center (the *axis mundi*) of contemporary aesthetics because, after all, Freud's most revolutionary discovery was precisely that all psychic life is finally an aesthetic operation. That is, he discovered that the Id, the source of psychic energy, seeks the aesthetics of pleasure. In the profoundest sense, psychoanalytic theory is an aesthetic theory. (Is it, then, not so surprising that Freud's texts have been both more carefully read and better served by those in philosophy and the arts than in the medical and social sciences?)

What we have most to gain from psychoanalytic perspectives (via Freud, Lacan or Deleuze) is that a science of the mind must be based on the question of aesthetics. It is in the field (field: gestalt, profession, fecund ground) of aesthetics that mind, history and politics converge. Freud's texts point the way to a realization that we must not simply devise a philosophy of aesthetics, but understand the aesthetics of philosophy. We can not discover the history of aesthetics until we uncover the aesthetics of history, nor invent a political aesthetic until we seek out the aesthetics of politics. This, indeed, goes a long way toward defining the contemporary marxist/post-marxist, structuralist/post-structuralist and feminist agendas and their ongoing romance (and quarrels) with psychoanalytic theory.

Freud, in exploring the aesthetics of mental life, thus discovers/uncovers a problem that now plagues contemporary critical theory. In his late essay,

Beyond the Pleasure Principle, a text Fredric Jameson calls, "rich with death and the archaic,"¹⁹ Freud is forced to confront a question not unlike that posed for us by *New York, New York*. Is there an aesthetic beyond pleasure (*plaisir*)? If Eros is the aesthetic of pleasure, is there an anti-aesthetic of Thanatos, of *Unlust*? What is the nature, then, of unpleasurable art? Before moving forward, it is necessary to quote Freud's essay at some length:

Artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults which, unlike children's are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. . . . The consideration of these cases and situations, which have the yield of pleasure as their final outcome, should be undertaken by some system of aesthetics with an economic approach to its subject matter. They are of no use for our purposes, since they presuppose the existence and dominance of the pleasure principle; they give no evidence of the operation of tendencies *beyond* the pleasure principle, that is, of tendencies more primitive than it and independent of it. . . .

. . . we come now to a new and remarkable fact, namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure. . . .

. . . But if a compulsion to repeat does operate in the mind, we should be glad to know something about it, to learn what function it corresponds to, under what conditions it can emerge and what its relation is to the pleasure principle--to which, after all, we have hitherto ascribed dominance over the course of the processes of excitation in mental life. . . .

. . . What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection. It is further an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead.²⁰

Here, Freud uncovers in the compulsion to repeat the primitive, anti-economics of *Unlust*. What is this anti-aesthetic of *Unlust* that neither seeks nor offers pleasure? Freud discovers beyond the pleasure principle, both before ("more primitive") and "beyond" Eros, a theatrical pre-Oedipal *stage* (in both senses of the word--a period of time, a space/site of representation), a *play* (indeed, discovered in the *fort-da* game) within mental life wherein resides an anti-aesthetic that "always already" resists commodity status, that confounds any attempt at bourgeois-capitalist critical evaluation of art as a *value*-ation. Freud's speculations on an anti-aesthetic compulsion have come to dominate twentieth century discourse on the nature of art. For good reason.

As we move further and further into the "age of mechanical reproduction," the "carnavalesque"²¹ nature of folk culture/performance becomes the

commodity production of a popular culture. Here, the aesthetics of pleasure become a product sold, as in prostitution. (One could well deconstruct the term "production number" as used in the capitalist Broadway/film musical as, indeed, signifying a mode of production producing a manufactured pleasure sold for profit.)

Then how do we evaluate an aesthetic of pleasure when every cultural artifact from the most "refined" to the most "popular" can become a fetish in service to the cruelest of hegemonies? How are we to value and evaluate an aesthetic of *plaisir* when the "divine" music of Mozart has been played at death camps to repress and displace the cries of the dying, when the aesthetics of Eros becomes a semiotics of death? Adorno concludes: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."²²

Once Walter Pater could say, "all romantic art aspires to the condition of music."²³ After Auschwitz the music of our generation aspires to the condition of noise. When music lies, we must listen for some truth in noise. When the pleasures of "representation" (mimesis) become the symptom of a cultural neurosis, a cure is looked for in an anti-aesthetic that deconstructs the illusory pleasures of a semiotics of repression, alienation and oppression, and thus the contemporary appeal of Nietzsche's call for a Dionysian art that seeks non-Presence, or Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* that denies the pleasures of illusion, or Artaud's destruction of a theater addressed to "a public of spectators, of consumers, of 'enjoyers' . . . offered to their voyeuristic scrutiny."²⁴ Here, an anti-aesthetic of *Unlust* is born, whether in its modern or postmodern modes: in modernism, as a denial of the pleasures of representation, in post-modernism, as a foregrounding, a bringing to consciousness of textuality as the compulsion to repeat. Likewise, in these two movements we can, like Freud, speculate on the anti-aesthetics of *New York, New York*.

Thus we must ask, how is it that Scorsese betrays the pleasures of the Hollywood musical film? How does he make the turn from *plaisir* to *Unlust*, to take the musical beyond the pleasure principle, from the pleasures of Eros to the masochism of Thanatos? To return to Mast's complaint, how does *New York, New York* deny the particular power of musicals? To address this question our explorations must move in two directions. First, we must ask, wherein lies the "particular power" of the Hollywood musical to produce pleasure? And second, how does *New York, New York* turn pleasure to unpleasure, an aesthetic of Eros to *Unlust*? To (compulsively) repeat:

What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection. It is further an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead.²⁵

IV. Pleasure in the Hollywood Musical Text

Few of us are strangers to the pleasure of watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers glide across the screen, or Gene Kelly singing and dancing in the rain. Of all Hollywood genres, perhaps only the musical offers as many moments that can be described as--sublime. Surely what Gerald Mast calls the "particular power" of the musical is its ability to generate, like a great machine, this power of the sublime. And, is not the sublime the transcendental signifier of pleasure and the ultimate goal of an aesthetic of Eros arising from the pleasure principle?

Indeed, of all Hollywood genres, the musical is most willing to reveal, for our delight, the very nature of the classic narrative film as a producer of pleasure. Thus, Thomas Elasseer can say that "the world of the musical becomes a kind of ideal image of the [film] medium itself."²⁶ And, Jean Luc Godard can define the musical as the "idealization of cinema." Dennis Giles interprets Godard's statement to mean that the musical, particularly the familiar "back-stage" musical:

deals more with essence than appearance or rather transforms essence into appearance through the labor of show-making . . . 'Idealization' is not only a process of abstracting the world, but one of freezing it. An idea, in contrast to the flux of apparent reality, is traditionally considered to be immobile, eternal.²⁷

In fact, of all film genres, the musical film, alone, is virtually defined (popularly called simply "the musical") by its ability to transform "essence into appearance." That is, the idealized essence of music appears within the film's narrative story. The musical's unique quality is its double articulation of two spheres: the realm of the *real* (the narrative constructed of a *fabula* [story] and *sjuzet* [plot]) and the *ideal* (the musical sequence, the production number).

To elaborate by appropriating Aristotelian terms, if the *existence* of the film depends upon its story, its *essence*, as Giles suggests, resides in its "freezing" of an "eternal" idea/moment. That is to say, the musical justifies itself, not by the existence of its story, but by the power of its essence, the musical spectacle. The essence of spectacle breaks into the existence of the story. Elasseer seems to convey something like this when he finds in the musicals of Vincente Minnelli "a drive for a liberation which inevitably leads to the spectacle. . . . Art as the destruction of 'ordinary' life."²⁸

It does not take a philosophical bent to note that the unique pleasure of the musical is reserved for the musical spectacle and hardly resides in its often (usually) mundane, if not moribund plots. In the musical, the story frames, and makes possible, the appearance of spectacle. And the spectacle, in turn, breaks into, disrupts, the narrative. "The offer of spectacle," writes Dana Polan, "is exactly that of a breakdown of coherence, a disordering of orders

(political, diegetic, whatever) for the sake of visual show."²⁹ (Parenthetically: then, every Hollywood musical aspires to the condition of MTV.)

Numerous film theorists have noted that the musical number initiates a break with the space and time dimensions of the narrative, as well as creating a new space and time relationship between the spectator and the film's text. For example, Alan Williams has observed the effect of the shifts in sound-to-narrative relations in the musical film. Williams points out that in the musical film there is a "liberation of the image from the demands of veracity, which are embedded in a narrative that relies on 'realistic' sound/image relations." And Williams continues:

the films observe two options: either the sound remains diegetic while the image introduces extra-diegetic material (the classic Busby Berkeley number) or the image remains diegetic while the soundtrack introduces extra-diegetic material (the unseen orchestra on the beach). . . . In each case, the space of the musical number becomes *larger* than the space of the narrative.³⁰

The musical number/spectacle appears, in fact, not only as an expanded space, but also, as expanded *time*. In the musical performance the "realistic" time represented in the narrative is, likewise, suspended for the "idealized" time of the musical number measured--in beats to a measure. It is significant that the greatest complement we can give to a musical number is to call it a "show-stopper." In fact, the musical number, by its very nature, is a show *stopper*; the number suspends the plot to offer the audience a spectacle. Once the musical number is completed, the "realistic" time represented by the narrative takes back up at the precise moment it was originally suspended.

The point I have been headed toward is this: the musical number is an expanded, fuller and thus more ideal realm than the realm of the *fabula*. The expansion of time and space in the musical spectacle provides the musical film with what Fredric Jameson calls (referring back to Ernst Bloch) a "language of utopian fulfillment. . . . the lyrical mode of the presentation of not-yet-being."³¹ The utopian quality of the production number operates not only through the film's representational signs, but as Richard Dyer notes in his essay, "Entertainment and Utopia," through heightened "colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, camerawork."³² At this point we might well remember Vincente Minnelli's use of color in *An American in Paris* where the "Black and White Ball" of the film's story is disrupted/suspended by the dream ballet, a spectacle of riotous color, texture, movement, rhythm, melody and camerawork. It is in the "Annunciation" of this utopian language that the musical takes on its mythic, even sacramental function.

In this regard, the classical musical film seems close to a secularized liturgical drama. In fact, one can easily relate the mythic structure of the musical to the liturgical drama of the Mass. That is, as in the Mass, a

transubstantiation takes place. The "existence" of the secular elements (bread and wine) become transubstantiated into divine "essence." Breaking into secular time and space is the appearance of a sacred (expanded, superior) "utopian fulfillment." For a moment, secular time and space are suspended, the heavenly subsumes the earthly in a "presentation of not-yet being." In the musical there is a transubstantiation of heavenly pleasure into earth bound narrative. In the language of contemporary literary theory, we might say, following Benveniste, an *énoncé* of sublime pleasure breaks into the *énonciation* of the film's *histoire*. In other words, there may, indeed, be something quite literal in Astaire singing, "Heaven, I'm in Heaven" or George Guetary crooning, "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise."

Thus the "particular power of musicals," so beloved by Mast, seems to spring from a shamanistic, mythic, ritual, sacred discourse, a secularized remnant of the original relationship of music to possession and trance. To drive home my point, I quote from a telling incident reported by anthropologist Gilbert Rouget in *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*. Rouget records a letter written by a young African ethnomusicologist studying in Paris addressed to a friend in his native African tribe. The letter begins:

My dear Asogba, What an adventure! I went to the Opera yesterday. I thought I'd gone raving mad! No one had warned me, so I had no idea what I was in for: imagine my surprise when I found myself bang in the middle of a possession ceremony! You would have thought you were in Proto-Novo . . . attending the annual feast for Sakpata, or at Alada attending the ceremonies of Ajahuto. . . . [W]hat links it so closely with a *vodun* ceremony . . . is its relation to music. In both cases it is in fact the music that organizes the performance, gives it the structure that governs its development, dictates the movements, regulates the alternation between tension and relaxation. Just as a man or woman embodying a *vodun* takes his or her identification with the possession divinity. . . . I hope to find a few native Parisians who will tell me what they think of the ideas I've had . . . as I observed them at the opera. I'll write again and tell you what I find out; it should be interesting. But I shan't necessarily take what they say at face value, you can count on that. Why should the mere fact that they are natives place them *ipso facto* in a better position than us to understand what is going on among them?³³

If nothing else, the writer of the above letter would understand Rick Altman's insistence that "the average musical takes every opportunity to turn a scene into a festival."³⁴

The musical as a ritual, mythic, even sacral form is, then, the film genre that, perhaps more than any other, exemplifies a cinema of Full Presence (or, as Lacan would say, Phallogocentric; Derrida, *Phallogocentric*). That is, the musical is a narrative form that displays a utopian (transcendental) discourse of expanded time and space--idealization made visible. The classical musical film is, therefore, as Godard said, the "idealization of cinema," itself, as it operates within the pleasure principle, a cinema of Eros. As Giles concluded:

The Musical is erotic in the Greek sense of the term--a sexuality that rises from the loins to invade and transform the domain of politics and *poiesis*. . . . as Plato reminds us in *The Phaedrus* (252b), 'through the power of winged Eros, men possess the power to become like gods', to free themselves from the constraints of the everyday lived-world. The erotic drive is . . . an assertion of dominion over the raw material of the world; it is the passion to 'remake' reality in the image of desire.³⁵

It is precisely this cinema of Eros, "reality in the image of desire," that *New York, New York* interrogates, deconstructs, demythologizes, desecrates (desacralizes), profanes.

V. The Anti-Aesthetic of *New York, New York*

In an interview, Jean-Francois Lyotard noted:

You cannot consider what has been happening in painting, music or sculpture for almost a century without having the feeling that the function of art has overturned. Art no longer plays the role it used to, for it once had a religious function, it created good forms, some sort of myth, of a ritual, or a rhythm, a medium other than language through which the members of a society would communicate, in a substratum of meaning . . . the sacred was that form, i.e., of art. This has now become impossible. Why? Because we are in a system that doesn't give a rap about sacredness. . . .

. . . because it is only interested in what can be sold.³⁶

If the *form* of the musical looks back to a time when art created "good forms . . . of myth, of . . . ritual . . . a medium other than language through which the members of a society would communicate," the *function* of the Hollywood musical has been to mystify the very loss it celebrates. The great contribution of Jane Feuer's and Rick Altman's studies of the Hollywood musical has been their exploration of the function of the musical as an agent of compensation for the loss of folk art (the art of myth and ritual). For example, Feuer writes:

The Hollywood musical shares with popular art a socio-economic alienation. Instead of a community where all, at least potentially, may perform, relations of production are alienated from those of consumption. . . .

. . . The musical, always reflecting back on itself, tries to compensate for . . . alienation by creating humanistic 'folk' relations in the films; these folk relations in turn act to cancel out the economic values and relations associated with mass-produced art. Through such a rhetorical exchange the creation of folk relations in the films cancels the mass entertainment substance of the films. The Hollywood musical becomes a mass art which aspires to the condition of a folk art.³⁷

Psychoanalysis tells us that "in every case the symptom tells a story."³⁸ Post-structuralist critical theory teaches that every story tells a symptom. The symptom in the Hollywood musical (as in all art) is the fetish. If the musical's form is that of myth, of full Presence, it's function is to obfuscate an Absence, the absence of the "aura" of art and its occulted replacement by commodity forms of popular entertainment.

Thus, says Adorno, "fetishism gravitates toward mythology."³⁹ And, as Brecht warned, we are caught up in the "fetish of the spectacular."⁴⁰ Brecht, thus, objected to formalist art that denies any meaning beyond the immediacy of the image. In a late capitalist-commodity culture, "Spectacle," according to Dana Polan, "offers an imagistic surface of the world as a strategy of containment against any depth involvement with that world. . . . to insist endlessly on the need for everyone to join the world of spectacle."⁴¹ Thus, the mythic, sacral form of the musical is used to sell spectacle as commodity, a commodity that, itself, promotes what Adorno called the "mythical obduracy of culture" --myth turned to stone. Lyotard says, "the function of art has been overturned." The overturning is the turning over of art to the artifice of the museum, performance to the fetish of spectacle, Eros to Thanatos. It is this turn that Scorsese documents in *New York, New York*. It is the TURN upon which *New York, New York* TURNS, revealing in TURN the re-TURN of the repressed, the endless repetition compulsion of the Hollywood musical. This is the strategy of Scorsese's masochistic art "beyond the pleasure principle."

"Brecht's moral role," writes Barthes, "is to infiltrate a question into what seems self-evident."⁴² This is the moral role Scorsese has taken on as, perhaps, our most Brechtian of popular American directors. The recurring theme of Scorsese's *oeuvre* has been to, likewise, "infiltrate a question" into the fetish known as The American Dream. His films endlessly repeat, like a return of the repressed, the dark side of our desire for fame, fortune, power. From *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York* to *Raging Bull* (1980), *The King of Comedy* (1983), and *The Color of Money* (1987), Scorsese's anti-heros make a fetish of their illusions. The *last* temptation of Christ, which is to avoid the

pain of commitment by giving into the seductiveness of illusion, is the *first* temptation of The American Dream, a temptation all Scorsese's heroes find impossible to resist--save one. For one to resist, to deny the anodyne dreams of security, money, love, admiration, surely this one would be the Messiah.

Like the theater for Brecht, the cinema, for Scorsese, is a site for the subversion of the illusions of the "taken for granted." Indeed, Scorsese's films seem to fulfill Lyotard's call for a revolutionary cinema. "The cinema," Lyotard declares, "is where certain things can be done: turning the spectator's attention around by reversing the space of representation and obliging him [sic] to *unfulfill* his *desire* is a revolutionary function." [italics mine]⁴³ If the cinema of Eros seeks only to fulfill desire, Scorsese's cinema of *Unlust* forever forestalls desire in endless repetition. Scorsese's films bring to the surface and bare the masochistic devices of postmodern life.

New York, New York is a prime example of Scorsese's masochistic narrative. In the masochistic narrative, repetition, what Leo Bersani terms "the activity of inertia,"⁴⁴ signals, as Studler says, "the collapse of conventional narrativity." And Studler continues,

. . . the repetitive masochistic economy of desire uses compulsive repetition to privilege . . . inertia over action, stasis over change. Hence the 'frozen' quality of masochistic repetition.⁴⁵

The frozen nature of repetition is the symptom of the fetish. In *New York, New York*, it points out the overturning of musical performance from art to commodity.

The theme of musical performance as a commodity infects the narrative of Scorsese's film. Altman finds the classic Hollywood musical narrative marked, even defined, by the doubling of romantic relationships with the energy and beauty of song and dance, thus endowing the coupling process with magical qualities.⁴⁶ If, in the classic musical film, music joins people together, in *New York, New York* music tears asunder bandleader Jimmy (De Niro) and singer Francine (Minnelli). Both Jimmy and Francine are musicians by trade, their music is a means to an end--the end of selling their talents for fame and money. In fact, the film does not contain a single musical number that is not depicted as, or in preparation for, a "paid performance." Music in *New York, New York* is a commodity to be hoarded and protected, rather than a pleasure shared. When Jimmy's band is playing at a jazz club, Francine comes up from the audience to join the band in a spontaneous song. Jimmy uses a loud sax improvisation as a weapon to prevent her joining in music making, to drive her back into the admiring audience.

Shortly after their marriage (following perhaps one of the least romantic courtships ever put on film), Francine and Jimmy write a song together. What in the classic Hollywood musical would be a song expressing their love for one another, here, becomes "The Theme from *New York, New York*." The song

is a paean to greed, self-absorption and ambition. If Bernstein's song for *On the Town*, "New York, New York," describes the city as a folk carnival midway, the Scorsese film's title song portrays the city as a site of the means and modes of production ("If I can *make* it there, I'll *make* it anywhere" [italics mine]).

It is telling to compare the two songs. The score of the Bernstein song is full of rollicking rhythms as the notes fly up and down the scale. The Kanter and Webb song's ever repeating notes--go nowhere. The words of Jimmy and Francine's song, likewise, are less than traditionally "poetic." Even Francine wonders aloud about the poetic suitability of the song's phrase "top of the heap"--a phrase, I imagine, that can be taken in two ways. (Ironically, while the film *New York, New York* was a financial failure, its bitter, brittle and nihilistic theme song has become an American pop standard and declared by Mayor Koch as his city's "official song.")

If "The Theme from *New York, New York's*" rhythms are repetitive, it is only a symptom of the entire film's compulsion to repeat. That Francine and Jimmy's song is titled "Theme from (evidently, from a film titled) *New York, New York* (apparently, the film we are watching) is itself a *mise en abîme*, an interior duplication from which we cannot escape. The loss of the aura of art and the fetishization of performance leads to a compulsion to repeat, the final symptom of *Unlust*.

Naturalism, according to Bert States, entered a stage of crisis at the turn of the century because "there was nothing new it could do . . . without repeating itself to death."⁴⁷ *New York, New York* is about the Hollywood musical repeating itself to death. The compulsion to repeat of Thanatos and the fetishization of the spectacle come into full view toward the end of the film when we sit with Jimmy and watch Francine perform in a film within the film (another *mise en abîme*).

The sequence shows us the closing production number of Francine's newest Hollywood musical, titled *Happy Endings*. (The elaborate sequence, costing 350-thousand dollars, was regrettably cut from the originally released film and remains absent from the commercially available video tape.) This typical Hollywood spectacle portrays Francine as an usher who daydreams of meeting a man in the theater who turns out to be a producer who, in turn, will turn her dreams of fame and fortune to reality. At the end of the production number's daydream, we see the former usher--now star--in the closing production number of a Hollywood musical (now a film within a film within a film, an ultimate *mise en abîme*). As the production number ends, our usher's daydream also comes to an end, but as she comes back to reality, there, in her theater stands the very man from the daydream. He, in turn, introduces himself, the sequence begins to repeat itself, leading to a repetition of the closing production number. *Happy Endings* forms a narrative Mobius strip forever looping back upon and into itself.

The film within the film within the film ends with the screen reading "*Happy Endings*" and written below the title the traditional words, "Made in

Hollywood, U.S.A." Later, when Jimmy meets Francine, he refers to her movie as "Sappy Endings" and Francine responds with an uncomfortable laugh, adding, "Well, when you've seen one, you've seen them all." Francine's ironic statement, as Bert States says of irony, "is a 'hovering' trope . . . and when it attaches itself to a metaphor or a metonymy or a synecdoche [*Happy Endings* is both a metonymy and synecdoche for *New York, New York*] it infects it, one might say, with self-skepticism."⁴⁸

Shoshana Felman writes of the "echoing effect" of repetition in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*: "If the story is preceded and anticipated by a repetition of the story, then the frame, far from situating . . . the story's origin, actually situates its loss, constitutes its infinite deferral."⁴⁹ Likewise, Scorsese's film within a film within a film is an infinite deferral, an elaborate *fort-da* game from which there is no escape. Just as by observing a child's obsessive game led Freud to discover the aesthetics of *Unlust*, so Scorsese's self-reflexive film within a film within a film becomes its own unterminable *fort-da* game from which there is no escape. The musical spectacle of Francine's production number, as Mark Taylor notes of postmodern texts, becomes "in the absence of transcendence. . . . a labyrinthian play of surfaces. . . . [wherein] one delights in the superficiality of appearance."⁵⁰ (Indeed, is this not a definition of spectacle?) Derrida writes, "this lost certainty, as the absence and haunting of the divine sign . . . regulates all modern criticism and aesthetics."⁵¹ This loss, that repeats itself in endless repetition, everywhere haunts *New York, New York*.

In *Happy Endings* the fetish of spectacle is forced to show itself as neurotic symptom. Like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, *Happy Endings* demystifies *New York, New York*'s own theatrical/cinematic techniques. *Happy Endings*, in producing no ending at all, in deferring what Geoffrey Hartman defines as art's "virtue of inducing closure, allowing the mind something to rest on,"⁵² thus bares the devices that show it up as simulacrum. And, as Baudrillard reminds us: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none."⁵³ In a passage that goes a long way toward explicating *New York, New York*, Gregory Ulmer writes of the deconstructive strategy of parodic repetition:

[T]o pass through the book, repeating the lure at every point along the way, changes everything without anything having budged--such is the enigmatic power of repetition to expose the derived status of origins. This repetition refers to the fact that the closure of the book occurs when the book lets itself be thought as such.⁵⁴

In refusing art's pleasure in formal closure, an anti-aesthetic marks the site of a second, final closure, what Derrida, in referring to Artaud, calls the "closure of representation," itself. "Closure," Derrida writes, "is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself."⁵⁵ Scorsese's film

marks the closure of the Hollywood musical by catching it in the act of repeating itself to death; the "book" (here, the Hollywood musical film) "lets itself be thought as such."

Freud discovered in the aesthetic of Thanatos the organism's repetitive drive to return to stasis, nothingness, silence. In *New York, New York* the repetitive drive is, finally, always already compulsively driven toward nothingness and silence. The film's narrative is drawn out to inexcusable length, dialogue played at a maddening slow pace. Francine, Jimmy, indeed, all the film's characters, talk and talk, saying nothing. When Jimmy first introduces himself to Francine, she asks what he is up to. Jimmy replies, "I'm just engaging you in small talk." Francine retorts, "It can't get much smaller." Indeed, her comment is an apt description of the film's characters, dialogue and story.

New York, New York aspires to the condition of emptiness and silence. Toward the end of the film, Francine, pregnant with Jimmy's child, fights with her husband. Jimmy rants, "Did I tell you to have that God damn baby?" Consequently she goes into labor. At the hospital, Jimmy comes to say good-bye. The marriage is over. He leaves without seeing his new born son. The camera pans in on Francine, holding on her silent, empty expression for what seems an interminable time. The camera then pans to the empty white hospital wall. The film seems to stop, the *mise en scène* a blank, the empty frame held for what seems, again, an interminable time.

In this scene we see Scorsese's affinity to Chekhov. As Bert States notes, "when stage conversation is filled with emptiness, as it is in Chekhov or with a form of emotion and anguish that has no specific derivation and no promise of surcease through possibilities in the world of action, *silence*--when it falls--will be the 'negative equivalent' of this emptiness."⁵⁶ *New York, New York* thus aspires to the condition of emptiness and silence.

In the film's last sequence, Jimmy and Francine meet after many years. Both have achieved the fame and fortune they desired. The closing sequence returns us to the film's opening location, the Moonlit Terrace. Jimmy listens as Francine sings the film's big closing number. The song, an aggregate of Jimmy's music and Francine's lyrics, is "The Theme from *New York, New York*." Minnelli gives it her all. It is the kind of finale we expect to end a Hollywood musical. The sequence, in fact, is reminiscent of Judy Garland's closing number in *A Star is Born* (indeed, throughout the film, Garland uncannily haunts Minnelli's performance). We might well expect the film to end on this long anticipated production number, a spectacle of performance. Instead, *New York, New York* continues, only to conclude with an underdramatic, anti-climatic, silent coda.

After her number, Jimmy and Francine talk before Jimmy returns to the street outside the nightclub. The street scene is a return to the film's opening sequence. Jimmy, feeling the tug of a return of feeling for Francine, stops and calls her from a phone booth. He asks if she would like to join him for some

Chinese food. Francine agrees, and Jimmy waits outside on the street. The musical's last sequence, an uncomfortably long three minutes, is played out in an empty silence. Francine, coming down to meet him, pauses, has second thoughts and returns upstairs. In the meantime, Jimmy, on second thought, seems to have reached the same conclusion. He turns and walks away.

New York, New York's closing sequence compulsively returns to the film's opening shots. As the film opened with the camera moving up from Jimmy's shoes to his face, a closing shot moves from his face down to his shoes. As Jimmy walks silently down the street, the camera captures a lamppost within its frame. At that moment, the *mise en scène* begins to look familiar, the return of something repressed. A closed umbrella in hand, Jimmy, his feet listlessly shuffling through the wet street, walks silently away. The night's drizzle turns to heavy rain. Suddenly, what only seemed familiar becomes, now, inescapable. The closing long shot reveals the street to be a replication, a simulacrum of the very street upon which Gene Kelly performed his immortal "Singing in the Rain." The camera slowly retraces Kelly's steps as it moves down the now empty, deathly street. There is no singing in this rain. One only feels its chill.

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Appendix

Plot Summary of *New York, New York*⁵⁷

Running Time: 163 minutes (cut by studio to 153).

Released June, 1977 by United Artists.

The film begins on V-J Day, 1945, and in the streets of New York City people are celebrating. Jimmy Doyle (Robert De Niro) throws his army uniform shirt out of his hotel window. Out on the street, the camera tilts up from Jimmy's now brown and white shoes to show us that he has donned a loud Hawaiian shirt. Jimmy goes to a fashionable nightclub, The Moonlit Terrace. There he attempts to pick up a newly released WAC with the USO, Francine Evans (Liza Minnelli). She resists his every move. Francine returns to her hotel. Later, at her hotel, she encounters Doyle for a second time in the lobby. Francine learns that Doyle is there under a false name to avoid payment of the bill. When the desk clerk discovers his charade, Jimmy abruptly joins Francine in her cab outside the hotel and orders the driver to head toward Brooklyn where he has a musical audition. Thus Francine finds

out that she and Doyle are both musicians looking for work. He plays the saxophone, she is a singer.

During the cab ride, Jimmy tells Francine about his ambitions--to achieve in life what he calls a "major chord" (playing his type of music, making money and having a woman). At the audition, Francine helps Jimmy get the job by singing to Jimmy's accompaniment (with ironic foreshadowing, "A New Kind of Love"). The club's manager agrees to hire Jimmy only if Francine joins him to make it a "girl-boy act." Francine agrees and as they celebrate with a night on the town it appears as if a love relationship might grow out of the evening.

However, before they begin working together, Francine is offered a job on tour with the Frankie Harte Band. She sends her agent, Tony Harwell (Lionel Stander), to give Jimmy the news. When Jimmy learns that Francine is now performing in North Carolina, he pursues her, declares his love and asks for a job with the Harte Band. As they travel with the band, the two grow closer and Jimmy begins composing the music for what will become the song "Theme from *New York, New York*." One day Jimmy reads a love poem Francine is writing about him. He is so moved that he suddenly spirits her off, without explanation, to a justice of the peace to be married. When Francine expresses doubts, and at least demands that he approach marriage with some romantic sentiment, they fight. Jimmy threatens to kill himself if she won't marry him on the spot. She gives in and agrees.

When Harte leaves the band, Jimmy assumes its leadership. The group becomes a success, mostly due to Francine's talent. This increasingly makes Jimmy jealous and the marriage grows strained. Now pregnant, Francine returns to New York against Jimmy's wishes. In New York, Francine occupies her time making demo records.

Meanwhile, Jimmy tries to make a success of the band without Francine, but her replacement (both professionally and sexually), Bernice (Mary Kay Place) is a dismal failure as a singer. The band fails and Jimmy is forced to return to New York. Back with Francine, the marriage grows still colder. Francine works on her career and Jimmy spends more and more time playing at the Harlem Club--where he, apparently, also becomes increasingly involved with drugs.

During this time, Francine has come to the attention of a major record company executive. She is offered a contract. Jimmy and Francine have violent arguments about her budding career. Francine, now near childbirth, becomes particularly upset when Jimmy yells: "Did I tell you to have that God damn baby?" Distraught, Francine goes into labor. At the hospital, Jimmy and Francine share a quiet moment together as both realize, without saying so, that the marriage is over. Jimmy leaves the hospital without looking at his new born son, Jimmy, Jr..

On her own, Francine becomes a well-known Broadway, Hollywood and recording star. She appears in a classic Hollywood musical names *Happy Endings*. During the same time, Jimmy has also achieved fame as a jazz

musician and owner of a very successful club, named The Major Chord. Jimmy goes to a movie theater and watches Francine's new movie. In the original version of *New York, New York*, the extended finale of *Happy Endings* (the film within the film) is shown. (It is similar to Judy Garland's "Born in a Trunk" number in *A Star is Born*.)

Francine is now back in New York headlining a show at the Moonlit Terrace. Jimmy attends her show which she closes by singing her lyrics to Jimmy's music in "The Theme from *New York, New York*." After her performance, Jimmy goes backstage and is re-united with his former wife and son. After a distant but pleasant exchange with both he leaves.

On the street, Jimmy changes his mind about leaving and goes to a phone and calls Francine's dressing room. He invites her to join him for Chinese food. Francine agrees. As she goes down to meet him, suddenly, she changes her mind. Meanwhile, Jimmy, waiting on the rainy street seems to, likewise, change his mind, or perhaps he realizes Francine will not show up. In either case, Jimmy turns and walks out of sight.

Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchmen (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 1.
2. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983) 114.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986) 177.
4. The phrase "keeper of the flame" is used in regard to Liza Minnelli by Jane Feuer in her discussion of *New York, New York*, see *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982) 120.
5. Stanley Kauffman, "Stanley Kauffman on Films," *The New Republic*, July 23, 1977, 18.
6. Judith Crist, "Films," *The Saturday Review*, July 23, 1977, 47.
7. Penelope Gilliatt, "The Current Cinema," *The New Yorker*, July 25, 1977, 82.
8. Andrew Sarris is quoted in Carrie Rickey, "Foreigners in their Own Language," *The Village Voice*, June 24, 1981, 52.
9. Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981)
10. Feuer 120.
11. Anthony Slide, gen. ed., *Filmmakers Series*, 11 vols. (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1985), No. 8: *Martin Scorsese and Michael Cimino*, by Michael Bliss 120.
12. Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singing* (Woodstock N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1987) 362.
13. Stanley Donen is quoted in Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981) 211.
14. Adorno 177.
15. Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell UP) 92.
16. Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 6.
17. Studlar 118.
18. 124.
19. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 67.

20. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1961) 11-18.
21. I have in mind here the use of the word "carnival" as used by Bakhtin, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 122-137.
22. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms* 34.
23. Thomas Elsaesser, "Vincente Minnelli," *Genre: The Musical* 13.
24. Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1978) 235.
25. Freud 18.
26. Elsaesser 24.
27. Dennis Giles, "Show-making," *Genre: The Musical* 24.
28. Giles 24.
29. Dana Polan, "'Above All Else to Make You See,'" *Postmodernism and Politics*, ed. Jonathan Arac, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 28 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 149.
30. Alan Williams, "The Musical Film and Recorded Popular Music," *Genre: The Musical* 149.
31. Jameson is quoted in Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Genre: The Musical* 149.
32. Dyer 149.
33. Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*, trans. Brunhilde Biebuyck (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1985) 241-242.
34. Altman 331.
35. Giles 101.
36. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Driftworks*, trans. Susan Hanson (New York: Semiotext(e) Inc., n.d.) 27.
37. Feuer 3.
38. J. McDougall in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 52, quoted in Giles 99.
39. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms* 24.
40. Polan 63.
41. Polan 63.
42. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972) 75.
43. Lyotard 76.
44. Studlar 123.
45. 124.
46. Rick Altman, *The American Musical Film* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 109.
47. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 86.
48. 75-76.
49. Shoshana Felman, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Yale French Studies, no. 55/56 (Valencia: Artes Graficas Soler, S.A., 1978) 122.
50. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1984) 15.
51. Derrida, "Force and Signification." *Writing and Difference* 10.
52. Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981) 148.
53. Baudrillard 1.
54. Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985) 16.
55. Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," *Writing and Difference* 205.
56. States 74.
57. I have been guided, here, by the plot summary by Michael Bliss in slide 131-133.