

UCLA Department of Musicology presents

# MUSE

*An Undergraduate Research Journal*



## Vol. I, No. 2

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Fetishism and Fan Engagement with  
Horror Scores"  
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"The *Narcocorrido* as an Ethnographic  
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Spring 2020

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# Grave-Digging Crate Diggers: Retro Fetishism and Fan Engagement with Horror Scores

Spencer Slayton

The horror genre is in the midst of a renaissance. The slasher craze of the late 70s and early 80s, revitalized in the mid-90s, is once again a popular genre for reinterpretation by today's filmmakers and film composers. A trend of retro fetishism has percolated throughout the visual media of the last decade. Seen and heard in films like the neon-noir *Drive* (2011), the zeitgeist-imploding Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016), or the inspired *It Follows* (2015), this trend of reaching into the past to harness nostalgia via stylized action, period-appropriate settings, and a synth-based score or soundtrack has become a trope for artists participating in this revival. While filmmakers use the stylistic touchstones of this era as inspiration, many fans and musicians are also integrating, reinterpreting, or reimagining these themes. Retro fetishism within visual media and fan engagement is perfectly paralleled with the current resurgence of vinyl as a form of music listening and collection cultivation. Our contemporary digital landscape, coupled with increasingly fraught politics reminiscent of 1980s conservatism, may be reinforcing this predilection as well. This glorification of older themes and mediums is reflected in the ways we engage with media in both our consumption and our content creation. While horror films have many critics, the genre, and specifically its music, is experiencing a notable resurgence, and the dynamics between producers, content creators, and consumers are shifting.

Much of what makes the music of horror films so effective is its function not only as sinister underscore but as punctuation to the frightening events on screen. Artists like German synth band Tangerine Dream, Italian prog rock band Goblin, and American filmmaker John Carpenter created some of the most iconic and effective synth-based film scores during this formative era of the 1980s. Tangerine Dream paired the psychedelia of Krautrock with ambient textures to compose crystalline synth scores for films such as William Friedkin's *Sorcerer* (1977) and the adaptation of Stephen King's *Firestarter* (1984). Goblin developed their prog rock take on film scoring by working with Dario Argento on his classic Giallo films like *Profondo Rosso* (1975) and *Suspiria* (1977). One of the most significant film scores from this period, however, is for the modest 1978 horror film *Halloween*, written, directed, and composed by John Carpenter. *Halloween's* sinisterly minimalist synth score worked in the most economical way possible, both in its creation and employment. Composed in just two weeks, Carpenter has said the reason he scored the film was that he was the cheapest and most expeditious option they had, which is fascinating given how influential the

film and score became.<sup>1</sup> Pairing plinking synths with a skittering drum programming in 5/4 time, the chilling main theme has become synonymous with terror. Academy Award-winning film composer Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails has often noted the massive influence Carpenter has had on him personally as a fan and professionally as a musician. In a statement accompanying the release of his 2017 cover of the infamous *Halloween* main theme, Reznor emphatically stated, “John Carpenter, it’s your fault that I turned out the way I did.”<sup>2</sup> The impact of the ominous synth music ushered in by these film scores is immense and many modern filmmakers and musicians owe many of their stylistic choices to this inventive music.

The influence of these artists beyond the scope of cinema appears most notably within twenty-first-century electronic music. A recent and potent example of this influence can be heard in the subgenre synthwave. This cheekily titled trend employs synths and pulsating drum programming to mine the sonic caves these horror composers created. After burgeoning over the preceding five years, synthwave was catapulted into the zeitgeist during the mid-2010s thanks to Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein’s outstanding score to the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. Heavily indebted to John Carpenter and Tangerine Dream’s synth-based film scores of the 1980s but with a controlled integration of modern ambient electronic music, the music in *Stranger Things* found its footing at the epicenter of retro fetishism. Amid a vinyl resurgence and an uptick in admiration for the vaporous nostalgia associated with the 1980s, Stein and Dixon, both ardent horror fans and members of the Texas-based synth rock quartet S U R V I V E, helped launch a wave of fandom associated with the musical tones of this era. In Julia Neuman’s article “The Nostalgic Allure of ‘Synthwave,’” she suggests the genre was propelled because “synthwave’s blending of modern electronic composition with nostalgia makes for an irresistible combination.”<sup>3</sup> Pop culture’s dichotomous desire for freshness and familiarity is satiated by synthwave’s nods to this classic era of sci-fi and horror but with contemporary touches. This reliance on nostalgia coincides with the resurgence of synthesized music and the renewed interest in dated forms of playback like vinyl and cassette.

Nostalgia is a critical component of both synthwave and this era of retro adoration and fan reinterpretations of the music from classic horror films. For many of the artists who are influenced or inspired by these films and their accompanying music, it may boil down to early exposure at a formative time in their lives. Music psychologists Carol Lynne Krumhansl and Justin Adam Zupnick performed a study to understand the effects of nostalgia and memory from music encountered in adolescence and discovered

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1. Gino Sorcinelli, “John Carpenter Created the Entire ‘Halloween’ Score in Two Weeks,” *Medium*, Micro-Chop, September 4, 2019, [www.medium.com/micro-chop/john-carpenter-created-the-entire-halloween-score-in-two-weeks-d7457bbd45ae](http://www.medium.com/micro-chop/john-carpenter-created-the-entire-halloween-score-in-two-weeks-d7457bbd45ae).

2. Daniel Kreps, “Hear Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross’ Chilling Take on ‘Halloween’ Theme,” *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 2018, [www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/hear-trent-reznor-atticus-ross-chilling-take-on-halloween-theme-200234/](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/hear-trent-reznor-atticus-ross-chilling-take-on-halloween-theme-200234/).

3. Julia Neuman, “The Nostalgic Allure of ‘Synthwave,’” *Observer*, July 31, 2015, [www.observer.com/2015/07/the-nostalgic-allure-of-synthwave/](http://www.observer.com/2015/07/the-nostalgic-allure-of-synthwave/).

instances referred to as “reminiscence bumps,” or intense personal connections established with these early musical encounters. They explain that “these effects have not been found previously in other domains, which suggest that music may be special perhaps because of its strong personal and emotional meanings, its prevalence, and its role in social development.”<sup>4</sup> These intense sonic connections are created as a form of cultural transmission that results in a strong emotional connection to particular music discovered through self-exploration or familial transmission. That many of these artists experienced their adolescence during the golden age of horror in the 1980s explains their engagement with the music from these films. However, “commodified nostalgia evokes the effect of nostalgia even among those who do not have actual memory of the period being revived.”<sup>5</sup> Initial engagement with the genre films of this time period is not always necessary for an evocative bond to be made, as seen with many young people’s current engagement with the sonic identity and themes of the era.

During this period of nostalgic participation with the music of horror films, many fan artists have completely reimagined the scores of their favorite films from the era as fan fiction albums. These dedicated fans took to their synths to create alternate histories for the genre of film music that was rapidly becoming a commercial trend. Some examples of these reimaginings include Los Angeles-based brooding synth artist Umberto’s update of the music to the 1982 slasher *Pieces* entitled *Night Has a Thousand Screams*, the American band Ogre’s synthwave rescore of *Night of the Living Dead*, Cemetery Gates’ analog exercises for the silent film *Häxan*, and Liverpool’s The Laze’s prog rock reinterpretation of *The Phantom of the Opera*. These works were released as deluxe vinyl or cassette packages to amplify the music’s nostalgic influences through period-appropriate listening practices. This sort of content creation is nothing new in the world of fandom, but with this wave of interest, longtime fans of the genre are able to engage with beloved texts in new and interesting ways. Fan culture researcher Kristina Busse posits that “in the age of convergence, the boundaries between professionals and fans, between producers and audiences, and between casual viewers and dedicated enthusiasts have eroded.”<sup>6</sup> This erosion of the boundaries between producer and fan allows for a dialogue between past and present that provides a plethora of fascinating content to be created and consumed.

One of the most compelling instances of fan engagement with this music is the trend of fan artists using horror scores as inspiration to create scores to imaginary films or even rescore films straight to picture during live events. Umberto and Antoni Maiovvi engage with their fandom for the music of horror films in multiple ways. Employing the palette that Carpenter spearheaded, these artists release synth-based music in the style of these 1980s genre films that act as scores to imaginary films. With

4. Carol Krumhansl and Justin Zupnick, “Cascading Reminiscence Bumps in Popular Music,” in *Psychological Science* 24, no. 10 (2013): 2057, doi:10.1177/0956797613486486.

5. David R. Shumway, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Sound Tracks and the Production of Nostalgia,” *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2 (1999): 40, www.jstor.org/stable/1225623.

6. Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 140.

track titles like “Shower Scene” and “End Credits,” these artists create atmospheric instrumental albums that carry the listener through a nonexistent film narrative. Additionally, in 2014, Umberto and Maiovvi banded together to perform an incredible live rescore to Tobe Hooper’s unflinching 1976 classic *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for Beyond Fest, an annual genre film and music festival. Death Waltz Recording Co., a boutique vinyl label and one of the founders of Beyond Fest, released an exclusive vinyl pressing of the duo’s rescore *The Hook & Pull Gang* to commemorate the event. I was lucky enough to be in attendance and it was an unforgettable moment in my engagement with the intersection of my fandoms of horror and film music. Not only was the performance and the accompanying album an incredible feat in its dark employment of dirge synths and punishing live drums, evocative of the harsh prog rock of Goblin and industrial goth music of the 1980s, but it stands as a reminder of the amazing nature of fan engagement on both ends of the spectrum, as consumers and creators. These inventive interpretations of horror films and their scores indicate that “fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides.”<sup>7</sup> These acts began as fans creating music by filtering the sounds of their favorite films, which in this case resulted in the opportunity to rescore one of the most influential films of all time in front of a sold-out crowd of adoring fans. Media studies PhD and fandom specialist Nicolle Lamerichs illuminates that “through these homages, fans mediate existing symbols, plotlines, characters, and settings. These fan creations are heavily inspired by the existing text or ‘source text’, but they also create new textual relationships.”<sup>8</sup> This interplay between content consumers and content creators is a compelling component of fan engagement. Many fan artists associated with reimagining scores or creating music in the vein of these beloved composers have gone on to become film composers themselves, another shift in the dynamic between fandom and producer.

This negotiation between fan, emulator, and producer can be seen in various ways in the engagement with horror scores. Many artists who began as fans eventually went on to work in the fields they were originally riffing on. Lamerichs discusses the concept that “the creativity of fans can be read as a type of appropriation that borrows and repurposes existing cultural materials to produce something new.”<sup>9</sup> Umberto went on to provide the score to the 2019 Blumhouse-produced *All That We Destroy*. Maiovvi composed the score for the 2018 horror-comedy *Mutant Blast* and the 2017 Turkish horror film *Housewife*. Steve Moore, one half of the Goblin-indebted prog rock duo Zombi, went on to score 2017’s genre bloodbath *Mayhem* as well as Adam Wingard’s 2014 film *The Guest*; incidentally, before half of its members composed the score for *Stranger Things*, S U R V I V E had two tracks licensed for this film. Finally, Daniel Lopatin, the Carpenter-loving synth-based experimental electronic artist known as

7. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 49.

8. Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018): 14, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65svxz.4](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65svxz.4).

9. Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 17.

Oneohtrix Point Never, has developed a substantial film composing career by pairing with the Safdie brothers on their acclaimed films *Good Time* in 2017 and *Uncut Gems* in 2019. The success of these acts and their interpretations of touchstones from the past was fostered by the prevalence of retro fetishism and the nostalgic themes that are popular in media today.

In this period of increased interest and visibility of this bygone era and its icons, many of the film composers whose work set off this moment of retro adoration began to interact with fans in new ways. In 2015, after almost a decade of musical inactivity, John Carpenter released his first album of non-film score music titled *Lost Themes* on the label Sacred Bones. Carpenter's reactivation into the pop culture landscape was a precursor to the more abundant engagement soon to occur. The explosion of synthwave and the popularity of *Stranger Things* and its accompanying score, released on almost thirty different vinyl editions, further reinforced our collective adoration of retro styles and mediums. Carpenter and other renowned horror composers like Alan Howarth, Goblin, and Fabio Frizzi have since embarked on world tours, playing their beloved film scores live for audiences to engage with like never before. In the same vein as Umberto and Maiorvi's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* event, these titans have even rescored their films live. Joe LoDuca performed a live orchestral reimagining of his score to Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* at Beyond Fest last year and Fabio Frizzi did updated renditions of his score to the classic Lucio Fulci film *The Beyond* live in 2016—both recorded and released on deluxe vinyl sets. This sort of performance, which acts as a prism of fan engagement in which film, horror, and music fans converge, may not have occurred without “commodified nostalgia [that] involves the revival by the culture industry of certain fashions and styles of a particular past era.”<sup>10</sup> This sweeping renewed interest in these films, their scores, and the artists that created them can be related to the nostalgic commodification of the resurgence of vinyl and the popularity of 1980s synth music. It seems as though this reinvigorated fan engagement has brought these icons back into the field again.

In discussing fan engagement with reinterpretations of these horror texts within the era of nostalgic consumption, it is critical to address the vinyl boom we are experiencing and how it relates to retro fetishism with physical media. Cultural sociologist Andy Bennett and music industry instructor Ian Rogers suggest:

Physical media such as vinyl and compact discs, as well as the recently reappraised analogue cassette, remain alluring to niche listenerships, but these are unnecessary extensions to playback. They are not required. In terms of reproducing sound, these items are fetishized excesses, trading almost entirely on cultural and aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup>

This fetishization exists as a means of engaging with media from and inspired by the past, but it mainly acts as a form of cultural capital and aesthetic identity. The last decade has seen an increase in boutique vinyl labels with a focus on releasing much of the work

10. Shumway, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Sound Tracks,” 39.

11. Andy Bennett and Ian Rogers, “Popular Music and Materiality: Memorabilia and Memory Traces,” *Popular Music and Society* 39, no. 1 (2015): 35, doi:10.1080/03007766.2015.1061339.



discussed here. Death Waltz Recording Co., the label responsible for the Beyond Fest film and music festival, has released work, both new and old, from aforementioned genre titans like John Carpenter, Alan Howarth, Fabio Frizzi, Goblin, and Joe LoDuca. They have also released work from fan artists inspired by them like Umberto and Maiovvi. Another label contributing to this engagement is Waxwork Records, which has released the scores for Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) composed by Michael Abels, as well as genre classics like deluxe releases of the *Friday the 13th* franchise composed by Harry Manfredini, and synthwave staples like Pilotpriest's aptly titled opus *Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*. Engagement with the physical media of this era extends beyond just music. In Los Angeles, there have been several pop-ups dedicated to the fetishization of VHS culture, such as Slashback Video, an interactive museum made to resemble the VHS rental shops from a bygone time. The revitalization of a print version of Fangoria Magazine further solidifies horror's resurgence, aligning with these other forms of retro fan engagement that signify materiality and the potency of nostalgia to reactivate interest in physical media.

Our collective obsession with retro themes in the media we consume, the content we create, and the material possessions we collect speaks to our current societal climate. It may be the effect of rampant conservatism that is boiling over in our country, reflective of the politics during the 1980s, that is informing our current predilection towards these styles. Neuman suggests, "[m]aybe it goes deeper than that, too... the '80s represent a clash of optimism and pessimism, a fascination with flying cars and robotic dog walkers, tinged with a dark apprehension about what's to come."<sup>12</sup> This concept of a comforting past in an uncertain future is fitting when considering not only the political state of 2020, but also the digital era in which we are currently enveloped, where immateriality and isolation are increasing exponentially. Referencing memory traces in memorabilia, Bennett and Rogers argue, "in an era increasingly imbued with a sense of digital immateriality, cultural researchers have remained alert to the potency of our ongoing affective relationships with music's physical extensions."<sup>13</sup> The impermanence and uncertainty associated with our current age may lead us to reinforce this retro fetishism with physical media. Additionally, these fan reinterpretations, both live and recorded, act as a means of harnessing a temporal connection with the technologically fragmented world around us.

This renaissance of engagement with horror and music is not yet finished in this current age of retro fetishism, reinterpretation, and franchise revival. A new trilogy of *Halloween* movies is in motion, with the first one, released in 2018, containing a score composed by John Carpenter himself and naturally released on a multitude of deluxe vinyl variants. Tangerine Dream composed the genre-bending cinematic score to the acclaimed video game *Grand Theft Auto V*. Radiohead's Thom Yorke provided the gorgeously haunting score to Luca Guadagnino's 2018 remake of Dario Argento and Goblin's masterpiece *Suspiria* (1977). Marco Beltrami's terrifying score to the

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12. Neuman, "The Nostalgic Allure."

13. Bennett and Rogers, "Popular Music and Materiality," 39.

2018 creature feature *A Quiet Place* was nominated for a Golden Globe. Jordan Peele is following up his Academy Award-winning film *Get Out* and World Soundtrack Award-winning film *Us* by writing and producing a new *Candyman* film. With many boutique vinyl labels cropping up every year, releasing and reissuing new and old music of this style, we are still engaging actively with the past in new and exciting ways. Additionally, up-and-coming film composers and horror fans Bobby Krlic and Colin Stetson have paired with visionary filmmaker Ari Aster to redefine the genre and further revitalize it by augmenting the touchstones of previous generations with their work on modern classics *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019). Having spent most of my life adoring this era of filmmaking and film scoring, it has been amazing to see the ways in which these fan artists have harnessed the sonic identities of these films to create new dark corners to be explored. As many die-hard fans of horror's golden era become creators of media, the distinctions between production and fan engagement are increasingly blurred. The past has come back to haunt us and we are welcoming it with open arms.

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# Callowness of Youth: Finding Film's Extremity in Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel*

Lori McMahan

Considering the staggering longevity of art forms throughout human history, cinema is a medium that is still in its infancy. With a lifespan of just over one hundred years, film has undergone a rapid transition from an early twentieth-century futuristic fantasy to a booming global industry wholly emblematic of humankind's greatest achievements in technological advancement. Indeed a hallmark of innovation, cinema's larger-than-life standards of technical production and artistic design are influenced and facilitated by technology's ever-evolving nature and seemingly endless scope of power to create audiovisual experiences so captivating, they have effectively become a transnational pastime and enterprise. It would appear that cinema, though young in terms of its dynamic history, is riding high on a growth spurt whose influence has since inevitably permeated similarly adjacent forms of visual and performing arts. On the other hand, opera, one of history's oldest forms of music theatre, has maintained a steadfast history of consistently delivering engaging musical content. The history of the attentiveness toward its visual material, however, tends to falter in comparison to film.<sup>1</sup> Years after its introductory encounter with silent films in 1915, opera received a bite from the infectious Hollywood film bug in 1935, resulting in a hybrid fusion called the film-opera that nuanced the remarkable strengths and supplemented the most prominent weaknesses of a time-honored musical relic and a cutting-edge visual modernization, despite its unpopularity.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, the lasting effects of that initial bite have become more and more opaque with each freshly penned postmodern opera that leaps onto the stage, each one considerably more visually striking and therein, more technically and artistically demanding, than the last. In this essay, I claim cinema's influence on the models of composition, production, and human ability in postmodern opera repertoire by examining Thomas Adès and Tom Cairns' 2015 opera adaptation of Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel's 1962 surrealist film, *The Exterminating Angel*. A tale of a band of aristocrats who find themselves at the center of a dizzying, disorienting house party that they cannot leave, the film and opera both plunge their audiences into uneasy fascination by embracing the extremity of their cinematic nature.

Creating an entry point into the subject at hand will require a brief outlining of

1. Martha Feldman, "Evenings at the Opera," in *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

2. Marcia J. Citron, "A Night at the Cinema: Zeffirelli's 'Otello' and the Genre of Film-Opera," *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (1994): 700, [www.jstor.org/stable/742507](http://www.jstor.org/stable/742507).

opera's relationship with film and the advent of the film-opera, thereby constructing the framework by which I will examine the extremities within the opera's original score, closely adapted libretto, and undeniably impressive visual design. In noting the impact of cinema's digitally exploitative and dazzling spectacles on the level of expectation for staged theatrical productions, I pose a question that I believe to be relevant to the broader consideration of the postmodern treatment of history's oldest art forms; in the game of late stage capitalist-consumer society where the stakes of art patronage run high, do the impossibly high production demands of *The Exterminating Angel* continue to be an exception, or the new rule?

As an opera whose plot and dialogue is faithfully adapted from a pre-existing work of cinema, *The Exterminating Angel* and its relationship to its namesake film finds itself breaking conventions and formalities around the ways in which opera and film are expected to interact. These expectations remain standardized primarily by the small but distinguishable cinema genre known as film-opera. In order to underscore how *The Exterminating Angel* defies the historical model regarding the direction of influence between opera and film, the following section will provide a brief account of how the two initially came to make each other's acquaintance.

### A Glance at Opera in Film

Historically speaking, the use of sound and music in film serves one key function: to appropriately suit and further inform its accompanying visual material.<sup>3</sup> Daniel Goldmark, a scholar of music in animation, iterates music's vital role in effectively communicating an image in the chapter of his book, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon*, that details the life and times of Warner Bros. film composer Carl Stalling. In mentioning the role of film accompanists of the 1920s and '30s, Goldmark echoes media historian Tim Anderson's observation that the music selected to accompany any film footage must "present an appropriate musical analogue for the adjective or emotion on screen."<sup>4</sup> The film-first-music-later creative process employed by the sound film industry thereby sequestered music to occupy a permanent role of servitude toward its visual content. Thankfully, an exception to this model came in the way of a new cinematic genre around 1915: film-opera. Seeking to extend opera's range of accessibility beyond the opera house and record industry, this small but mighty body of work was revolutionary for tailoring what were traditionally staged productions into cinematically directed and produced works to be filmed and broadcast.<sup>5</sup> Film-opera finds itself in a position that departs from music's expected subjugation, as the opera half of the equation comes readily supplied with its own elaborate score. This naturally upsets the traditional direction of influence between the two components, displacing music's

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3. Daniel Goldmark, "Carl Stalling and Popular Music in the Warner Bros. Cartoons," in *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 10-76.

4. Goldmark, "Carl Stalling and Popular Music in the Warner Bros. Cartoons," 14.

5. Citron, "A Night at the Cinema," 701.

previous responsibility of providing a supplementary source of narrative information onto the film and effectively reversing the roles of who is serving whom. Film-opera, though a remarkably small film genre, manages to stand out as a rare example of visual cues being crafted around and informed by the narrative trajectory of their music.

Throughout its short history, film-opera has persisted with a mission to stretch the limits within the duality demonstrated by either side of its hybridity. *The Exterminating Angel*, while not a film-opera in any way by definition, remains a distinct case of film and music's interdependency working in a cyclical motion, where both elements are in constant states of informing one another. Buñuel's original film provided the composer and librettist with a base plot, narrative, character roster, and dialogue from which they created an operatic variation. In return, the staged production and its score serve to faithfully reframe the surreal world of Buñuel's creation, and in its association to the original material, the opera functions as an additional channel of influence and information for the film.

Despite the ostensibly nonparasitic relationship that exists between the film and opera versions of the *The Exterminating Angel*, it does little to tip the scales in favor of film-opera on the whole. It is the challenging "commingling of the disparate elements of theatrical artifice, vocal music, and cinematic realism that is perhaps unique in the history of film adaptation" within film-opera that is a point of concern for American film critic, John C. Tibbetts.<sup>6</sup> In raising concern for what he deems to be "problematic" about the genre, he posits that film contains devices of visual storytelling that are too inherent to the art form to communicate clearly through any alternative medium. In the section that follows, I offer a counterargument to Tibbetts' notion by suggesting that opera's facility as a non-cinematic art form has the ability to communicate through what Marcia J. Citron refers to as the "freedoms of cinema."<sup>7</sup> To do so, I will be examining the score and libretto of *The Exterminating Angel* in reference to the Metropolitan Opera House's 2017-2018 season run of the production in order to create points of contention out of the show's high degree of technical and musical demands. By examining the arguably cinematic degree of technical and musical demands throughout the entirety of the staged opera production, I aim to make a case for this opera's remarkable degree of cinemism beyond its designation as an outlier vaguely adjacent to a niche film genre, thus arguing that postmodern opera as a whole demonstrates the capacity to also lay claim to these so-called "freedoms."

### **Magnifying the Cinematic Devices of *The Exterminating Angel***

Cinema's resounding attitude of "what can't we do?" is rather appropriate in terms of its age, as film revels in its rebellion as the bastard, renegade son of visual and performing art's combined affair with technology. Metaphors of teenage angst aside, what Tibbetts

6. John C. Tibbetts, "The Voice that Tills the House: Opera Fills the Screen," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2004): 2, [www.jstor.org/stable/43797146](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797146).

7. Citron, "A Night at the Cinema," 702.

and Citron really mean when they bring up the “freedoms of cinema” are the freedoms of the digitally advanced world in which the art itself was birthed and raised. For art forms that predate cinema’s pioneering technology, there is a supposed assumption that those mediums are somehow less capable of adopting and acclimating to the degree of tech savvy that film inherits by virtue. Seeking to refute this notion, I will now cover key points of the production that demonstrate its undeniable scale of cinematic proportions.

## The Cast

The principal cast of *The Exterminating Angel* is scored across fourteen voices. This is an enormous cast of primary players by opera’s general standards, and especially when viewed in comparison to other postmodern opera literature.<sup>8</sup> Factor in eight additional secondary roles and two live sheep, and the opera boasts a base cast of twenty-four members (not included: the undetermined number of chorus members).<sup>9</sup> From an audience standpoint, an ensemble this large hinders the ability to piece together information into a cohesive flow of events, resulting in a story told through simultaneously occurring side narratives rather than a single metanarrative. Such an effect points to the disorienting surrealism at the core of the opera’s inspired source material, as well as a reflection of postmodernity’s rejection of metanarratives in the wake of post-World War II anxiety.<sup>10</sup>

Deviating from the longform thematic material of a plot while maintaining audience comprehension toward a linear narrative through devices such as flashbacks or concurrent side narratives is a visual storytelling device made possible in part due to film’s ability to be cut, spliced, edited, and rendered into simultaneously occurring stories that do not disrupt or confuse viewers. Attempting to achieve the same seamless effect with traditional staged production techniques often communicates as clunky in comparison, but *The Exterminating Angel*’s cast executes each shot-for-shot scene “replay,” identical repeat in musical material, and overall portrayal of their story through a series of smaller, more intimate encounters as gracefully as actors on a movie set. This success is no doubt aided greatly by set and costume designer for the production, Hildegard Bechtler, the individual responsible for turning the world’s largest opera stage into a fully functioning movie set.

## The Set Design

The primary feature of Bechtler’s set design is the massive, freely moving doorway that functions in the production as both a technical and artistic asset. The set piece

8. Zachary Woolfe, “Your Guide to the Met Opera’s ‘Exterminating Angel,’” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/arts/music/thomas-ades-exterminating-angel-metropolitan-opera.html>

9. Thomas Adès, *The Exterminating Angel: opera in three acts* (vocal score), Faber Music Ltd, London, 2015.

10. This idea was first brought to my attention by Professor Morgan Woolsey in a UCLA musicology course titled MUSCLG 125C: Modern and Postmodernism. Further reading on postmodern ideals can be found in the work of post-nineteenth-century scholars such as Frederick Jameson.

evokes a proscenium arch, the raised and curved edge of a theatrical stage that serves as a physical and mental barrier between the performers and the audience.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the opera's dizzying chronology, the doorway is able to move freely around the stage thanks to the set piece's internal directional mechanism. This allows the piece to act as a threshold from one doorway to another within the confines of the plot's house party. And yet, despite the number of opportunities that the enormous doorway presents for the party guests to leave the house, they instead find themselves driven to madness by their unexplained inability to physically cross the threshold. Surely, if a fully automated set piece were not reasonably exemplary of set design on a cinematic scale, then perhaps a more overt homage to film will suffice. The use of images and video footage presented on a projection screen are sprinkled throughout the opera's two and a half hour run time, providing the audience with additional visual cues that are intended to clue them in to plot-sensitive information that foreshadows events that are relevant to the plot but hinge on a particular lack of character knowledge. This storytelling trope differs in that it did not originate with cinema. However, for much the same reason that cinema and *The Exterminating Angel* can both pull off side narratives without confusing their audiences, secondary visual cues that create a distinction between audience knowledge and character knowledge are communicated as more sleek and effortless, like that of a film, when aided by technology.

### The Ondes Martenot

The role of the ondes Martenot is so prominent in the orchestration and compositional landscape of *The Exterminating Angel* that it very well ought to be billed as a member of the principal cast. In remembering Daniel Goldmark's remarks on music functioning appropriately for its intended visual content, there is so much one could say about what has quickly become science fiction cinema's second most beloved instrument. Invented by French composer Maurice Martenot as an electronic successor to the theremin, the ondes Martenot is most regarded for eerily resembling the timbre of a human voice.<sup>12</sup> This has made it particularly effective in science fiction and horror film scores, evoking atmospheres of extraterrestrial activity and nauseating uncertainty. As for this early electronic instrument's contribution to *The Exterminating Angel*, composer Thomas Adès attributes the titular role of the opera to the ondes Martenot's waveringly unstable pitch and curiously manipulated timbre: the hauntingly enigmatic voice of the exterminating angel itself.<sup>13</sup> The synthetic wobble of the instrument weaves in and out of the otherwise acoustic score, punctuating the guests' downward spiral of sanity with tinges of the unexplained supernatural that, until now, have found their home primarily in film.<sup>14</sup> In

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11. Woolfe, "Exterminating Angel."

12. Richard Orton and Hugh Davies, "Ondes Martenot (Fr. 'Martenot Waves')," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, 2001, doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.20343.

13. Edward Venn, "Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel*," *Tempo* 70, no. 280 (2017): 38, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000067.

14. Orton, "Ondes Martenot."



this way, the scoring of the ondes Martenot becomes the unifying component that places *The Exterminating Angel* at the intersection of cinema and staged theater. As it happens, the ghostly presence of the ondes Martenot as the exterminating angel falls just short of occupying the opera's most challenging and pivotal musical role. Such an honor belongs to that of coloratura soprano, Audrey Luna, who premiered the role of Leticia Maynar at the Met.

### Leticia's A6

Adès knew he had met the most enticing challenge of his career in the remarkable range of famed soprano, Audrey Luna, when the two fatefully met in 2012 during the Met Opera's run of his earlier opera adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Heralded for her incredibly lithe and stratospheric instrument, Luna first dazzled audiences with character Ariel's G6 in *The Tempest*, citing character Leticia's A6 in *The Exterminating Angel* as a follow-up "double dog dare" of her ability as a vocalist.<sup>15</sup> Though the note is well within her means, Luna found herself staring down a feat that had never before been attempted in performance during the entire one hundred and thirty-seven year history of the Metropolitan Opera.<sup>16</sup> What's more is that the placement of the infamous A6, rather than occurring during a moment of utmost climax in the score, is essentially the introductory note that the character of Leticia sings before she is even visible on stage.<sup>17</sup> Presenting such an impossible note and overall tessitura within a live opera production, according to Adès, "is a metaphor for the ability to transcend these psychological and invisible boundaries that have grown up around them."<sup>18</sup> In explaining his choice, Adès jokes that a role such as Leticia contains a certain "amount of useful cruelty involved... not cruelty, but the callowness of youth."<sup>19</sup>

Adès's account of youth's urge to stretch limits and push boundaries beyond the realm of possibility undoubtedly circles back to the previously discussed adolescent nature of cinema and its activity as a rogue vehicle of unimaginable fantasies come to life. A number of *The Exterminating Angel's* most distinct and exciting musical and visual features, such as Leticia's insurmountable feat, bear an uncanny resemblance to the aforementioned "freedoms of cinema," a likeness that Tibbetts surely never anticipated to find in staged opera. In shedding light on cinema's manipulation of the standards in which contemporary opera is conceived and constructed, I steer my discussion toward a consideration of live performing art's battle for patronage with the film industry's appropriately gargantuan, multibillion-dollar industry. The purpose in doing so is to

15. Zachary Woolfe, "At the Met Opera, A Note So High, It's Never Been Sung Before," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/arts/music/metropolitan-opera-high-note-exterminating-angel.html>

16. Woolfe, "At the Met Opera," 2017.

17. Thomas Adès, *The Exterminating Angel: Opera in three acts* (vocal score), Act I, Scene III, m. 67 (London: Faber Music, 2015), 7.

18. Woolfe, "At the Met Opera."

19. Ibid.

stake claim in the discourse surrounding postmodern opera by giving the repertoire's indisputable cinematic influence a chance to permeate the dialogue surrounding further discussion and research of contemporary opera.

### Conclusion

As of the year 2018, the United States film industry boasts a total revenue of \$43 billion.<sup>20</sup> In 2017, The Metropolitan Opera House saw a seven million dollar increase in generated revenue, capping out the fiscal year at \$148 million.<sup>21</sup> The truly harrowing comparison between them reveals that cinema no doubt occupies a league entirely of its own, irrefutably untouched by modes of live visual and performing arts. Despite its economic placement below film, postmodern opera adapts to the constant flux of cinema's influence, as demonstrated by the integration of cinematic devices in *The Exterminating Angel*. The notion of cinema's freedoms finding a home outside of its own facility is upheld by the opera's ability to dazzle and disturb its audience using cinema-specific modes of storytelling and adopting film's highly digital nature and tendency to err on the side of extremity. This, in turn, positions opera to hold its own in terms of competing with motion picture theaters for patronage. This is no easy feat, as the film industry has become acutely keen on how to best win the consumer's dollar. But in the race of late-stage capitalist society where the stakes of audience attendance run high in order to stay afloat, history's oldest surviving form of music theatre refuses to go down without a fight. The fusion of cinema and opera best encapsulates what ought to come from postmodernity's future treatment of musical and theatrical relics. In proving that film's ability to create a spectacle is not beholden to the art of cinema, I make a case for postmodern opera's greater correspondence with film, and in doing so, shift some of the silver screen's unprecedented prestige back toward its time-honored cultural ancestors. Though live opera will not likely overthrow the film industry in terms of patronage anytime in the foreseeable future, it remains deserving of our recognition.

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20. David Robb, "U.S. Film Industry Topped \$43 Billion In Revenue Last Year, Study Finds, But It's Not All Good News," *Deadline*, July 13, 2018, <https://deadline.com/2018/07/film-industry-revenue-2017-ibis-world-report-gloomy-box-office-1202425692/>.

21. The Metropolitan Opera Annual Report 2016-2017, 16. [https://www.metopera.org/globalassets/about/annual-reports/fy17\\_annual\\_report.pdf](https://www.metopera.org/globalassets/about/annual-reports/fy17_annual_report.pdf)

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# The *Narcocorrído* as an Ethnographic and Anthropological Lens to the War on Drugs in Mexico

Samantha Cabral

*Narcocorridos*, or “drug ballads,” first came into the public scene about twenty years ago in Mexico. The *narcocorrído* has become a subgenre of the *corrído*—which is “for the *pueblo* [...] one of the most typical expressions of the Mexican masses.”<sup>1</sup> Although its intention is not to deliver news, the *corrído* in many respects can be thought of as journalism put into song, encapsulating events of *pueblo* (town) and rural life, as well as true stories of tragedy and love. However, in recent years, drug traffickers and criminals have been using *corridos* to send threats as well as to glorify crime and violence creating the *narcocorrído*.<sup>2</sup> The violent and foul content of the *narcocorrído* has been felt as a threat to the country’s Catholic, festive, and family-oriented cultural origins. As a result, in several parts of Mexico we have seen the censorship of this type of song. While on the one hand, they are unsettling and violent to various degrees, they can help us to gain a better understanding of the Mexican people. This paper analyzes *narcocorridos* as a symptomatic lens for modern Mexico. I delineate how *narcocorridos* exhibit the rising narco regime and its nihilistic culture, but ultimately how they reflect the complexity and intimate pain that violence and desperation causes. Furthermore, I demonstrate how music allows us to see beneath the surface and gain a better understanding of social and political issues—on the basis that music itself is a social phenomenon indicative of profound attitudes, values, and perspectives. *Narcocorridos* point to three larger themes: a destroyed economy, the struggle to maintain power, and a victim’s painful yearning for a powerful alternative.

## The Corrido

Before examining the larger themes, let us first establish the historical context of

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1. Merle E. Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido as a Source for Interpretive Study of Modern Mexico 1870-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 7.

2. Louis M. Holscher and Celestino Fernández, “Contrabando Y Corrupcion: The Rise in Popularity of *Narcocorridos*,” In *Beginning a New Millennium of Chicana and Chicano Scholarship: Selected Proceedings of the 2001 NACCS Conference*, edited by Jaime H. García. (San Jose: National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, 2006): 161-174.

the corrido, as well as its musical aspects and corresponding connotations. Vicente T. Mendoza, a Mexican musicologist and leading academic authority on the topic of the corrido, has categorized the corrido in three different eras: the first is the pre-revolutionary period between 1875 and 1910, the second between 1910 and 1930—during and shortly after the Mexican Civil War—and the last from 1930 to present day.<sup>3</sup> Most scholars agree that the corrido was derived from Spanish romantic ballads.<sup>4</sup> Given that the Spanish ballad was an oral tradition, printed material to trace this evolution is extremely scarce. As a result, the process of this progression remains unclear. However, six lines of a ballad written by a sixteenth-century Spanish conquistador named Bernal Diaz del Castillo remain. According to him, Cortes' men sang this ballad "much in the manner of the battle corridos of modern Mexico."<sup>5</sup>

In regard to the musical aspects of the corrido, its poetic form, meter, instrumentation, and vocalization assist its greater narrative function. The corrido form is customarily *strophic*, which means the same melody is sung repeatedly throughout the song with different words.<sup>6</sup> Such form can be described as AAA. Other structures (such as the AABA form used frequently in jazz) are conducive to improvisation, variation, and free interpretation. However, the direct form of the corrido "begs the listener to focus on the details, nuances, and sentiments expressed in the text without being overly distracted by musical features."<sup>7</sup> Apart from directing the central attention to the story, the unornamented style of the corrido contributes to a solemn mood. In this way, the corrido perfectly serves the purposes of narcocorrido composers, who wish to express the blunt realities of their country. In other words, the corrido is a perfect platform for narcocorridos because on top of the lyrics, the simple form itself echoes a place where freedom is stifled, variation unvalued and justice is no more. Form is only one of several musical aspects that support the corrido's (and narcocorrido's) greater motives.

The corrido was originally played on guitar with vocal accompaniment. Over the years, the accordion, tuba, and the *bajo sexto* (twelve-stringed guitar) were added. In regards to rhythm, it typically follows a triple meter. The first of the three beats per measure is distinctly accented with a bass note, and beats two and three are immediately followed with chords. The pattern is not particularly conducive to dancing. In this way, the triple meter plays a role in steering the audience towards other concerns (such as the lyrics) and loyally upholds the corrido's function: to tell a story. That being said, there are corridos with duple meters from both past and present times.<sup>8</sup> However, duple meter corridos from the pre- as well as revolutionary period were few precisely because the triple meter best served the corrido's narrative purposes. Consequently, we only see the rise in popularity of the duple meter as people begin to want to dance to these songs—

3. Ric Alviso, "Musical Aspects of the Corrido, the War on Drugs, and Their Convergence in a Federal Prison," PhD Dissertation (University of California Los Angeles, 2002): 44.

4. Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido*, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 9.

6. Alviso, "Musical Aspects of the Corrido," 64.

7. *Ibid.*, 65.

8. *Ibid.*, 66.

bringing into question whether the role of the corrido can evolve.

On a more general note, whether they are about a political leader, a family death, the adventures of war, or a macho fight over a girl, corridos typically involve some level of tragedy. Furthermore, if a corrido is written it is understood that there is a serious message worthy of being handed down. That is, in each of these believed-to-be-true stories lies a lesson to be learned from the experiences and oftentimes the mistakes of others. For example, consider the lessons that can be extracted from this man's experience:

Casi sonaban las doce,  
cuando llegó aquel vaquero,  
desensilló su caballo,  
y se quitó su sombrero.  
Venía a pasarse la noche,  
con la mas linda del pueblo.

Midnight bells were about to ring,  
when that cowboy arrived home,  
he unsaddled his horse,  
and took off his hat.  
I was coming to spend the night,  
with the prettiest girl in town.

Estaban recién casados,  
salió a trabajar tres días,  
bajó ardiendo en deseos,  
por la mujer que él quería,  
la muerte andaba rondando  
y nadie la presentía.

They were newly married,  
and after three days working,  
burning in desire  
for the woman he wanted,  
death was lingering  
and no one felt it.

Estaba lloviendo fuerte,  
con el goteo se arrullaban,  
porque no se percataron  
cuando el vaquero llegaba,  
un relampago alumbró  
a dos cuerpos en la cama,  
el odioegó su mente,  
con rabia les apuntaba,  
se ollerón debolaciones  
hasta acabarse las balas,  
quería cobrarse la ofensa,  
eso era lo que el pensaba.

It was raining hard,  
with the rain they were lulled,  
because they didn't realize  
when the cowboy arrived,  
a lightning bolt showed  
two bodies in bed.  
The anger blinded him,  
with rage he aimed his gun at them,  
detonations were heard  
until the bullets ran out,  
he wanted to take revenge,  
that's what he thought.

Cuando descubrió los cuerpos,  
quiso morir de tristeza.  
primero abrazó a su esposa,  
después a su madre muerta.  
La tempestad de la noche,  
les regalo una sorpresa.

When he discovered the bodies,  
he wanted to die of sadness.  
first he hugged his wife,  
then his dead mother.  
The storm of the night  
gave them a surprise.

Su madre por la distancia,  
 muy poco los visitaba.  
 Y se sentía temerosa  
 si el cielo relampagueaba,  
 por eso durmieron juntas,  
 por sentirse acompañadas.

His mother, because of the distance,  
 very seldom visited them.  
 And she felt fearful with the sky  
 roaring in thunder and lightning,  
 that's why they slept together,  
 feeling accompanied.

Después que las enterraron,  
 se oyó un disparo a lo lejos,  
 se presentía la tragedia  
 por los acontecimientos,  
 en donde se oyó un disparo,  
 estaba el vaquero muerto.

After they were buried,  
 a shot heard in the distance,  
 tragedy was in the air  
 because of the events,  
 where the distant shot was heard,  
 there was the cowboy dead.

— “*La Tragedia Del Vaquero,*” *corrido* composed by Teodoro Bello (2006)

## Narcocorridos

In recent years, drug smugglers and mafias started using corridos to glorify crime and violence, formulating what are now known as narcocorridos or “drug ballads.” In the early 1970s, as drug trafficking and emigration from Mexico rose, *Los Tigres del Norte*, a band from northern Mexico, released an album consisting exclusively of songs about drug trafficking and violence. Their album was a precursor to the boom in popularity of narcocorridos and when faced with backlash about its content, Jorge Hernández of *Los Tigres* said, “The only thing that we do is sing about what happens every day. We’re interpreters, then the public decides what songs they like.”<sup>9</sup> This music, though violent and at times scandalous, at its core reveals a societal cry against injustice, and the consequences of a country famished of hope and opportunity. *Los Tigres del Norte* merely brought an intimately cultural wound out into open air.

The following narcocorrido is told from the perspective of a drug cartel, exemplifying the romantically resistant, violent, terror-instilling, and hyper-masculine attitude of these warlords, but more so the struggle on behalf of the “Drug Boss” to maintain power and respect as the legitimate figure of control in a region:

Zumbando por el estado  
 y armados con metralletas  
 en puros carros blindados  
 y a la orden de tres letras  
 así anda por todos  
 lados el comando del muletas

Humming through the state  
 And armed with machine guns  
 In pure armored cars  
 And at the orders of three letters  
 He walks everywhere  
 The crutches command

9. Holscher and Fernández, “Contrabando Y Corrupcion: The Rise in Popularity of Narcocorridos,” 168.

un hombre muy peligroso  
 que no le teme ni al diablo  
 sonriendo jala el gatillo  
 disfruta de su trabajo  
 y siempre les dice a todos  
 yo soy hombre no payas

A very dangerous man  
 Who does not fear the devil  
 Smiling he pulls the trigger  
 Enjoy your work  
 And always he says to all  
 I am a man, not a clown

— “*El Más Bravo De Los Bravos*,” *narcocorrido* by *Los Tucanes de Tijuana* (2018)

“El Más Bravo De Los Bravos” exemplifies the nihilistic culture promoted by Mexican cartels. Although the vast majority of narcocorridos do not contain such egregious depictions, scandal never ceases to be present in one way or another. My point is simply this: such gastly occurrences are not typical to the average person and thus must exist due to a mutation of the ideal human condition. It is for this reason, and in this sense, that I argue narcocorridos are valuable to society—or at the very least worthy of deeper study and consideration as to why they exist and continue to grow in popularity. Even within the subgenre of narcocorridos lies a wide taxonomy, each with slightly different connotations. In their research and analysis of the narcocorrido, Luis Ómar Montoya Arias Juan Antonio Fernández Velásquez categorized the subgenre into fourteen different classes.<sup>10</sup> The subject classifications are as follows: “religious faith, political criticism, honor, brave women, cruelty and threats, protest, fictional, tribute, facts, bravo, charge, of keys, partying, and murder/assasination.”<sup>11</sup> Consider the following narcocorrido that falls under the category “Mujeres Valientes” (brave women) which speaks of the involvement of women in the drug trafficking:

Salieron de San Isidro  
 Procedentes de Tijuana  
 Traían las llantas del carro  
 Repletas de hierba mala  
 Eran Emilio Varela  
 Y Camelia, la Texana  
 Pasaron por San Clemente  
 Los paró la emigración  
 Les pidió sus documentos  
 Les dijo: “¿De donde son?”  
 Ella era de San Antonio  
 Un hembra de corazón  
 Un hembra si quiere un hombre  
 Por el puede dar la vida  
 Pero hay que tener cuidado

They left San Ysidro,  
 Proceeding from Tijuana  
 They had the tires of their car  
 Stuffed with ‘the bad herb’  
 They were Emilio Varela,  
 And Camelia the Texan.  
 They passed through San Clemente  
 The immigration stopped them  
 They asked for their documents  
 They asked: “Where are you from?”  
 She was from San Antonio,  
 A woman of heart.  
 A woman, if she loves a man,  
 Can give him her life  
 But one must be careful

10. Luis Ómar Montoya Arias, and Juan Antonio Fernández Velásquez, “El Narcocorrido en México,” *Cultura y Droga* 14, no. 16 (2009): 227.

11. Montoya Arias, “El Narcocorrido en México,” 227-29.



Si esa hembra se siente herida  
 La traición y el contrabando  
 Son cosas incompatidas  
 A Los Angeles llegarón  
 A Hollywood se pasaron  
 En un callejón oscuro  
 Las cuatro llantas cambiarón  
 Ahí entregarón la hierba  
 Y ahí también les pagarón  
 Emilio dice a Camelia,  
 “Hoy te das por despedida  
 Con la parte que te toca  
 Tu puedes rezar tu vida  
 Yo me voy para San Francisco  
 Con la dueña de mi vida.”  
 Sonarán siete balazos  
 Camelia a Emilio mataba  
 En un callejón oscuro  
 Sin que se supiera nada  
 Del dinero y de Camelia  
 Nunca más se supo nada.

If this woman feels hurt,  
 Betrayal and contraband  
 Are incompatible things.  
 They arrived in Los Angeles  
 They passed to Hollywood  
 In a dark alley  
 They changed all four tires  
 There they handed in the herb,  
 And there too they were paid.  
 Emilio says to Camelia,  
 “Today I bid you farewell,  
 With your share,  
 You can remake your life.  
 I’m going to San Francisco  
 With the love of my life.”  
 Seven gunshots sounded,  
 Camelia killed Emilio  
 All the police found  
 Was a discarded pistol.  
 Of the money and Camelia  
 Nothing else was ever known.

— “*Contrabando Y Traición*,” *narcocorrido* by *Los Tigres Del Norte* (1974)

Underpinning each of these groups lies, to one extent or another, a rejection of moral principles (and also religious ones for that matter) out of an unplumbed conviction that life is meaningless. Granted, for some of the youth who join the cartels, it is not so much embracing the dominating forces of evil as much as acquiescing to them for the safety of their families. Business for cartels includes, but is not limited to: carjacking, kidnapping, and very frequently extortion. A young man from a family lacking the financial means to pay what is demanded by the cartels may join, so that they do not kill his sister whom they have kidnapped. Less dire motivations may include (as many *narcocorridos* put it) that “un amigo se [mete] a la mafia porque pobre ya no quiso ser” (“El Centenario” by Los Tucanes De Tijuana). On the one hand these ballads may be “the soundtrack to a nihilistic cult of automatic weapons and cocaine traffickers that [are] seducing [our] young.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, they are not so much a call upon drug lords as they are, “an artistic reflection of an undeniable reality... a mirror of the contemporary Mexican political drama of a tradition as old as Mexico itself.”<sup>13</sup> Either way, both perspectives point to a persistent injustice, power struggles, a corrupted market, poverty and more—songs that scream of a problem under three persisting

12. Alviso, “Musical Aspects of the Corrido,” 59.

13. *Ibid.*

strums representing terror, dominance, and revenge. So, let us now take a look into this political drama.

### Narcocorridos and Political Turmoil

The effects of the Drug War in Mexico are astonishing and severe. Yet, in the United States, people hear more about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq than those transpiring beneath our noses. According to an article by *PBS FRONTLINE*, since the beginning of the war in 2001 the number of civilian deaths has been estimated to be over 21,415. In regard to Iraq, they have calculated about “81,636 since the U.S. invasion in 2003.”<sup>14</sup> However, a recent study by the Mexican government shows “that between 2007 and 2014—a period that accounts for some of the bloodiest years of the nation’s war against the drug cartels—more than 164,000 people were victims of homicide”—nearly more than the total of both Middle Eastern countries.<sup>15</sup>

The hegemonic attitudes and intentions carried within narcocorridos particularly manifest in their use as a platform for sending threats, usually directed at one cartel group from another with the musicians being the middle-men. This results in a mix of musicians who sing narcocorridos on behalf of cartels either because they are coerced, or because they have embraced the songs and enjoy their role as “‘house bands’ of particular cartels or as the quasi- official spokespeople of a particular cartel’s interests.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, this puts musicians in a relationship with the cartels where infidelity is not to be meddled with. Freedom in music is choked and the music scene is transformed into a forum for displaying political supremacy.

This is the experience of musicians forced into singing narcocorridos, but many musicians are not forced at all, and pay their respects to cartel leaders as romanticized outlaws. They view themselves as similar to Robin Hood—a heroic outlaw who kills sometimes, yet is compassionate and cares for the poor.<sup>17</sup> Each cartel entity aims to establish its legitimacy in the popular eye and assert a sort of dominance over others that goes far beyond stereotypical Latino machismo. This inevitably leads to violence. Thus, cartels use intimidation tactics in order to maintain their authority and at the same time lead people to think that what they have to offer is better than the alternative (the Mexican Government), or simply that there is no alternative.<sup>18</sup> Traffickers use several forms of propaganda to “threaten, confuse, inspire fear, and persuade,” and music is just one of these.<sup>19</sup> The following message was broadcasted on a bridge in Juárez, Mexico by

14. Jason M. Breslow, “The Staggering Death Toll of Mexico’s Drug War,” *PBS*, July 27, 2015. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/>.

15. Breslow, “The Staggering Death Toll.”

16. Howard Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican ‘Drug War’: An Anthropological Perspective,” *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (April 2014): 71, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0094582X12443519>.

17. Philippe Bourgois, phone interview by Samantha Cabral, January 20, 2020.

18. Bourgois (2020).

19. Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican ‘Drug War,’” 71.

a Cartel group called Los Zetas:

Members and Ex-members of the Military, Los Zetas Wants You. We offer good wages, food, and benefits for your family. Don't keep putting up with mistreatment and hunger. We are not going to give you Maruchán [instant] soup to eat. . . . We pay in dollars. We offer benefits, life insurance, and a house for your family and children. Quit living in the poor neighborhood and riding buses. You choose, the latest model car or pickup truck. What more do you want? Tamaulipas, Mexico, the United States, and the whole world are the territory of the Gulf Cartel.<sup>20</sup>

Further spectacles have included attacking celebrations of Mexican Independence Day by blowing up cars and other objects in the streets of Mexico's central cities.<sup>21</sup> In these two examples, the power of the Mexican government is clearly being challenged. Not only that, but the government is doing nothing to help its citizens. In a desperate attempt to stop, or at the very least mitigate the killing, a Mexican journalist addressed the cartels that took over his city:

You are, at the moment, the de facto authorities in this city, because the legally constituted authorities in this city have been unable to do anything to prevent the continuing murder of our colleagues...We do not want more dead... tell us what you expect from us as a medium.<sup>22</sup>

These men use terror-instilling strategies similar to terror group tactics of the Middle East. From hanging corpses for the public to view, to censoring Mexican journalism by making them publish what the cartels want and covering up what they don't want to be made known, to forcing television companies to play their messages, narcos are at the very least fascistly controlling public life by sustaining an uncertainty in everyday people's daily activities. At worst, they are brainwashing public opinion into respecting them for giving the Mexican people not only the financial means to live, but material luxury the government could never give them—thus creating an antihero leader.

### **The Ulterior Imperative of the *Narcocorrido***

In this sense, narcocorridos are only a partial reflection of a greater monster: the war paralyzing the country. The rise of the outlaw economy in Mexico can be accredited a great deal to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that took effect January 1, 1994. The agreement left Mexican farmers unable to compete with the more efficient agricultural production of the United States. Their unprotected prices plummeted and the Mexican people found themselves without work or any sort of hope of making a comfortable living in their nation. With the Mexican government restricted by the terms set by the United States, people have been emigrating to search for hope elsewhere, or making their living off black market drug exchanges—and specifically

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20. *Ibid.*, 67.

21. *Ibid.*, 65.

22. *Ibid.*, 64.

off the United States' "appetite" for it.<sup>23</sup> Effectively, the common person finds himself crucified by the globalization of the free market. To that extent, cartels are a reaction to a disappeared economy, and the dark realities of neoliberalism are the unspoken hurt fueling the narcocorrido. This need for a powerful alternative authority and way of life lies at the heart of every drug ballad.

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23. Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido*, 73.

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# This Is Our Story: The Fight for Queer Acceptance in *Shrek the Musical*

Clarina Dimayuga

Musical theater is a performative space that allows artists and audiences alike to reimagine a hopeful future for themselves while facing an uncertain present. This is especially true for minority communities that can relate to the characters' struggles. In *Shrek the Musical*, the conflict between Farquaad's nation of Duloc and the fairy tale creatures mirrors the intrastate tension in California that arose with the gradual legalization of same-sex marriage in state legislatures in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> This tension is best demonstrated in the contrasting musical numbers "What's Up Duloc?" and "Freak Flag." The distinctions between the musical and lyrical content, costuming, and choreography encapsulate the clashing values and ideals between the queer community and opponents of same-sex marriage. I argue that the fairy tale creatures' victory over Farquaad promotes feelings of hope for queer audiences during a turning point in our history, but this also poses the question of whether LGBTQ+ coding in the show is truly being used to promote solidarity or is simply appropriating support for marginalized groups as a way to boost their profits.

Discourse around the right to same sex-marriage began in the early 2000s as Vermont became the first state to legalize civil unions for same-sex couples. In following years, courts at the state and federal levels disagreed on whether marriage for these couples was a constitutional right. Most notably, in 2003, San Francisco's former Mayor, Gavin Newsom, allowed officials in the city to issue marriage licenses for same-sex marriages, but this was quickly deemed a violation of state law by the California Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup> It was around this time that composer Jeanine Tesori joined playwright and lyricist David Lindsay-Abaire in the production of *Shrek the Musical*.<sup>3</sup> In the months preceding the musical's off-Broadway premiere in Seattle during September of 2008, the California Supreme Court struck down the ban against gay marriage. However, a voter-approved ban, Proposition 8, was passed in November. This was only the start of what would become an eight-year battle for the legalization of same-sex marriage on the federal level.

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1. Peter Henderson and Will Dunham, "Timeline of Gay Marriage in the United States," *Thomson Reuters*, June 26, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-court-gaymarriage-chronology/timeline-of-gay-marriage-in-the-united-states-idUSBRE95POYK20130626>.

2. Henderson, "Timeline."

3. Matthew Gurewitsch, "Orchestrating an Ogre's Monster Makeover," *New York Times*, December 11, 2008, [https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/theater/12Shre.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/theater/12Shre.html?_r=1).

Although these topics are not a primary message of the story in *Shrek*, it is clearly influenced by these events that reveal a major turning point in this country's history. The passing and overturning of same-sex marriage laws throughout the United States escalated tension between queer communities and conservative groups. Organizations like the American Family Association and Concerned Women for America maintain nationalist ideals that construe homosexuality as deviant behavior that pushes a morally harmful agenda on American youth.<sup>4</sup> Although nationalism to a certain extent may be seen as patriotic, excessive adherence to nationalist ideals can become detrimental, especially in a country that considers itself a melting pot of cultures and identities. These ideals characterize otherness as undesirable because it does not conform to the values of a particular group. However, when a nation consists of groups that tend to have differing values, the rights of those in the minority are often neglected in favor of the desires of dominant groups.

Similarly, the song "What's Up Duloc?" uses sonic and visual homogeneity to accentuate the issues of nationalism as extreme support for one's own nation at the expense of outsider groups. The instrumentation stresses the musical and choreographic tension performed by the chorus to highlight Farquaad's power over the people of Duloc while his lyrics explicitly condemn the fairy tale creatures for being unable to conform. As Shrek and Donkey enter Duloc, they are greeted by citizens of the town, a reference to the machine puppet show from the 2001 movie from which the musical was adapted. The opening cheerful flute melody is underscored by the sound of a ratchet, mimicking the sound of a toy being wound up as the seemingly lifeless bodies appear on the stage before bursting into dance. Their assertion that "Duloc is a perfect place" is undercut by the fact that this perfection comes about only through dictatorial control. The rules they list seem trivial: "Don't make waves, stay in line / And we'll get along fine." However, they serve to conceal the more significant consequences of Farquaad's rule that come through in the instrumentation. The constant ticking percussion, simple bass line, and rigid up-down-up-down contour of the single melodic line deindividuates the chorus by regulating the dancers' expressions and forcing them to sing exactly on the beat. The percussion persists throughout the song, emerging whenever the chorus sings to emphasize their lowly position as cogs in the machine.

The costuming further emphasizes the loss of individuality that results from extreme nationalism under the egotistic ideals of a hypocritical ruler. Ironically, the over-the-top presentation of the musical number reads as camp, a sensibility often related to LGBTQ+ culture; for example, it is associated with drag queen performance and musicians such as Freddie Mercury and Liberace who were generally understood to be gay. Though difficult to define explicitly, camp in this essay refers to an overt display of performativity in its most artificial, exaggerated, and hedonistic form.<sup>5</sup> Although it is unlikely that this was a deliberate choice by the writers, their use of camp sensibilities in

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4. Peter Hart-Brinson, "The Social Imagination of Homosexuality and the Rise of Same-Sex Marriage in the United States," *Socius* 2, (January 2016): 4, doi:10.1177/2378023116630555.

5. For a deeper discussion of what does and does not qualify as camp, see Sontag (1964).

this performance imitates the ways in which modes of expression used by subcultures, especially LGBTQ+ groups, are often appropriated and reintroduced into mainstream culture. “What’s Up Duloc?” is a performance put on by Farquaad and his dancers within the context of the musical as a whole, bringing an added level of artificiality to the musical number. Furthermore, the visual uniformity of the performers exaggerates their display of conformity to the point of parody. The identical plastic red and blue costumes paired with the dancers’ yellow helmet hair looks dull and artificial against Farquaad’s own flashy costume of the same color scheme. Though the short-stacked ruler believes this ensures that “the fashion’s never clashing,” the exhibition of these costumes comes off as enjoyably distasteful to the audience in the same way that cult followings develop around bad movies. Many viewers enjoy art that makes a serious attempt at success, yet allows the audience to revel in its failure. Overall, the performance mirrors attempts by straight people to appropriate camp sensibilities, whether deliberately or not. Farquaad condemns the fairy tale creatures for their deviant identities, yet uses the LGBTQ+ associated glamour and theatricality of camp in his introductory number as it suits him.

Likewise, the choreography takes cues from camp sensibilities by using exaggerated movements and over-the-top stagecraft to continue to drive home imagery that plainly demonstrates the tyrannical nature of Farquaad’s rule. The chorus’ movement is as identical as their costumes, with rigid, robotic gestures that serve as another reference to the film’s puppet show and reiterate their insignificance as common pawns. Even as Farquaad says, “let’s hear it for those Duloc dancers,” which would generally indicate a dance break featuring the ensemble, he remains in the spotlight as the dancers simply imitate his movements in the background. As the orchestra reaches the climax of its crescendo, so too does Farquaad “grow” as he shoves the dancers down and even shifts the stagecraft to present himself as taller than he is, elevating himself by stifling others. The extreme nationalist ideal of building community through assimilation of other groups elevates the standards and values of its ruling system and as the song ends with the chorus bowing around Farquaad before lying flat on their backs, they demonstrate how exaltation of these ideals can lead to the death of the individual.<sup>6</sup> His influence extends beyond the stage as he directs the audience to start and stop applause with a wave of his hand. Although the audience laughs at the silliness of Farquaad’s reaction, this interaction makes evident the power of a single charismatic person to control the masses. His elaborate displays of power over the citizens of Duloc and the audience alike are entertaining because this level of authoritarian power becomes outrageously laughable when framed in camp style.

In addition to Farquaad’s iron rule over the denizens of Duloc, those labeled as “Other” by his standards are physically and semantically separated from the “normal” majority. The fairy tale creatures, stamped as “fruitcakes and freaks,” are unable to conform and consequently concentrated into a single area, forced to camp out in Shrek’s swamp. They are classified as deviant and expressly labeled as queer through the word

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6. Anne Sanders, “What is Nationalism? Its History and What it Means in 2018,” *The Street*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.thestreet.com/politics/what-is-nationalism-14642847>.



“fruitcake,” a derogatory term used against gay men. The word “queer,” originally defined as deviation from the norm, has over time come to specifically denote deviation from gender norms. Though first used as a slur against the LGBTQ+ community, younger generations of the community have recently moved to reclaim it as an expression of self-identification that celebrates opposition to social norms.<sup>7</sup> The terms “queer” and “deviant” are two sides of the same coin viewed by two groups with opposing values. While queerness celebrates differences to bring people together, deviance applauds uniformity to tear people apart. Although not all the fairy tale creatures are necessarily queer by today’s definition, the markers of social and sexual deviance that led to their banishment from Duloc also mark them as queer or queer allies that come together in solidarity to uplift minority identities.

In stark contrast to “What’s Up Duloc,” “Freak Flag” features an assortment of characters each showcasing their individuality. This uniqueness is expressed through their costumes, solo dances, and lyrics pertaining to idiosyncrasies that, despite marking the characters as atypical, showcase their differences in a positive light. Although queer modes of expression often involve metaphor or an implicit understanding of things unsaid, this musical number does not make use of these stylistic choices, most likely because the writers are straight and use mainstream interpretations of queerness geared towards straight audiences. Instead, characters who are queer are very obviously marked as such in a way that echoes the experience of coming out of the closet and laying bare this previously hidden part of their identity. Other fairy tale creatures who have been similarly labeled as deviant by Farquaad share in this chance to revel in their authentic selves. The lush instrumentation, lyrics, and high-energy performances are characteristic of a show-stopping ‘11 o’clock’ number, demonstrating a growing sense of pride and acceptance of queer self-identity. This number mirrors the growing solidarity around the discussion of same-sex marriage during its time. As the fairy tale creatures lament being evicted from Shrek’s swamp after the ogre’s return, Pinocchio sets the stage for the song with the question, “Why can’t I be a real boy?” This is a question many closeted queer people are confronted with in the face of self-doubt as they ask themselves why they are unable to conform to expected gender norms. To this, Gingy (the Gingerbread Man) and Papa Bear (of Goldilocks lore) declare that “it’s they who need to change the way they think.” Farquaad and Duloc are not explicitly mentioned here, instead leaving “they” as an open invitation for everyone in normative society to change the way they think.

Perhaps in recent days this invitation has come to be more widely accepted, as gendered notions of being a “real” boy or girl are increasingly considered to be social constructions established by the dominant ingroup.<sup>8</sup> However, during a time when the freedom to marry was still contended, this hesitance to accept one’s “nonstandard”

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7. Juliette Rocheleau, “A Former Slur Is Reclaimed, And Listeners Have Mixed Feelings,” *NPR*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2019/08/21/752330316/a-former-slur-is-reclaimed-and-listeners-have-mixed-feelings>.

8. Linda Lindsey, *Gender Roles, A Sociological Perspective* (Boston: Pearson, 2015): 4.

sexual identity was widespread. In defiance of this uncertainty, Mama Bear (Papa Bear's mate) jumps right in along with a grooving bass line that is a call to arms to "let your freak flag fly." The pronounced rhythm of a grooving bass is danceable and welcomes listeners to embody the music. The "freak flag" is a reference to the rainbow flag that symbolizes gay pride, but in the same way that queerness is used to describe general deviation from norms, the application of the broader label "freak" is also a call to celebrate everyone's individuality.<sup>9</sup> As Farquaad's halfling origins later reveal, everyone has their own identities that differentiate them from the crowd.

The individual differences of the fairy tale creatures are featured at the climax of the song, allowing each character to come front and center for a solo part to describe how they deviate from social norms. In a striking contrast to the identical costume and dance of the Duloc dancers, those of the fairy tale creatures are a manifestation of their own personalities and experiences that are expressed through unique melodic and lyrical lines that build on each other. Unlike the call and response in "What's Up Duloc," which involves the chorus simply echoing Farquaad, the responding ensemble supplements the call with a related phrase that lifts the melody even higher in a gesture of acknowledgment of and support for their identity. The call and response is a musical feature that is often used in musical theater to simulate a conversation. Instead of repeating the call word for word in the response, the chorus of fairy tale characters responds with words of encouragement. For example, the Big Bad Wolf, dressed in grandma's nightgown as per "Little Red Riding Hood," sings, "I'm gonna shed my housecoat." The audience's previous familiarity with these fairy tale personas position these characters as two-dimensional stereotypes based on the children's stories they come from, such as the understanding that the Big Bad Wolf wears the nightgown to trick Little Red Riding Hood. However, each solo part turns this knowledge on its head by revealing that there is more to each individual than meets the eye. Two other fairy tale creatures remove the gown to reveal a glittering red dress as the chorus responds, "Miss Thing, you work it out!" The Big Bad Wolf effectively comes out as trans and is welcomed with overwhelming support in this call and response dialogue. With the right system of support, a person coming to terms with their queer identity can understand that feelings of self-doubt and anxiety are shared by others in the community and realize that individuals are never truly alone in their struggles.<sup>10</sup> The music crescendos at the chorus as everyone sings together to promote feelings of personal growth through solidarity under common difficulties and goals within the music and lyrics.

Moreover, Pinocchio's support from the other fairy tale creatures provides him with the perspective he needs to come to terms with his identity. The bridge opens with a lightbulb moment as he realizes that "it all makes sense now!" The marching snare and triumphant trumpets in the orchestra contribute to a sense of carrying a flag into battle

9. Curtis Wong, "The History and Meaning of the Rainbow Pride Flag," *Huffington Post*, May 29, 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rainbow-pride-flag-history\\_n\\_5b193aafe4b0599bc6e124a0](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rainbow-pride-flag-history_n_5b193aafe4b0599bc6e124a0).

10. Guy Shilo, Nadav Antebi, and Zohar Mor, "Individual and Community Resilience Factors Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, and Questioning Youth and Adults in Israel," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 55, no. 1-2 (2015): 216, doi.org/10.1007/s10464-014-9693-8.

as he recognizes that “together, we can stand up to Farquaad.” These characters who have been ousted for their individuality can come together in solidarity because their differences, whether it be sexuality, physical appearance, or even species, have given them not only a common enemy in the systems of power that have oppressed them, but also a common goal of accepting their own personal identities, as well as gaining a similar acceptance from the dominant ingroup of normative society. The rapport within this community is underscored through the harmonies between Humpty Dumpty’s soulful solo and the rest of the ensemble in a short gospel section that raises the group’s spirits. These feelings of empowerment, camaraderie, and compassion throughout this number come to a climax in the final repetition of the chorus.

The all-important key change in the final refrain represents a culmination of pride in oneself and one’s community, referencing not nationalist ties to the land but rather ties between the people who live together on it. As the musical numbers in a theater production are used to reveal emotional states in a character’s story, a key change signifies a change in a character’s thoughts or motivations. Farquaad’s message of growth through nation building and exclusion is merely superficial to both the audience and those who live in Duloc, as its simple dynamic increase goes to show. However, the key change in “Freak Flag” expresses genuine growth as the music modulates to a higher tonal center. It denotes a journey of queer acceptance both for normative society, through the audience members who were encouraged at the start of the song to change the way they think, and for queer individuals in the face of internalized homophobia through Pinocchio’s own awakening. His final line, “I’m wood! I’m good! Get used to it!” is a play off the LGBTQ+ slogan, “I’m here, I’m queer, get used to it!” that reclaims the word “queer” in self-identification to overturn systems of power.<sup>11</sup>

The fairy tale creatures’ subversion of Farquaad’s regime in the final scene encapsulates utopian ideals that come about from the possibility of a world in which all people are accepted, regardless of what makes them different. The utopia often performed in musical theater is defined by José Esteban Muñoz as “an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence ... is not enough.”<sup>12</sup> However, a utopian acknowledgement that there is something missing in the present opens the floor for the potential of the future to move towards this point of achievement. The capacity for utopian performativity exists in both musical performance and in queer identity, as Muñoz notes that “this potentiality is always on the horizon and, like performance, never completely disappears but, instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling each other.”<sup>13</sup> It is on account of the feeling of ongoing hope that we—and especially queer audience members—can move away from outdated notions of nationalism to solidarity, a sense of commitment and

11. Sara Whitman, “We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Used to It!,” *Huffington Post*, November 17, 2011, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/were-here-were-queer-get-\\_b\\_68399](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/were-here-were-queer-get-_b_68399)

12. José Esteban Muñoz, “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2006), 12.

13. Muñoz, “Stages,” 19.

belonging both within and without one's own groups. In a nation that places a high value on practicality and realism, this kind of idealism can seem overly optimistic and impractical. However, idealism is necessary for humanity to grow and evolve so that it may pull itself "out of the limitations of the known world and raise it above impulses of sensual gratification or of accommodation to more immediate worldly demands."<sup>14</sup> It is our idealism that allows us to view the world as it is and motivate us to make it better.

Despite the overt themes of solidarity and queer pride, the intentions of the seemingly straight cisgender creators of this musical and others that deal with queerness must be questioned; are they truly promoting solidarity, or are they commodifying musical theater as a branding tool? The book and lyrics of *Shrek the Musical* were written by David Lindsay-Abaire and the music was composed by Jeanine Tesori, both of whom are in heterosexual marriages.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, it is common for those in positions of power within the sphere of consumerism to exploit underprivileged groups by providing tokens of support through their products in order to give the image of being an ally and increase sales. DreamWorks and other media production giants have become household names by creating narratives that capitalize on the fears and aspirations consuming the nation at the time. Jessica Brater argues that DreamWorks "constructed *Shrek the Musical* as a celebration of multiculturalism to stake out a politically liberal position on Broadway ... and so distinguish itself from its arch-rival Disney."<sup>16</sup> However, this article constantly refers to DreamWorks as the sole producer and disregards Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori's roles as writers of the musical. While Lindsay-Abaire is a writer under DreamWorks, Tesori is a prolific composer of screen and stage whose own intentions in creating the music cannot be discounted. Although she is married to a man and thus is likely straight, she has organized a benefit to fight against anti-LGBTQ+ law and composed music for *Fun Home* (2013), the first Broadway musical to feature a lesbian protagonist.<sup>17</sup> From her activity in supporting the queer community, she could reasonably be considered an ally.<sup>18</sup> The ally role has been defined as "a dominant group member who provides support to an oppressed population, helping to carry out the objectives that are identified by the oppressed group."<sup>19</sup> Allies are necessary in

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14. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 165.

15. "Shrek the Musical." Playbill, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://www.playbill.com/production/shrek-the-musical-broadway-theatre-vault-0000012248>.

16. Jessica Brater, et al., "'Let Our Freak Flags Fly': *Shrek the Musical* and the Branding of Diversity," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (May 2010): 154, [www.jstor.org/stable/40660600](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660600).

17. Olivia Clement, "Stephen Schwartz and Jeanine Tesori Unite to Fight Anti-LGBT Law Tonight," *Playbill*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.playbill.com/article/stephen-schwartz-and-jeanine-tesori-in-concert-to-fight-hb2>.

18. In a PLAYBILL interview, Tesori discussed working as a composer for *Fun Home* and the challenge of creating a genuine representation of "butchness" that removed itself from common stereotypes of this identity. See Hetrick (2016).

19. Lauren Mizock and Konjit Page, "Evaluating the Ally Role: Contributions, Limitations, and the Activist Position in Counseling and Psychology," in *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2016): 19, [www.brandeis.edu/teaching/EvaluatingAllyRole.pdf](http://www.brandeis.edu/teaching/EvaluatingAllyRole.pdf).

achieving the objectives of minority groups because they can use their resources and positions of power to assist in the attainment of these goals. For Jeanine Tesori and the queer community, the production of *Shrek the Musical* was used to educate the audience on LGBTQ+ issues, as well as to promote solidarity and celebrate the path towards legalization of same-sex marriage.

Furthermore, while Brater et al. believe the overall message of *Shrek the Musical* to be a push for generic multiculturalism, they ignore the LGBTQ+ historical context that surrounded the show's early production, off-Broadway premiere in 2008, and national tour in 2010.<sup>20</sup> Art is, more often than not, a reflection of the artist's environment, especially in commercial media. As legislation regarding same-sex marriage was a hotly contested topic throughout the musical's production history, it is almost impossible for the show not to have been aware of and involved in the conversation around it. In fact, the original cast and subsequent touring cast included people of LGBTQ+ identities such as the original actor for Pinocchio, John Tartaglia, who is openly gay. The entire cast of the touring show also joined other celebrities in making videos for the "It Gets Better" campaign on YouTube. This campaign was intended for LGBTQ+ teens in the hope that it would provide some sense of support for those struggling with this part of their identity. As the actions of the showrunners and the cast have shown, support of queer identities is a significant message of the musical and its paratexts.

Additionally, queer coding is often overlooked or mistaken as multiculturalism by members of the straight hegemony who are unaware of the symbols of expression used by queer subculture, such as Farquaad's camp performance in "What's Up Duloc?" Most of the critical and popular reception of *Shrek the Musical* touts the fairy tale creatures' victory as a multicultural win. However, it's easy to see where the lines between media that supports multiculturalism and media that supports queer folks become blurry. People of ethnic minority backgrounds and those who identify as LGBTQ+ share similar hardships that stem from the same social and structural injustices. This is why it is important for these communities to build each other up, whether they share these identities or not.

The fight for queer acceptance has come a long way from the previous intrastate hostility and homophobia that existed when *Shrek the Musical* had first debuted. This struggle is one that will continue as we depart further from nationalist beliefs of homosexuality as deviance. Although the depiction of a utopia in which marginalized groups can overthrow the authoritative structures by which they are suppressed serves as a reminder that there is something lacking in the world we presently live in, it is also a reminder that there is something to live and fight for today with a hope for a better tomorrow. This is our story, not only as a queer collective, but as a nation that strives to be united by community and a sense of solidarity that celebrates everyone's individuality.

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20. Brater, "Branding of Diversity," 153.

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## Cats: Culturally Significant Cinema

Liv Slaby

*A note from the editors: As a senior member of the editorial board, while Liv had the chance to review other papers and provide feedback, she was not involved with the selection process for this issue of the journal.*

Fan practices around *Cats* (2019) draw critical ideas about taste, fandom, movie musicals, and camp into a conversation that questions the stability of their internal oppositions. These concepts are often positioned through polarities that become play spaces at *Cats* screenings. Through an intertextual framework modeled on *Rocky Horror* fan practices and traditions of musical theater, movie musicals, and cult films—all especially conducive to active fan performance and textual poaching—camp emerges from the dialectic of play between good taste and bad taste, as well as fandom and anti-fandom. Similarly, the polarities of camp itself are transversed and negotiated through these fan practices. Fans employ a queer aesthetic frame to upset oppositional notions used in these discourses. They simultaneously deploy cultural capital, engaging a system of inclusion and exclusion to camp *Cats* as a claim to cool.

### On Stage and Screen

*Cats* is a sung-through musical “composed” by Andrew Lloyd Webber, based on the 1939 poetry collection *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* by T. S. Eliot. It premiered in 1981 on the West End and soon opened on Broadway, becoming the fourth-longest-running Broadway show in history. The musical’s standout hit, “Memory,” has been recorded over 600 times. The stripped-down plot involves a group of cats, the Jellicles, who meet once a year to make the “Jellicle choice” and decide which cat will ascend to the Heaviside Layer. The draw of the show is the experience; audiences are met with seats that wrap around three quarters of the stage, an oversized set that spills out through the house, and a high-energy dance performance wherein the fourth wall disappears. *Cats* offers complete immersion in another world, populated by a wealth of kooky characters and emphasizing themes and moods over dramatic momentum.

London critics enjoyed the show’s eclectic tone and choreographic showmanship, previously unseen on the English stage. Broadway critics were more mixed, though reviews were inconsequential; the show marked the emergence of the megamusical with a heavy marketing campaign promising entertainment bigger than anything audiences had seen, and the iconic glowing cat eyes were inescapable on



the streets of New York City. Megamusicals elevate spectacle over drama, employing constant music, a simple plot, and flowery scenic design. Their value lies in their innovation and wholeheartedness; *Cats* likely would not have found success were it not completely original in its time.<sup>1</sup>

The music is often considered pastiche, as it invokes the common musical theater practice of drawing on other show tunes, pop standards, and light classics. While some critics found Lloyd Webber's implementation of his musical influences clever and maximally orchestrated, others remarked on its unoriginality and empty appeal to popularity. "Memory" utilizes a simple pop-rock progression, influenced by Romantic-era conventions, and several have noted its similarity to Ravel's *Boléro*.<sup>2</sup> The soundtrack functions to underline the dancing, which in itself is literal and not particularly innovative or aligned with the themes of the show, adding to the spectacle through sweeping orchestrations and creating accessible enjoyment based on paradigms familiar to a mass-culture audience. Lloyd Webber was in a financial bind before *Cats* and strove to create a musical that was flashy, engaging, and above all, popular. As he told Hal Prince, who inquired about deeper meanings involving religion or Queen Victoria in the show: "Hal, it's about cats."<sup>3</sup>

*Cats* (2019) received a wide release from Universal Pictures in the U.S. and U.K. around Christmas. It was critically destroyed as well as financially disastrous, making \$74.6 million on about \$100 million. On opening weekend the studio distributed the film with supposedly improved special effects, before quickly yanking the Oscar campaign. Director Tom Hooper loved the musical as a child because it transported him to a different world, and he said of the film: "The thing I'm most proud of is that you feel grounded watching it; it's not that fantastical."<sup>4</sup> Highlights of the cinematic craft include cockroaches with human faces, Judi Dench's fully human hands, and Jennifer Hudson's runny nose and slipping CGI cat face as she belts out "Memory." As in the musical, the characters are sexualized; masks and tight costumes draw attention to their bodies as they dance and move in provocative and primal ways. However, in the film, any sexuality feels forbidden and unsettling due to the strange visual choices in rendering the actors as CGI cat-people. Whereas the stage actors are clearly human, the film's characters appear as voluptuous anthropomorphic animals, evoking an uncanny valley effect yet inviting attraction. This element of danger and deviance encourages playful interpretations and further sexualisation amongst subversive readers.

Whereas the musical's soundtrack is broadly orchestrated and uses synth within the conventions of '80s pop, the film's soundtrack is overblown and ricochets between genres. The musical's orchestrations all operate within the typical musical theater sound, while the film's music is jarring in its dissociation from both the visuals

1. Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 174.

2. Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 165.

3. Barbara Isenberg, "Prince at the Helm," *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1994, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-10-09-ca-48293-story.html>.

4. David Sims, "A Serious Conversation With the Man Who Made 'Cats,'" *The Atlantic*, December 26, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/12/tom-hooper-cats/604147/>.

and other elements of the score; “Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats” oscillates from a crisp, horn-punctuated pop melody to a bass-heavy dance beat to an invocation of a Strauss waltz within twenty seconds, whereas the Broadway recording retains its orchestral sound throughout the song.

Because the critical and popular reception of the film almost unanimously negated producer expectations, the power dynamics of capitalist production that enable producers to control textual interpretations were upended; creators of big-budget Hollywood films like *Cats* are often able to police fan activity online to control the image of their work. Instead, this communicative failure opened a space for those who engage with the film to freely create their own meanings.

### (Anti) Fandom and Cult Films

*Cats*' breakdown in producer control evokes the ideas of Henry Jenkins, whose work utilizes Michel de Certeau's characterization of readers as textual poachers engaged in a struggle for possession of a work and interpretive control.<sup>5</sup> Producers actively attempt to confine and dismantle meanings, but *Cats* represents an instance in which viewers almost unanimously rejected authorial intent. Whereas fans usually come from a culturally marginalized, socially weak position and must negotiate with those in positions of economic and interpretive power, *Cats* fans are able to step into the role of producers through fan-organized screenings and parties, and they perform the part of the author with overdramatic restatements of the producers' intentions, hailing the film as a masterpiece on social media with a fondness not entirely ironic.

With producers unable to construct acceptable fan activity, fans are free to engage in disruptive and derisive practices which may read as anti-fandom rather than fandom. These engagements evoke Derek Johnson's “fantagonism,” which he defines as “ongoing, competitive struggles between both internal factions and external institutions to discursively codify the fan-text-producer relationship according to their respective interests.”<sup>6</sup> Johnson examines the multi-layered meanings produced within the hyperdiegesis of a cult text, and how competing interpretations structure fan practices and establish acceptable audience relationships to an industrially produced text. Johnson determines that practices of fantagonism create and preserve hegemonies of cultural power, typically defined at the institutional level. Especially in cult texts, which employ a higher degree of textual poaching and multidimensional interpretations, examining fan practices involves focusing on hegemonic negotiations rather than community formation across levels of production. Because the *Cats* producers essentially abandoned the film, responding to harsh criticism with radio silence rather than a reframed marketing scheme, those who engage with it to the highest degree become the disseminators and regulators of meaning. *Cats* fans perform this position of authority,

5. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24.

6. Derek Johnson, “Fantagonism,” in *Fandom, Second Edition*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 371.

articulating hegemonic structures around the text through systems of inclusion and exclusion evoked in fan practices. These practices play between oppositions of fandom and anti-fandom as viewers criticize the film and its music while engaging in behaviors that signify genuine enjoyment, such as repeat viewings and listening to the soundtrack, sometimes appearing to outsiders as though they genuinely connect with the producers' intentions and effectively excluding those who lack an appreciation for this irony and sarcasm. Fans and anti-fans both experience enjoyment in cultural activity around the text, and they form communities and identities based on a passion for the arts. The performative, camp element of practices around *Cats* complicates oppositional notions of fandom and anti-fandom as fans renegotiate their meanings through discourse-as-play.

Fan engagements with *Cats* work through intertextual interpretive frameworks involving knowledge of cinematic, musical, and theatrical canons, pop culture, and other cult films. Many practices are modeled on those of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, evoking the competition that emerges when a shadow cast member performs a role. *Cats* fans dress up, participate in karaoke and sing-along shows, and a majority of audiences are young (between twenty and thirty years old) and attend with their friends. Many journalists question whether *Cats* is the next *Rocky Horror*; while *Rocky Horror* is entrenched in cultural references, consciously wavering between pastiche and parody through representations of artificiality and artifice, *Cats* lacks this embedded manipulation of camp and thus may not have *Rocky Horror*'s staying power.<sup>7</sup> However, although *Rocky Horror* is deliberate camp, audiences camp the film at a disconnect from producer intentions, comparable to readings of *Cats*. Both are cult films, a form that heightens the transportive ability of movies through deeper and more community-based engagement as they evoke a "spiritual passage from the physicality of a seat in a theater to the physicality of an imaginary time-space continuum."<sup>8</sup> Cult films often require a suspension of disbelief, involving irrationality and nonconformity. Midnight movies are a subset of cult films created by audiences through subversive readings that rebel against normative social attitudes and the practices of the typical audience.

## Taste

This subversive engagement with *Cats* evokes discursive play with historical structures of taste. By the 1790s intellectuals began setting cultivation and materialism in opposition, concluding that commercial success might impede artistic achievements; as Matthew Arnold famously asserted in 1869, culture is the "best that has been thought and said in the world" and his aspiration to "make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light" effectively established a high Victorian cultural agenda.<sup>9</sup> These

7. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 246.

8. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 16.

9. Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 15.

ideals present a reference point for ironic performance in camp interpretations.

In the mid-nineteenth century, as the United States became less fragmented and hierarchical due to increasing immigration and urbanization, the elite attempted to assert control by sacralizing culture, elevating pursuits of earnestness and spiritual aesthetic gratification over fashionable styles. This attempt to control public spaces rendered exoteric works inaccessible to those who had appreciated them earlier as the upper class appropriated the term “culture” to signify high art.<sup>10</sup> Opera houses, concert halls, and museums, once socially and financially available to the public, became temples of the educated as other entertainment like photographs, bands, and public libraries emerged for the masses. The interwar period saw the rise of egalitarian language and a reluctance to assert “the best” without allowing for a reader’s preference. The worth of culture was contested as the twentieth century saw a partial, uneven shift from producer to consumer values, as traced through the history of middlebrow. Susan Sontag coined this phenomenon the “new sensibility,” articulating a disappearing distinction between high and low culture in favor of a pluralistic perspective.<sup>11</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu asserted in 1979 that taste arises from one’s class and the social institutions and networks through which one pursues goals.<sup>12</sup> Taste functions to advance status through accumulation of cultural and social capital; this is another system, framed as a reinforcement of class hierarchy, engaged by camp fan practices. The young demographic of *Cats* fans invokes Carl Wilson’s assertion that Bourdieu’s pursuit of distinction can be rephrased as the pursuit of “cool” when discussing those under fifty years old. The University of California, Los Angeles’ Bruin Film Society organized a *Cats* viewing party, and my own *Cats* party was mainly populated by my friends who consider themselves film buffs; also, rowdy screenings at theaters are primarily held in large metropolitan areas where young people tend to be more attuned to arts and culture. Therefore, those engaging in fan practices around *Cats* deploy cultural capital to assert belonging to a social group that values astute artistic and pop culture awareness.<sup>13</sup>

Creating this community requires articulating systems of taste and exclusion; dislike of a text involves specific expectations and values. Anti-fans have clear ideas of what is worthwhile in a text, and they assert through anti-fan practices their ideas of morality and aesthetics in art.<sup>14</sup> What one disapproves of in media consumption is indicative of what one approves of, as fans cannot assert love for one text without dismissing others. Fans must like and dislike the right elements of *Cats* in the right way: through a lens of irony that produces deviant readings, and in language that indicates insider knowledge of film, theater, and music. Jokes around the film include

10. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 132.

11. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 241.

12. Carl Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 88.

13. Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love*, 92.

14. Jonathan Gray, “New audiences, new textualities,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 64-81.

creating Criterion Collection covers and asserting in-depth aesthetic interpretations in movie-buff jargon as if it were an auteurist work of high art. *Cats* fans deal between the polarities of liking and disliking a text, introducing a dialectic through which camp readings emerge.

### Camping *Cats*

Camp resists definition and can be understood by examining the modes of and reasons for this resistance. Fabio Cleto's introduction to *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject - A Reader* expands upon British comedian Kenneth Williams's comment that "camp is a great jewel, 22 carats" to articulate camp's significance as culturally constructed and its inscription within the signifying system of preciousness and luxury.<sup>15</sup> Cleto deploys the camp-as-diamond metaphor to provide a framework for examining different perspectives; those who have written about camp refine the camp gem into facets by struggling between and within paradigms, wrestling with a subject and object of discourse that refuses crystallization.

One prominent topic of disagreement is the relationship between camp and queerness. Some scholars, like Jack Babuscio and Richard Dyer, assert that camp is a sensibility exclusive to gay men, a creative energy that stems from a specific social situation and fosters belonging to a community.<sup>16</sup> While Susan Sontag recognizes how gay men utilized aesthetic taste as a tool for social integration, she ultimately separates camp and sexuality.<sup>17</sup> Because these scholars were writing in a different social landscape, and because I frame camp in this paper as unstable and inclusive, I will present a camp that is engaged with queerness in its history and discourse yet not dependent on the sexuality of its practitioners. Similarly, writers' constructions of camp as serious versus playful, cynical versus affectionate, and self-mocking versus self-celebrating present oppositions that can be transversed, with a queer discursive architecture allowing audiences to locate camp between polarities.

Queer and camp work as all parts of speech, presenting an inclusiveness that fosters disagreement. These terms share in their "clandestine, substantial inauthenticity, unstable and elusive status, devoiding the subject of its fullness and permanence."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, asking whether camp is gay seeks a determinism that betrays camp. One can visualize defining camp as trying to sit in the corner of a round room in a building constructed on sand; discussions of camp are structured by a queer architecture.

Some critics postulate definitive definitions of camp while others resist doing so, which evokes multiple facets of the jewel. Philip Core provides an index of camp

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15. Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 1-3.

16. Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 40.

17. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 290.

18. Fabio Cleto, *Camp*, 16.

composed of people, places, and things, as he asserts that camp is in the eye of the beholder. Additionally, he lists brief interpretations of camp including “character without context... moral anarchy which makes room for the self without altering the attitudes of society... embarrassment without cowardice... a lie that tells the truth.”<sup>19</sup> Susan Sontag stakes a broader yet more definitive claim, asserting that camp is the sensibility of aesthetics, a way of seeing the world in terms of the degree of artifice and stylization.<sup>20</sup> Most critics articulate camp through oppositions, providing polarities to be negotiated in *Cats* interpretations.

Camping a text requires a space for rebellious theatricalization and improvised mise-en-scène. This space can be described as a party, evoking the playful performances in which *Cats* fans engage at social gatherings centered around the film. As Christopher Isherwood writes, “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it, you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.”<sup>21</sup> Fans display appreciation for cinematic craft by celebrating the lack of it in every element of *Cats*. Strong beliefs about what makes a film worthwhile enable viewers to appreciate the existence of *Cats*, seeing a bad movie through an incredulous and joyful lens constructed with awareness of cinematic conventions.

The movie-musical form of *Cats* makes it especially conducive to camp readings. In *Making Light*, Raymond Knapp remarks upon musical theater’s full-frontal embrace of artifice, wherein it effectively forecloses claims of authenticity within the paradigms established for popular music. Music that mostly comforts does not seem as authentic as music that discomfits, since to comfort is to indulge fantasy and sentimentality.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Sam Baltimore examines a *Sound of Music* singalong and asserts that “the world of the song has a queer temporality...celebrating instance rather than progression...camp sensibility demands that we read everything both ways, see everything as simultaneously queer and straight, comical and serious, musical and dramatic.”<sup>23</sup> The camp party works within both a queer architecture and a queer temporality, invited by the form of the movie musical.

## Conclusion

Critical theory positions fandom and anti-fandom as well as good taste and bad taste as oppositional. *Cats* fan practices evoke a dialectic of these ideas, exercising the good taste of bad taste, a camp practice that simultaneously liberates in its playfulness and signals a continuation of the aristocratic posture in relation to taste. *Cats* fans negotiate the power

19. Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth* (Medford: Plexus, 1983), 3.

20. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 275.

21. Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1954), 54.

22. Raymond Knapp, *Making Light: Haydn, Musical Camp, and the Long Shadow of German Realism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 249.

23. Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis, ed., *Music & Camp* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 131.

structures of fandom, engaging with a naively camp object, which Sontag states “... enacts a superiority of the decoding subject based on a deliberate misunderstanding.”<sup>24</sup> This superiority is enhanced by the financial losses of the film. By taking control of textual interpretations, fans claim the film’s commercial context and budget of \$100 million, which can be viewed as its initial valuation; *Cats* fans throw a very expensive party in celebration of a capitalist failure.

This camp party takes place on a stage that lacks stability as fans queerly transverse oppositions. In *The Aesthetic of Play*, Brian Upton discusses the role of play, which he defines as, “free movement within a system of constraints,” in performance and critical discourse. He notes the value of examining not a work’s meaning but rather the play it allows in audience engagement, and how every reader navigates the work through a system of constraints structured by their aesthetic frame.<sup>25</sup> *Cats* fans’ camp readings engage in both performative and critical play through a theatricalized reception and a queer aesthetic frame. Fans structure a discursive play space that allows for interpretive moves toward control of textual meaning, as well as a meta-critical play space of the discourses around interpretation itself.<sup>26</sup> By celebrating and performing *Cats*, fans play with and between notions of fandom and anti-fandom, good taste and bad taste. They evoke a play space to introduce a dialectic of dualities through which camp readings and a genuine passion for art emerges. This party also calls into question the stability of notions of camp itself, often critically articulated through polarities.

Engagement with *Cats* is built on an intertextual framework of fan practices around midnight movies and movie musicals which encourages throwing a party within a queer, unstable architecture to camp the film. This performance space activates camp’s system of inclusion and exclusion as fans pursue distinction from the mainstream and belonging to a group that values artistic ideals by making fun out of the film’s lack thereof. At this Jellicle Ball, fans play between polarities of good taste and bad taste, fandom and anti-fandom, and critically opposed definitions of camp, ultimately asserting discursive dominance over the text and claiming *Cats* as a camp delight.

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24. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 282.

25. Brian Upton, *The Aesthetic of Play* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 264-298.

26. Upton, *The Aesthetic of Play*, 301.

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## Contributors to this Issue

### In order of appearance

**SPENCER SLAYTON** is an avid record collector, horror film fanatic, and film music enthusiast. Currently a junior in the music history and industry program at UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music, he hopes to employ his love and passion for music and film to pursue a career in music supervision. When he's not collecting and listening to film scores or watching horror films, he's on the quest to find the perfect breakfast burrito.

**LORI MCMAHAN** is a fourth-year undergraduate student at UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music and will be graduating with a bachelor of arts degree in musicology this year. Lori is a founding member and outgoing secretary of the undergraduate-run Active Listening Club. She is also a member of uclaFLUX, HASoM's contemporary chamber music ensemble under the direction of Gloria Cheng.

**SAMANTHA CABRAL** is a second-year ethnomusicology student at UCLA. Growing up in the Mexican community, she fell in love with her culture and particularly its music. She enjoys research, studying, family, and performing professionally in the all-female and Grammy-nominated mariachi group Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles.

**CLARINA DIMAYUGA** is a senior graduating this spring with bachelor's degree in psychology with a minor in musicology. She hopes to combine her love of psychology and musicology by pursuing research in the field of music therapy.

**LIV SLABY** is a third-year musicology major minoring in theatre and pursuing dramatic writing. She has written, directed, and held creative team positions for productions of UCLA's HOOLIGAN Theatre Company. Her academic interests include queer film and literature, reception theory, and self-perception through sound in gymnastics.

## Closing Notes

Thank you for reading. If you are interested in learning more about either the Active Listening Club at UCLA or MUSE, please contact us at [uclamusclgy@gmail.com](mailto:uclamusclgy@gmail.com), or visit us at our website at [uclamusclgy.github.io](http://uclamusclgy.github.io). We are always looking for people to join our team, and we are always accepting submissions.

Special thanks to the wonderful faculty and staff of the UCLA Department of Musicology for your support and mentorship.

## Active Listening Club Members

Alana Chester	Ashley Zhang	Katrina Weissman	Miles Mateus
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Vol. 1, No. 2  
Spring 2020