

**“INSUBORDINATE” LOOKING: CONSUMERISM, POWER AND IDENTITY AND
THE ART OF POPULAR (MUSIC) DANCE MOVIES**

by

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The dissertation distinguishes the cultural and historical significance of dance films produced after *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). The study begins by examining the formation of social dancing into a specific brand of commercial entertainment in association with the popularity of Vernon and Irene Castle as social dancing entertainers around 1914. The Castles branded social dancing as a modern form of leisure through their exhibitions of social dancing in public, through products that were marketed with their name, in a book of illustrations for “*Modern Dancing*” (1914), and through *Whirl of Life* (1915), a film they produced about the origination of their romance and popularity as dancing entertainers. The chapter emphasizes the way in which the Castles represent their success in romance and entertainment as validated by pleasures reflected back to them by their audiences. The chapter concludes with an analysis of *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939) in which Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers commemorate the Castles’ influence upon audiences to symbolically participate in popular social dancing through consumption of their products.

The second chapter looks at the way in which representations of youth dancing in musical entertainment produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s similarly mythologized their power through dominant discourses of the folk musical, surveillance, deviance, and instruction in *Blackboard Jungle*, *West Side Story*, and *Bye Bye Birdie*.

The last chapter performs a close reading of dance movies produced after 1977. Dancing styles originating from disco and hip hop subcultures in the 1970s are signified in dance movies as a source for representing renewal of community, popular art, and public space by their proximity to audiences, popular song, and artifice. Modern innovations in media technology accommodate these transformations.

The dissertation argues that dance movies mimic folk musical rhetoric to validate popular culture as a source of renewal for traditional arts. The dissertation concludes that dance movies are a paradoxical modern genre of folk film musicals that reconstruct traditional relations of folk performance and reception as a consumer process that commemorates cultural progress and social change through symbolic participation in social dancing to popular song.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION: DANCE MOVIES

The dance movie is a modern musical genre that positions dancing as an inclusive but differentiated subcultural practice. Like “modern dancing”, dancing in dance movies is defiantly pleasurable because it is recognizable and unclassifiable at once. Dance movies celebrate freedom from restrictions to responding to popular culture productions in ways that shift traditional standards and rituals of representation established by dominant institutions of family, school, and home. Familial relationships and traditional ritual practices that symbolically reproduce them are marginalized in the dance movie for being too restrictive. Traditional institutional structures are represented by dance movies as inhibiting individuation of interpretation and encourage agreement through symbolic practices that subordinate cultural differences to moral values. Popular dancing styles excluded from institutional sites of cultural instruction may be artistic but are not accommodated institutionally for performance for a theatrical audience. Dance movie protagonists feel more at home in subcultural communities that allow more freedom to dance without submission to judgment by an authority and allow for them to imagine displaying their own pleasure in relating to the music in the form a song that captures their own story.

Saturday Night Fever (John Badham, 1977), *Flashdance* (Adrian Lynne, 1983), *Footloose* (Herbet Ross, 1984), and *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Adorlino, 1987) begin with departures away from home towards a cultural context that intensifies boundaries of working

class and elite culture. Working class is from the standpoint of professional and leisure standards of cultural practice. Alex (Jennifer Beals) and Tony Manero (John Travolta) are going to their working class jobs in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Flashdance*, respectively. Both desire to transition into spheres of cultural production, which involve working in the arts or dancing in milieus that have the respect of art.

Footloose opens with Ren's (Kevin Bacon) arrival to the small rural town of Bomont, Kansas from Chicago, and marks the arrival of film audiences to the story world from every other part of the world that allows dancing and the amplification of music in public.

Dirty Dancing begins with Baby Houseman (Jennifer Grey) en route with her family to the Catskills for vacation where she diverts from the regulated activities to the isolated quarters of the entertainment staff and finds a world of energetic dancing into which she is drawn. Baby wanders away from the leisure activities offered to the upper class hotel guests to the isolated sphere where the entertainment staff spends their time off from work dancing. The entertainment staff facilitates leisure activities for vacationers at the resort but is restricted by the folk traditions that the activities are meant to commemorate. They are restricted from participating in dancing in ways that demonstrate their own pleasure. Baby opens up the cultural practices of reception and production that inhabit the resort for the film audience and ultimately transcends her class to inhabit the stage, representing for the audience her own pleasure of being a spectator through a discourse of theatrical performance. During the final dance, both the audience in the film and the dancing of Baby and Johnny Castle (Patrick Swayze) inhabit the filmic representation of the dance sequence.

Strictly Ballroom (Baz Lurhmann, 1992) begins with Scott Hasting's (Paul Mercurio) disqualification from a ballroom dancing competition for dancing "flashy, crowd-pleasing steps"

that have not been officially codified by the ballroom dancing federation. His family owns a ballroom studio that they operate from their home. Scott refuses to submit to the demands of the dancing federation to dance only approved steps. Nor does he care to take a dance partner selected for him by his Mother, who, runs a ballroom dancing studio out of the family home. Scott secretly practices his own steps during off hours. Eventually, an amateur dancing student, Fran (Tara Morice), discovers Scott practicing on his own and encourages him to allow her to practice with him. Fran, like Baby in *Dirty Dancing*, begins to transform in appearance and develops a desire to bring Scott home with her through her private dance education. Fran's Spanish family home becomes an alternative milieu for a new, informal education in dance for Scott. Fran's family teaches her and Scott to listen to the rhythm and to respond to it. The rhythm of music in dance movies is expressed as a metaphor for life – a mediation for communication between two dancers, and, eventually, between them and their communities. Thus, dancing in dance movies functions as a *story* – as representational rather than as symbolic – of maturation through a process of changing cultural positions.

Dance movies, including: *Shall We Dansu?* (Masayuki Suo, 1996), *Dance With Me* (Rhonda Haines, 1998) *Center Stage* (Nicholas Hytner, 2000), *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), *Save the Last Dance* (Thomas Carter, 2001), *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (Guy Ferland, 2004) *Shall We Dance?* (Peter Chelsom, 2004), *Take the Lead* (Liz Friedlander, 2006), *Step Up* (Anne Fletcher, 2006), *Sipur Hatzi-Russi/Love & Dance* (Eitan Anner, 2006), *Save the Last Dance 2* (Peter Petrarca, 2006) *Step Up 2: the Streets* (Jon M. Chu, 2008), *Center Stage: Turn it Up* (Sten Jacobson, 2008), *Step Up 3D* (Jon M, Chu, 2010), *Kochaj i tancz/Love and Dance* (Bruce Parramore, 2010), *Street Dance* (Max Giwa and Dania Pasquini, 2010), *Footloose* (Craig Brewer, 2011) *Street Dance 2* (Max Giwa and Dania Pasquini, 2012), *Step Up 4:*

Revolution (Scott Speer, 2012), *Make Your Move* (Duane Adler, 2013), *Step Up: All In* (Trish Sie, 2014) represent a transition of amateur dancers towards an inhabitation of sites of representation in ways that allow for them to interpret culture in the form of a response to it. The traditional audience is represented as just as much a part of the experience of the dancing sequence as the dancing. From the film audience's perspective the audience in the film reflects the modern milieu of social dancing rather than theatrical exhibition dancing; the audience is significant of popular culture. The audience in the film replicates the subcultural experience of popular social dancing as much as the experience of watching dance movies. In *Footloose*, the youth organize a petition to be allowed to have a prom within the town limits of Bomont. Ren McCormick and Reverend Shaw Moore (John Lithgow) represent two poles of cultural values for integration, which is signified as a matter of authority over meaning versus the freedom to have authority over the kinds of meanings that cultural practice may have. Reverend Moore finally accepts Ren's defense, which Ren constructs through an interpretation of the dominant cultural text of the community: the Bible. As Vi Moore (Diane Weist) and Reverend Moore sit outside and listen to the music coming from the high school prom just off in the distance, Vi says, "Shaw, its like we're almost dancing." It is as if for Shaw and Vi, listening to the music from the prom, without actually being present to it, reflects for them their own story as well.

But what is the story of the dance movie, really? What story does the history of movies about dancing tell us about the historical audiences for whom they have been produced and who consume them as commercial entertainment, specifically as a brand of film musical entertainment? And are dance movies different from the musical, which their stories of music and dancing would seem to reflect? Dance movies do constitute a diversion from the musical's dominant ideology of integration around the unification of the couple. Gender difference is

expressed through a binary of masculine processes of evaluation and authorship and feminine processes of spectatorship and theatricality. Dance movies present dancing that occurs apart from sites traditionally codified as stages in a manner that reflects the theatrical and stylized milieu of the stage.

Dancing in public functions as entertainment in dance movies, and as entertainment, the quality of the dancing seems to deviate from values of autonomy in the sphere of art while appealing to values of originality and individual personality. The communal folk context allows for the theatricality of the presentation to appear more natural. Dance movies marginalize theatrical dancing performance and produce into professional dancing sequences dancing that function variously as leisure, rehearsal, or popular entertainment. The latter, in the presentation style of historical cabaret, do not inhabit a narrative structure. Thus dance movies represent diversions from commercially produced entertainment shared by a public audience and sites for theatrical display that are organized to emphasize strict boundaries between spectator and stage.

Dance movies are very much commercial products and marketed to the most common denominator of the public audience, and possibly even reflecting the most common denominator values of integration and unity of the historical genre of film musicals. Yet a dance film always admits into its final, inclusive dancing sequence the commercial product as an object as well as a technology that accommodates the transition of subculture from a position apart from, similar to Vi and Shaw's position to the school prom, the site from which it is physically and organically constructed. Thus, as when *Footloose* and *Flashdance* show the title song entering as a recorded commercial track that the protagonists physically turn on and also physically dance to, dance movies incorporate their own products (songs), which become part of the story itself, sometimes literally.

Dance movies do not constitute a complete separation from the musical. Like *Vi* and *Shaw Moore*, too, the dance movie story had beginnings before the formation of the film musical as a popular studio genre and before the innovation of film sound. The final sequences of the dance movies signify youth culture entering into and taking over the center of the frame. Unlike a community whose symbolic significance is reflected apart from them by someone of authority, the interpretations in dance movies are individuated, self-consciously produced, and self-reflexive. The song reflects the story of the subject dancing to it and the story of the dance movie we, as a film audience, have also just shared. The dance movie demonstrates differentiation of interpretation of standardized and conventional cultural expression. However, dance movies do not imply that the way in which one moves is necessarily original or autonomous.

Dance movies often admit that dancing is never wholly original and lacks the ability to uphold classical values of originality represented by the discourse of folk cultural practices because it is fundamentally social in the way in which it is dependent upon the bodies of living individuals who give it presence as an organic, active, and self-conscious image. Dancing in dance movies is largely a practice of mimicry and assimilation of the way in which others move. The dance movie represents this kind of mimicry as complementary, though, rather than as exploitation. It also admits that mimicry will never really be the same as the original, and that mimicry is productive of recognition and communication of difference at once. Historically, though, social dancing cultural practices were in tune with a moment of transition in modern industrial practices in which popular cultural expression was made more social and public through mass market production and consumption. Dance movies represent a process of moving away from practices of cultural reception that emphasize the audience as a unified body of spectators and the audience as a body of separate spectators unified through symbolic reception.

Innovations in modern technology have accommodated engaging with media independently of home and traditional theatrical contexts.

Dance movies make symbolic reception – reception apart from the frame in which a live theatrical style presentation is taking place – representational. Dance movies were qualitatively different from musicals but very much quantitatively similar to musicals in that they appealed to the most common denominator of mass audiences. I say this in the past tense because even though dance *movies* are still being produced, they are no longer at the center of the life of popular media consumption. Dance movie narratives have, ironically, diverted from the center of popular culture through reality dance TV programming and a culture of dance videos on the Internet.

In *Footloose*, Bomont, Kansas is a community with stringent standards and values in accordance with the patriarchal and ritualistic cultural traditions of the church led by Reverend Moore. Coming to Moore's home of worship is equivalent to entering into a contract to share the same values according to a common symbol: God. God stands for and embodies the significance of all the words inscribed in the Bible and Reverend Moore seeks to give presence to meanings expressed by the symbolic material to foster belief in his community. Reverend Moore's ritual, unlike responding to song by dancing to it, inhibits any active form of direct response or communication from his community. The community creates a culture in their homes in accordance with the ideals represented and interpreted for them by Reverend Moore, and which they symbolically imagine they also share with their fellow community members. Thus the town church provides a site for recognition of shared values among the community of Bomont. Attending sermons every Sunday is expressive of other communities beyond their immediate spatial and temporal reality but that share the same values and inhabit space in the same way.

These forms of dominant cultural practices foster unity and submission to a representation of oneself beyond themselves. Dance movies use restrictions upon dancing as metaphors for cultural practices that censor one from having a voice within contexts of representation.

The town of Bomont has outlawed amplified music and dancing in public. Song is represented by *Footloose* as antithetical to Reverend Moore's words because it encourages response and does not correspond to a shared set of tastes among the community. Effectively, modern music and modern books emphasize rituals of response that are not agreed upon or identified with equally among the community. The individuality and informality of dancing socially to pop songs reflects a potential for differentiation in the kind of positions that may be taken in association with to mass culture. A variety of ways and contexts of cultural response appears subversive to authoritative interpretations of dominant texts consumed through traditional ritual practice. The kind of differentiation, separation, and diversion from authoritative sites of cultural expression allowed for through consumption of mass cultural production is signified as a positive value in the popular song universe of dance movies. The process of achievement and diversification through popular culture is expressed in association with subcultural positions historically identified with decentered social bodies identified with race, class, and sexual difference. From the standpoint of the commercially mass-oriented production context of dance movies, historical subcultural positions are symbolized by youth culture.

"Footloose" means to travel freely without commitments or constraints, and the film tames the meaning of the word into something more responsible, more active, and less symbolic: social dancing. Dance movies do the same with respect to the historical musical genre. They appeal to liberation from dominant culture symbols resistant to differences of response and

interpretation while also taming liberation through the construction of a space that mimics the historical conditions of folk art. Thus, *Footloose* ends with local teens constructing their own space for the prom in which they demonstrate for one another and the film audience their own dancing moves to the title song, “Footloose,” which communicates simultaneously with symbolic spectators in the film – their families and the real, historical spectators – the film audience.

The opening of *Center Stage* represents a procession of teenage dancers on their way to into Lincoln Center, away from their families, to audition for entrance into the prestigious ballet school at the American Ballet Theater (ABT). *Save the Last Dance* introduces Sara (Julia Stiles) on a train to inner city Chicago to live with her father, a struggling jazz musician, and, temporarily, away from her dreams of becoming a professional dancer after her mother had died tragically in a car accident while rushing to make it to her Juilliard school audition. Both films are reminiscent of *Flashdance*. *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Dirty Dancing* provide the common historical and cultural context from which the film musical may be reflected as well as provide the symbolic textual significance for other variations of dance movie narratives that have come after. Interestingly, *Strictly Ballroom* is an Australian “dance movie musical.” It brings the musical and the dance movie into close generic proximity, which is signified by its final dancing sequence in which the technologically amplified song is diverted and restored in a folk fashion whereby the audience begins to take over the role of the song and produce the music for the dancing with their own hands. *Strictly Ballroom* unifies music with dancing in a manner that privileges live, folk performance in a commercial theatrical setting.

All dance movies, including *Strictly Ballroom*, are propelled by a conflict having to do with a diversion from family for alternative cultural spheres that provide a source of cultural

renewal and personal growth. Alternative sites of cultural expression are diversely represented as sites of leisure removed from traditional stages or institutional sites of artistic training. Dancing in public, either on the streets, in dance clubs, or alone after hours is similarly positioned apart from either conventional work or professional theatrical work. The sites dance movie protagonists divert to are usually coded as entertainment or leisure, such as the drive-in movie arcade in *Footloose*, the Odyssey 2001 in *Saturday Night Fever*, the staff quarters in *Dirty Dancing*, Fran's Spanish family home in *Strictly Ballroom*, or the street and the show dancing stage of Mawby's in *Flashdance*, respectively. In ballroom dancing movies after *Shall We Dance?*, including *Dance with Me*, *Take the Lead*, and *Shall We Dance?*, the amateur ballroom dance studio and the club scene provide alternative sources of cultural instruction into which the dancing protagonists immerse themselves. The home is restored as a more open and flexible contract that admits relationships with other couples or the formation of other adult friendships that are non-biological.

Angela McRobbie was one of the first critics to take seriously "Dance narratives," which she referred to as, "Fantasies of Achievement."¹ McRobbie's analysis is focused on dancing as a trope of youth fiction directed at girls or fiction, such as *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980), that includes partial dance narratives which represent dancing as, "[a] metaphor for an external reality which is unconstrained by the limits and expectations of gender identity and which successfully and relatively transports its subjects from a passive to a more active psychic position."² According to McRobbie, the terrains for passivity and activity are distinguished by poles of family romance,

¹ Angela McRobbie, "Dance Narratives and Fantasies of Achievement," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 207-31.

² McRobbie, 217.

“along with a focus on achievement, passion, dedication, and self-discipline.”³ The former constrains and the latter offers a terrain for imagination and fantasy of themselves as unconstrained. But as evidenced by Tony Manero’s (*Saturday Night Fever*) movement backward and forward between these poles, as well as Billy Elliot (Jamie Bell) and Ren McCormick’s (*Footloose*), the dance narrative extends beyond girls as subject, but as Robbie states, dance narratives are conventionally feminine texts.

Interestingly, dance movies often negotiate spaces that are traditionally feminine: the home and theatrical cultural practice. However, dance narratives, even *Flashdance*, are somewhat ambivalent in regards to the gender association of the spaces its characters move between. Thus Alex in *Flashdance* gleans an important part of her dancing style for the final audition from the male dominated culture of break-dancing she encounters on the street with her friend, Jeannie (Sunny Johnson).

I will use *Flashdance* to demonstrate the ways in which dance movies complicate implications of popular genres’ reflection of common denominator ideology, especially the musical, and signify spaces of productive ambivalence that liberate popular culture for inclusion of queer audiences while retaining their differentiation from dominant symbolic values. The first time we see Alex in *Flashdance* she is riding her bike through the streets of Pittsburgh. The title song “Flashdance: What a Feeling” is amplified on the soundtrack and the opening titles display over the images in the sequence. We follow Alex to the steel mill where she works as welder. However, the film has not yet formally introduced Alex as a character. No representational communication within the film’s diegesis has taken place. Communication only takes place through the sequence of images set to the song, which is personifying the images.

³ McRobbie, 216-217.

Dance movies transform the relationship between song and image in such a way that the dance movie protagonists are empowered to represent the song apart from the non-representational form of images. Their dancing becomes for the film audience the reflexive embodiment of the story in an indirect representational manner. Dancing becomes symbolic of the purpose of the film's diversion from the center of cultural practice when they demonstrate that their story can provide a source for an art of entertainment. Hence, the realm of work introduced by *Flashdance* is amplified as part of the representational qualities of the sequence, so much so that Alex's name is presented to the film audience indirectly. At the end of the film the indirect representation of subjectivity of the opening in which Alex is indirectly identified for the film audience will be presented more actively as an expression of her story through dancing. Alex does not even introduce herself to the committee when she auditions for whatever it is she auditions for. In a sense, Alex is finally reflected in the movie as the interpreter of her own story (her song) through dancing. The song remains the same as it was in the opening sequence but the reflection of the image is defined by the physical expression of her body in dance. Alex and the committee are incorporated within the performance of the sequence rather as a part of its mise-en-scène. The mise-en-scène is indeed stylized by the film but stylized as anti-theatrical. The large windows and the natural light exposing the floor complement the openness of the floor. There is no barrier really between Alex and the committee. In dance movies, mise-en-scène pushes outward from the design by produced the dancing. The dancing mimics elements of dancing already portrayed through out the narrative and, between the song and the film audience, mediates also in a non-representational fashion the story already told through the narrative.

The sequence cuts from Alex on her bike to a shot of steel workers walking through the mill site. The shadowy industrial scene is illuminated by light reflecting off a inexplicably

hydrated wall (likely created to stylize the look of the steel mill through the high contrast and reflection produced by wetness) and sparks from equipment. Justin Wyatt characterizes the interior images from the introduction of *Flashdance* as “high contrast” and says that they make the location, “hardly recognizable due to extreme backlighting which extends figures in the frame and which creates high contrast in the images within the frame.”⁴ The indiscernible nature of the setting extends also to Alex’s dramatic arc as a character and has substantial significance for the narrative progression of the movie. Later Alex occupies the non-industrial but urban setting of the street and takes a position as a spectator to a spontaneous break-dancing street performance. The break-dancing style of the dancing appears as eccentric, especially for audiences contemporary to the film’s release. Alex also attends a professional ballet performance with her elderly friend and mentor Hanna (Lilia Skala). A shot positioned from behind Alex in the audience intensely watching the performance limits the film audience’s perspective upon the ballet performance on stage. The stage view, though, is directly presented for the film audience from Alex’s perspective during the curtain call – the point at which the dancers come out of character and directly address the theater audience with their bows. In this scene, like the scenes of dancing at Mawby’s bar where Alex dances at night, the stylization of the setting is primarily limited by the theatrical site of performance. The street dancing scene is self-produced and the attire of the break-dancers is specific to their own style of dress. The music is transmitted from a portable boombox placed on the street. In place of the high style of the opening, the break-dancing moves Alex incorporates are rendered as the attraction of Alex’s audition dance performance. Whereas they seemed eccentric and fragmented apart from the sequence of street

⁴ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 28.

dancers earlier, Alex integrates the moves into a choreographed piece, which also takes on narrative significance in association with the song.

When we first see Alex she is wearing a protective helmet with “Alex” written across the front of it. It is not apparent that “Alex” is the same girl we have just seen riding her bike. The song is still playing over the sequence and the interior of the mill seems to pulse with mechanical machinery to the rhythm, reflecting, in physical form, the symbolic significance of the lyrics, “In a world made of steel, made of stone”. Alex” takes off his helmet to reveal that “Alex” is actually a woman. The gender revelation seems to punctuate the song’s lyrics, “What a feeling! Being’s believing, I can have it all. Now I’m dancing for my life.” The relationship between the image and the song lyrics, however, is ideally unified since we have yet to be introduced to Alex’s story, which will fragment it. It is the sequence most symbolic of commercial culture and most available in its original form to be used apart from the narrative. The sequence is modulated by the song and, as Justin Wyatt points out, can easily be extracted for advertising; the original trailer for *Flashdance* essentially follows the narrative progression with images set to the title song. Like most high concept films of the early 1980s to early 1990s, the images are, “aesthetically bold, often in a setting of high technology or industry.”⁵ According to Wyatt, the construction of excessively stylized high-concept images in films of this period could easily be extracted for advertising and used to market the film.

Flashdance reproduces the concept of the story told by the song in a less symbolic and representational fashion in the diegetic context of the narrative. “Flashdance: What a Feeling” is finally about Alex and, from the film audience’s perspective, she inhabits the song and reproduces an expression of her story by dancing to it and signifying the music and being the

⁵ Wyatt, 28.

significance of its lyrics at the same time. Because she is dancing as herself rather than as a character in a show, the song is also representational of her story for the film audience. The final dancing sequence is reflexive of Alex, not the song, from the position of the film audience. From the position of the selection committee, Alex gives presence to the song as art, and therefore, they see it as non-representational. But it also signifies Alex's ability to be evaluated as a real dancer. Alex's dancing during the audition subverts the introductory image of Alex in a hard hat, which identifies and indirectly presents and represents her for the film audience within the context of the song and the images. Alex is unconscious of her being presented. In the audition, Alex seems to consciously speak by dancing to the song. The eccentricity of Alex's gender identification is tamed by the final dancing sequence. Alex's performance signifies "Flashdance" as representational of her story rather than as a track exclusive to the movie and which its producers are selling to the audience. But of course from a historical and material standpoint rather than a representational one, the filmmakers make the film and the song more desirable because it becomes distinguished as a story about Alex through the film. Alex objectifies the music in the scene by bringing with her the record to the audition. The narrative allows the film audience to read the sequence as expressive of her story in association with the song while the reactions of the committee seem to signify the resolution expressed by the song – that Alex can make it happen and have it all.

The film audience is differentiated from the selection committee. The committee becomes part of the performance, as the sequence intercuts their individual reactions to the dancing as part of the presentation of the audition. The exaggeration of gender differentiation represented by the shot of Alex that punctuates the opening sequence is transferred to a form of cultural exaggeration in which the elite committee responds in a manner reflective of the public

audience to the street dancing performance. The scene differentiates their role as spectators from the film audience to subvert the standards of their evaluation of technique and form to the public's expression of pleasure provided by dancing. The professional appearance of the committee is exaggerated to draw attention to the eccentricity of their physically emotive responses to Alex's dance performance. This exclusive audience is at once differentiated from the public by their appearance and recognizable by the nature of their responses to the dancing. They assume the personality reflected by the personality produced by the dancer. The appreciation seems to be one of real life transcending the constraints of the material of art, for which dancing is inherently symbolic as an art. The song on the soundtrack rather than being sung liberates the separation between performance and spectatorship and allows the film audience to "feel" as though the film is communicating their own experience of watching *Flashdance* back to them.

Dance movies, such as *Flashdance*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Footloose*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Bootmen*, *Dance with Me*, *Center Stage*, *Save the Last Dance*, *Billy Elliot*, and *Step Up* signify a lack of equivalence between elite spectators and social audiences. The appearance of exclusive spectators who have a professional or familial relationship to the dancing protagonists represent a personal form of the audience which is synthesized with a public form of the audience. In *Flashdance*, the public street audience is absent from the final dancing sequence but the film audience is symbolically positioned in their place – also apart from the scene, literally outside of the world of the film and in the world at once. The film audience is significant of the popular essence of music – its social content – according to which the song's lyrics have the most expressive power. The public, mass audience is privileged over the exclusive audience. I am alluding to Jane Feuer's analysis of the way in which Hollywood

musical discourse redefines music as song through reflexive lyrics about music.⁶ In this way, the exclusive audience is symbolic of music and the public symbolic of the lyrics.

Feuer argues that the musical must redefine music as singing in order to link it the social and amateur relationship of “love.” This indicates that folk culture and the amateur are capable of producing professional quality entertainment – making love into something worth paying for. Feuer points out, “In privileging song over non-representational music, however, the Hollywood musical is not necessarily contrasting two languages (music and words) even when it seems to be doing so” (52). The dance movie similarly seems to progress toward transforming the privileged audience into the role of spontaneous audience. It is the first time either audience has seen the performance, while the public audience is privileged to the narrative significance of the dancing as a part of Alex’s story. The dance movie reconciles the contrast between exclusive audiences and popular audiences by positioning the popular audience in the realm of the dancers who bring the song, the story, and us with them to the stage. The dance movie produces a sense that we are on display, too, but from both positions: the performer and the audience, on stage and off stage. Additionally, dance movies do privilege the “voice” of the dancer over the words of the song. By the time we see the final dancing sequence we are as familiar with the story and the song as the dancer is. We have rehearsed it as a dramatic process of the narrative through which a series of dance scenes have been positioned but isolated from one another and from traditional theatrical practices of representation.

Interestingly, the dance movie was generated within historical cultural and industrial contexts in which the entertainment industry was becoming more globalized and fragmented in terms of the conglomeration of various media, such as music, film, and television being operated

⁶ Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 51.

by divisions of international corporations. It seems as though the dance movie is decidedly distinguished from the film musical with respect to its strong record of domestic as well as international success early on in the 80s with *Saturday Night Fever*, *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, and *Dirty Dancing*. Even more interesting, though, is that dance movies today are likely to be marketed more aggressively in international markets than in America where most of these films are produced. The most contemporary dance movies are more successful internationally than in the US. The *Step Up* films have been renamed *Sexy Dance* for the international market and do better business there than they do here. The generic emphasis of the dancing as sexy rather than as artistic seems to associatively tie them to the international success of *Flashdance*, which was often regarded in journalistic reviews for its sexually suggestive display of dancing by women. Dance movies market the pleasures of dancing as an organic force in the formation of popular culture, and paradoxically represent the achievement of self-representation in association with popular culture as originating pleasures of consumption.

Dirty Dancing is a more obvious example of a title that implies a correlation between dancing and sex, and is the most successful dance movie internationally. I will discuss more specifically the transformations of dance movies into live musical presentations and remakes of dance movies, like *Footloose* (2012) in my conclusion but for now it is important to note the live musical version of *Dirty Dancing: The Classic Story on Stage* (2004) also has broken box office records internationally but has barely made an impression in the US. The subtitle of the stage adaptation of *Dirty Dancing* could be could also be the same as saying, “the classic songs on stage.” In fact, it is only getting an American national touring production after being in existence for over five years and still going strong on in Australia and London. And since the 90s, there have been equally successful international dance movies produced that have crossed over

successfully to the American market, beginning with *Strictly Ballroom*, followed by *Shall We Dansu?* and *Billy Elliot*, and more recently British street dance movies *Street Dance* and *Street Dance 2*. The latter have not demonstrated much success in the US but have received domestic releases on home video. The titles make them easily identifiable as a genre and lessen the need to market them as anything other than dance movies. More obscure international dance movies from non-English speaking countries, like Israel and Poland have no crossover potential at all really (they are not available in US formats on home video) but were nonetheless successful domestically, which implicates the question of the importance of recognition and identification as a privilege of representational qualities of language over and above symbolic qualities of image. Most recently, *Make Your Move* was produced starring Derek Hough and Boa, a pop singer from Japan on par with the popularity and style of Britney Spears in the US. The film barely made a mark in the US even though it was released in 3D internationally. All of this demonstrates the fragmentation and containment of markets within a global business model. I will discuss the implications of this relationship for the significance of dance movie narratives in my final chapter. But the domesticity of dance movie narratives is associative with the theme of home in the films, as well as the separate but inclusive quality of audience from a material standpoint as well as a representational one. And most importantly, as a question of genre, the relationship of dance movies to the musical is significant to discourses of folk expression through popular culture and their importance to selling mass culture back to audiences as something inhabitable locally.

Studies of dancing in the musical are primarily founded by an auteurist approach in which actors and choreographers, such as Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and Bob Fosse are

highlighted for contributing to the aesthetic formation of dancing as an art of the film musical. Additionally, from a narrative standpoint dancing is generally regarded as contextual to the Hollywood musical's primary ideological value of integration, which also appeals to elite cultural values of unity and balance in art.

Jerome Delamater, in his book *Dance in the Hollywood Musical*, admits unconventional dancing into the history of the musical under the category of "eccentric dancing," which he identifies with specific specialty dancers, such as Bill Bailey and Tommy Tune, and director/choreographers, such as Bob Fosse.⁷ The "eccentric" classification alienates these personal styles for being too personalized for incorporation into a symbolic form of narrative and character. Delamater writes, "The eccentric dancer's wont was to reinterpret traditional dance steps according to his own body – that body often disproportioned in some way – and, with a knowledge of traditional dance steps, once could delight in the variations. In addition, the dancer would often exaggerate movements or so grossly defy the musical and dramatic "requirements" of the number that it would become a parody."⁸ If we were to assimilate the dance movie to the musical genre, it would obscure the social, anti-authorial significance of the dance movie, which promotes a relationship between public and personal experience as productive of liberation from traditional values of authority and authorship from within representation. "Within" signifies an atmosphere of the public – the space of the audience – as significant authors because in reality they occupy the same space of production as the performers. When audiences watch filmic entertainment, the only real performer is the cinematic apparatus of projector and screen. Thus I argue that dance movies represent the cultural practice of social dancing as filmic practice, which

⁷ Jerome Delamater, *Dance in the Hollywood Musical*. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), 83.

⁸ Delamater, 83.

admits the kind of separation between reality and illusion structured by the filmic practice. Dance movies are critical of the qualitative value given individual authorship as art and instead represent authorship as a symbolic illusion that lacks authority over meaning. Dance movies celebrate the communication allowed for in association with culture – the objects themselves apart from the author and its original historical context of production.

For Rick Altman, dancing in the musical has been produced in various ways, as narrative, as social, and as technical spectacle. But, according to Altman, the specific function of the dancing in the musical is to give wordless, physical expression to the musical's dominant ideology of duality through movement. Altman, says, "The beauty of dance is that it needs no words – indeed, it escapes words, surpassing any description which we might devise."⁹ According to Altman, whether musical dancing sequences have narrative qualities or not, they are structured in such ways as to reproduce balance and unity in order to integrate cultural difference is signified by gender binaries. It is as if without the achievement of balance and centeredness dancing in the musical would throw off or destabilize the musical's ideological universe. Like the camera liberated from the "fifth row of the orchestra," the film may deviate a little bit from its central plot and dialogue – its words – its realism, but this departure must be reconciled before moving on.¹⁰ The camera must return to the "center line" of the symmetrical universe of the musical. Altman writes:

Astaire and Rogers are of course up to this task, using the ballroom style to perfection as she molds herself to his lead, replicating with perfection his every gesture"; "Instead of tying a stationary camera to the fluid movements of a single duet, Berkeley relegates individual dancers to the status of constitutive elements in an overall pattern, whose changes he captures from the vantage point of a mobile camera on a crane or a track

⁹ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 40.

¹⁰ Altman, 40-41.

located above the stage. This technique calls for constant substitution of one symmetrically organized duet shot for another.¹¹

With Busby Berkeley, Altman suggests the work of producing dancing and restoring duality was performed through interplay between the unity of the group, which is captured by a more stationary use of the camera and Berkeley's representation of patterns within, and, "Fluid movements of a single duet."¹² "With Astaire and Rogers," Altman says, "individual steps were highlighted; here it is the male-female patterning that stands out, almost independently of the dance steps employed."¹³ In dance movies, dancers, both as individuals and as couples, are independent of the steps, rather their steps becomes symbolic of their stories. Thus dance movie dancing pushes the technical patterning and personal significance of dancing outward from the center and brings the audience into its realm of musical expression, as though the performance stage were also a social dancing stage. The narrative and choreographic features of the dancing are structurally significant, in and of themselves, to the audience because they have beginnings and endings and signify the social quality of representation as larger than personality and technique.

Altman praises Minnelli for being versatile in his ability to combine techniques for representing dancing and creating a dynamic narrative quality for a musical dancing sequence, combining, "Solo and group dancing, realistic sets and empty stages, as well as narrative and ballroom dancing."¹⁴ To exemplify, Altman points out the impressive way in which "This Heart of Mine" from *Ziegfeld Follies* (Lemuel Ayers, 1935) is like a "mimed summary" of the couple's (Astaire and Lucille Bremer's) goals in Minnelli's full-length musical *Yolanda and the Thief*

¹¹ Altman, 41.

¹² Altman, 41.

¹³ Altman, 42.

¹⁴ Altman, 42.

(1945). Altman suggests, “The resolution – in which we find out that their goals are less divergent than we might have thought – has been fully prepared by the dance’s movement from separate activity to alternating paired movement and finally to shared movement.”¹⁵ Thus “narrative dancing” is like an impressionistic representation of a story expressed by dialogue, and Minnelli demonstrates his superior skills as an author of dancing in the musical by his, “ability to vary the methods which he uses to keep the idea of the couple foremost in the audience’s mind – and eye.”¹⁶ Altman regards dancing sequences in the musical as a more pronounced diversion from the narrative than is produced by sequences of song and therefore requires extra care and “class” to bring the audience’s attention to where it is supposed to be: on the couple, and which is the ideal goal of dominant formations of film musical narratives.

In *The American Film Musical*, Rick Altman discusses, “reduction of the audience’s physical investment in the process of entertainment,” as a result of, “increases in scale and speed,” by which individuals can simultaneously view dramatic presentations.¹⁷ Altman is referring to the way in which entertainment occurs to a greater extent in isolation from the outside world through home entertainment technology. He also says that he believes that the contemporary fragmentation of spectatorship has, “liberated American entertainment and its audience for another kind of participation of a symbolic nature.”¹⁸ Interestingly, though, current innovation in portable media technology allows for an even more diversified spatial experience of viewership, while viewing in isolation from shared sites of reception is even more pronounced. Altman argues, though, that no matter how much spectatorship fragments, genre film supports principles of cultural integration by its standards and conventions of practice,

¹⁵ Altman, 43-44.

¹⁶ Altman, 44.

¹⁷ Altman, 335.

¹⁸ Altman, 335.

which are driven, too, by industrial principles of differentiation and sameness. Genre fosters recognition based on its production of shared narrative patterns and themes that appear as the common denominator of the large number of films.¹⁹ Thus recognition of a genre implies that others share the same kind of recognition of the genre's basic narrative patterns and thematic concerns. Genre supports "symbolic spectatorship" which is, "largely responsible for integrating individuals into the culture while assuring the culture's continued existence."²⁰ Culture is doubly symbolically reflective of its products and its values. Altman's conceptualization of genre represents a correspondence between them.

Although viewing has become increasingly isolated, spectators, according to Altman, will willingly engage in, "a cultural process where particular objects take on new meaning provided by a broader cultural context."²¹ Altman seems to be saying that the fragmentation of spectatorship will liberate the genre to produce new meanings in accordance with transformations in cultural values, technology, and production. However, I believe that the opposition between spectatorship and text is reconciled too easily by Altman to correspond to the complexity of the historical differences that contextualize genre production and the variety of associative texts, like songs and books, and does not account for the way in which reception is also a symbolic and physical performance that makes the values represented by a dominant text vulnerable to a diverted perspective of personal cultural experience and subjectivity of readers and viewers. I believe the dance movie is symbolic of the ways in which standards and conventions of genre, coupled with the mobility allowed for by mass technological production, accommodate the reproduction of symbols according to alternative voices that depart from the

¹⁹ Altman, 336.

²⁰ Altman, 337.

²¹ Altman, 336.

center. Reading and responding in ways that mimic conventional practice, even if it structured (or choreographed) into a structure, will ultimately and necessarily transform the look of that practice, as reflected by the reader or audience's imagination of it.

The musical is regarded in the dance movie as too balanced symbolically and evenly structured in its reconciliation of cultural differences to allow for the audience to respond and communicate apart from it: audiences would not be likely identify with music and songs in a musical as pop music. Music in a musical is too eccentric in style and form for it to become a mass marketed brand or to be recognized as a popular cultural experience apart from watching the films. Audiences may form recognition with dance movies through songs that they may dance to, even if the songs are not specifically contextualized by a dance movie text. In this way, dance movies may produce a form of symbolic spectatorship in association with songs that they could imagine dancing to.

We might say that dance movies are a brand of the musical, which co-opts its traditional format through the addition of pop music sensibility. The dance movie sensibility allows greater distance between song and dancing into which the dancer's story (and the viewers') are assimilated. Dance movies allow for the differentiation of music as product (song) and as art (dance). Asserting values of personification over amplification of song and mimicking over singing of song deconstructs the musicals traditional values of integration. There is also usually a pronouncement of the separation of narrative and number, as when in almost all dance movies there is an interruption to the unity of a continuous theatrical presentation or a break in the competition as a result of a misstep or intentional disruption by character's assertion of themselves. These breaks deconstruct passive focus upon performance and/or indicate some form of defiance towards passivity – not on the part of the audience but of the dancers. The defiance to

submit to the authority of producers is reconciled by the effect it has for the audience in the film, which is demonstrated to evaluate the performance as appealing. The appeal of the diversion for the audience and their subsequent participation on the dance floor is symbolic of the marketability of competition.

The competition between producers and performers is reconciled in dance movies by the integration of the audience into the space of representation occupied by performers. The dance movie, ultimately, disintegrates professional entertainment and amateur entertainment between two poles: the market and the narrative, the material and the symbolic, the product and the art, reality and fiction. The integration of performer and the audience in dance movies mystifies the difference between dance movie and dance song but intensifies the differentiation between dance movie and film musical.

Concern over social dancing, especially when it developed into a public cultural practice without moral purpose or goals, had to do with what it might symbolize for those not dancing or inspire in the imaginations of those who do, particularly in association with women being on display in public. A history of moral oppositions to social dancing in public and constraints placed upon subcultural in association with traditional art discourses have informed the art of the dance movie. The formation of subcultural forms of dancing into something like a popular art form of social dancing has been the narrative goal of movies about social dancing and popular social dancers. Dance movies have used dancing to reflect symbolic ways of producing resistance to authority over exclusion from professional cultural practice in order to allow for more exchange between symbolic expressive practices that integrate various histories and communities, as well as various kinds of bodies within those communities. Achievement is rendered sexy, unsettled, and modern by dance movies.

Vernon and Irene Castle were regarded as the first commercially popular modern dancing entertainers. Their image sold modern dancing to the public and they engaged with their public through commercially manufactured products based on their brand of social dancing. The most symbolic expression of their historical relationship to the development of social dancing into a popular culture is represented in a film they produced about their lives: *Whirl of Life* (Oliver D. Bailey, 1915). My discovery *Whirl of Life* will allow me to rewrite the intersection of the dance movie and the film musical. In a sense, there is a distance between the two genres which is reflected by the fact that *Whirl of Life* is a dance movie without any prerecorded music or a soundtrack. The distance is also historical and it seems interesting to me that the dance movie narrative prospered in periods of huge industrial shifts in the production of popular culture. Its absence was marked also by the integration of the studio system, a period in which there was little competition between the film industry and other media markets. The music for dancing sequences would have been played live but in watching the film a few times without music, it is clear that the success of the film is not dependent upon the music's integration with the film.

I will negotiate in my first chapter their film, *Whirl of Life* with the film musical about their lives, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (H.C. Potter, 1939). I will interpret the way in which the films emphasize the construction of dancing into a brand based on the personal identity of the dancers and the ways in which those identities do and do not correspond, productively, to the performers enacting and communicating through them.

2.0 DANCING WITH THE “CASTLE AUDIENCE”: FROM *WHIRL OF LIFE* (1915) TO *THE STORY OF VERNON AND IRENE CASTLE* (1939)

“She reminded him of their own marriage... Young people were young people, she said, and love was love, regardless of boundaries. This was not a matter of American foreign policy. It was a simple matter of the heart.”²² (Irene Castle referring to her mother’s comment to her father in defense of Vernon’s marriage proposal to Irene.)

Vernon met Irene (Foote) while spending time away from New York City in a theatrical boarding house in New Rochelle. At that time Vernon had a small role on Broadway in Lew Fields’ comedy *The Hen Pecks* (1911). Vernon was born in Norwich, England in 1887. His family ran a pub and hotel business. Rather than participate in the family business after college Vernon earned small fees as an entertainer at small clubs but never found professional success. Vernon eventually emigrated from Britain with his sister, Coralie, and found work as a professional actor. Irene was from an upper middle class family in New Rochelle, NY. Her father, Hubert Foote, was a successful doctor. Irene had aspirations to become a dancer as a teenager but never excelled beyond amateur. According to the Castles’ biographer, Eve Golden, Dr. Foote’s, “Only concern was whether Irene could earn any money at her art: he was a firm

²² Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1958), 43.

believer in women having careers but felt that Irene was neither talented nor hardworking enough to survive in the competitive and risky theatrical world.”²³

Vernon and Irene Castle became famous for their interpretations of popular social dances. They performed on professional stages and in public cafés. In addition to performing as acts to entertain the nightlife crowd in between public dancing to live orchestras at nightclubs, which had become fashionable during the time of their success, the Castles performed upon invitation at parties held by high society in their homes for a fee. The Castles became so popular that they eventually opened two of their own dancing cafés, The Sans Souci and Castles by the Sea on Coney Island. The Castles’ appeal crossed class boundaries, as well as boundaries of high and low popular culture, performing also in *Watch Your Step* (1914), a Broadway show loosely based on their dancing success. The Castles eventually published a book, *Modern Dancing* (1914), to promote their dancing style, made a film of scenes in which Vernon and Irene demonstrate popular dances from their repertoire, *Mr. and Mrs. Castle Before the Camera* (1914) opened their own school for dance instruction, The Castle House, on Broadway, which catered to middle class debutantes who wanted to learn dancing steps apart from the crowd, and, finally, made a semi-fictionalized feature film based on their story of social dancing success, *Whirl of Life* in 1915. In *Mr. and Mrs. Castle Before the Camera*, the Castles demonstrate “half a dozen or so steps.”²⁴ According to Eve Golden:

Mr. and Mrs. Castle (Before the Camera) was a big success, bringing \$35,000/week to vaudeville managers. ‘The picture is life size,’ marveled one reviewer, ‘and it is remarkable how fascinating the tango dancing is really holding the entire audience until the very finish when Mr. and Mrs. Castle are brought to the front with a gracious little bow.’²⁵

²³ Eve Golden, *Vernon and Irene Castle’s Ragtime Revolution*. (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 29.

²⁴ Golden, 94.

²⁵ Golden, 95.

Also, The Castles toured major cities around the country to perform their social dancing routines for theater and café audiences, had acquired their own orchestra, led by James L. Europe, who also wrote ragtime style dance songs such as, “The Half and Half,” specifically for Castle dances, and were managed and promoted collaboratively by their agent Elisabeth Marbury and Gladwyn McDougal, a personal friend of Irene’s family and a theater producer in New York City.²⁶

The Castles’ legacy lasted only a few years. Vernon tragically died in a flight training accident in 1916 while working for the British army at the end of WWI. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers paid homage to the Castles in *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, which was the last film in a cycle of musicals Astaire and Rogers made together for RKO. The Astaire and Rogers biopic is curious as a film musical because it features minimal amounts of singing. It does include a significant amount of dancing in sequences that demonstrate interpretations of the Castles’ dancing style by Astaire and Rogers. I will argue that *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* is a musical because it produces a mythological vision of the past, especially the historical milieu the Castles inhabited. Astaire and Rogers’s reflection of the Castles glorifies them paving the way for the Hollywood musical tradition and implies that the territory of the Castles inhabited with their audience was reflective of Astaire and Rogers’ territorializing of a brand of the Hollywood musical. At the same time, like dance movies, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* commercialized social dancing in the film musical as a form of folk cultural practice, which Astaire and Rogers have continued to ritualize.

²⁶ Marbury was a prestigious American manager of theatrical and literary professionals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She was the first woman to work as a professional manager and was well respected by the arts community in both America and Europe; Jerome Kern was one of her clients, who after Marbury’s death wrote a musical inspired by her life.

Whirl of Life is a social dance movie because it tells a story about the formation of social dancing into a popular entertainment and, like later dance movies, represents the success of the Castles in association with the formation and representation of “their audience.” The audiences in the film are represented as part of the Castles’ social dancing performances, and signify the folk quality of the Castles construction of social dancing into a popular entertainment brand, which came to be regarded as “modern dancing.” For even though the Castles individuated social dancing from its communal relationship as a popular social practice, social dancing audiences of the Castles (and audiences of contemporary dance movies even less so) participated in social dancing as a form of entertainment. The Castles also, like the protagonists of contemporary dance movies, are represented as struggling to participate in a professional context for dancing without sacrificing their subjectivity in its representation. *Whirl of Life* represents social dancing as a reflective symbolic practice that signifies modern experience of heightened visibility of diverse communities and individuals in public life.

Castles’ style of social dancing has been characterized as a more refined version of ragtime dancing because their assertion of personality and personal style individuated the broad range of dancing styles associated with ragtime music as a modern dancing brand of the vernacular and eccentric social dancing styles from which it originated. Thus ragtime was a generic and easily marketable way to classify the popularization of African-American, vernacular and folk song and dance styles, which were characterized by a high degree of variation in form and differences in experience based on the variations in the subcultural relations of the communities who originated, practiced, or imitated them.

Just prior to the period in which the Castles became famous, “animal dances” were popular. According to Marshall and Jean Stearns:

The Cakewalk, like the earlier Polka and Schottische, had been a strenuous and far from easy dance. Not so the animal dances – they were simple to the point of awkwardness, and for the first time, they permitted what was denounced as ‘lingering close contact.’ (In the old-fashioned Waltz you whirled so rapidly that you were fortunate if you simply kept in touch with your partner.) The animal dances spread among a more general public.²⁷

Animal dance styles waned in popularity as the popularity of social dancing in public became more popular with the wider public. Social dancing emerged with the popularization of ragtime music around 1912, at which time, notes Elizabeth Kendall, “urban culture began to manufacture something like a ragtime universe.”²⁸Ragtime was synonymous with a new atmosphere of popular culture that emerged through the manufacturing of professional songs, nightlife, and dancing. The Castles participated in social dancing as an entertainment. The Castles demonstrated for audiences their own versions of social dances in cafés and nightclubs. The Castles’ dancing performances captured the audience’s imagination of the milieu of social dancing in which they imagined participating and also inhabited when they watched the Castles dancing. The Castles opened up the boundaries of display to reflect the audiences’ own imagination of themselves being on display when they danced. After returning to America from Paris, the Castles capitalized on the mass popularity social dancing had begun to acquire.

The Castles had traveled to Paris to perform by professional contract in a revue, titled, “Efin ... une Revue (Finally ... a Revue). The show was not a success and Vernon’s comic routine, which was adapted from a routine he had performed with Lew Fields in New York, failed to translate to Parisian audiences. However, Vernon and Irene received praise for their work together in two dancing routines featured in the revue, one of which was a take on Hans Christian Andersen’s tragic tale of doomed love, “The Brave Tin Soldier,” and the other, “An

²⁷ Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. (New York, Macmillan, 1968), 96.

²⁸ Elizabeth Kendall, *When She Danced*. (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1979), 93.

appearance as M. and Mme. Flirt,” in which the Castles, “finally found themselves breaking out in a wildly energetic and very American dance routine to the tune of ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band.’”²⁹ According to their biographer, Eve Golden, “The dance itself was a hastily improvised combination of the Texas Tommy and the grizzly bear, both of which were new to Paris.”³⁰ After the revue closed, the Castles and Walter Ash, Irene’s friend and family servant, whom Irene had invited to join them on their venture, stuck around Paris looking for work. The positive press the Castles received for their dancing in the revue reached the proprietor of Café de Paris, Louis Barraya, and he invited them to dance for his patrons. The Castles agreed, and were asked unexpectedly to dance at the request of a “Russian gentlemen” while they were surveying the café. The Russian had seen the Castles dance together in the revue. The Castles obliged and were tipped 300 francs by the Russian gentleman. Papa Louis, as the café owner was known, asked the Castles perform regularly at his café. According to Golden:

(The Castles’ dancing act) was something new and fresh in Parisian nightlife: they went on at midnight, starting their dance from their ringside table; this was the first time, Irene claimed, that performers did not enter from the wings or backstage. Their dance was rougher in style than those for which they later became famous: more comic and acrobatic, ‘rough and tumble,’ as Irene recalled. As the money poured in, Irene was smart enough to maintain her quiet chic: simple white dresses, no jewelry. She made every other woman in the room look like an overdressed frump.³¹

The Castles’ dancing appeared social because they executed movement in a way that seemed reflective of themselves rather than the dancing steps. The mass recognition of the Castles as amplifiers of a modern social dancing experience, which included the atmosphere, style, and attitudes reflected by their performances, is what distinguished the Castles’ social dancing as modern dancing. The shared recognition of their image among international audiences

²⁹ Golden, 41.

³⁰ Golden, 41.

³¹ Golden, 43.

distinguished modern dancing as a form of popular culture rather than as a specific set of steps and gestures for dancing.

Vernon and Irene Castle loved dancing, and for them social dancing was not a matter of who was dancing or whether they danced the steps correctly but rather the ability of the public to take pleasure in communicating and following along with the movements of their partner, and especially, their ability to continue moving when missteps occur. In their book, *Modern Dancing*, the Castles represent for readers their conception of “modern dances” through a series of introductions to dances and the culture of modern dancing as a particular approach to social dancing. Vernon and Irene offer insight into social dancing and instructions on how to dance their versions of social dances. Included also is a statement by the Castles on “Dancing as an Art”, introductions to “The Tango of To-Day” and a few other variations on the Tango, popular “Castle” style dances, including “The Castle Walk” and a few variations on the Waltz, as well as short sections on “Etiquette”, “Proper Dance Music”, “Dances of the Past”, and, significantly, “Modern Dances as Fashion Reformers”. Vernon Castle introduces the “Innovation” as follows:

The much talked of Innovation is nothing more or less than the Tango danced without touching your partner. This is naturally very difficult, and can only be done by good dancers. However, a word of advice may help those who would include it in their repertoire. First of all, the man must learn to lead with his whole body; by this I mean he must convey his steps and direction to his partner by means of head, eyes, and feet. The steps should be broader and more deliberate, and the dancers should travel at the same pace all the time. If by any chance the lady does not follow, and goes into the wrong step, don't stop dancing, but get as closely together as possible, and the man must do a plain walk backward. When both are ready the man must try to convey the step in a better way. If, when mistakes happen, you keep on dancing, in nine cases out of ten no one will know about it but yourself. On the other hand, no one can miss your mistake if you get confused and stop. The lady should not look at a man's feet in this Innovation, but rather try to get a general view of her partner, so that she may see what he is doing without actually scrutinizing the steps. The hands may be either kept behind your back, on your hips, or in your pockets; look at yourself in a mirror and decide which position suits you best.³²

³² Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle, *Modern Dancing*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1914), 102-104.

It is interesting the way in which looking at the “whole body” is emphasized by Vernon as a means of communicating effectively with your partner in dancing the Innovation, and also the way in which looking at yourself in a mirror is encouraged to decide which position suits you best. It is as if social dancing, according to the Castles, is likened to the way in which one may decide upon an item of clothing or a particular “look.” Thus Vernon encourages readers to adapt the dances to their own bodies rather than to his or Irene’s impressions. Associatively, *Modern Dancing* is filtered with photographs of themselves in poses that seem to emphasize the appearance of the dancer in the dances more than the steps. The array of Castle poses and fashions throughout the book suggest the way in which *Modern Dancing* offers a high degree of differentiation in the characterization of oneself through social dancing. The variation of images corresponds to the variety of songs to which one may dance. Therefore, the whole body of the Castles’ expression of *Modern Dancing* as a concept of social dancing is diversified through their book and introduces a number of positions that may be mimicked or adapted at will among a whole body of readers. Readers are not just an audience for *Modern Dancing*, they are also participants in “Modern Dancing” as an atmosphere for social dancing.

Social dancing may be distinguished from folk or vernacular dancing. Although folk dancing and vernacular dancing are social in nature and may include elements of theatricality or presentational demonstrations of dancing, folk and vernacular dance have a stronger basis in traditional rituals and are more structured by codes and standards shared among the community that participates in them. Stuart Hall points out that in folk art, “There was a direct relationship between performer and audience: the threshold of participation was high, the material familiar, and since it had been repeated and handed down, with slight variation, from one generation to the

next, the forms simple or traditional.”³³ Social dancing is qualified by dancing which may have roots in folk and vernacular dancing practices but is not intended to pay respect to the meaning or purposes they originally had for the communities who originally performed them. Julie Malnig, distinguishing social dancing from vernacular and folk dancing, says:

I prefer to use the term “social” dance primarily, in part to distinguish it from other forms of vernacular dance, such as folk dance, which tend to involve like-minded or homogenous communities of dancers interested primarily in the preservation of heritage and group traditions. In social dancing, a sense of community often derives less from preexisting groups brought together by shared social and cultural interests than from a community created as a result of dancing.³⁴

Social dancing maintains many folk dancing elements, such as being shared or recognizable among a total cultural community. However, within the context of social dancing as an entertainment, social dancing is in essence an attitude of the performer rather than an art of the community. The community becomes the audience and the art individualized into personal expression of music amplified for dancing as a form of public leisure.

In *Whirl of Life*, the Castles narrate their story from within their home, intimately illuminated by flickering light from their fireplace. The intimate setting heightens the sense that the Castles are personally sharing their story with the film audience. Vernon conceived the scenario in which he and Irene star as themselves. Close friends and personal pets also take part in the production. Some characters are based upon real people and the events are exaggerated to reflect the popular heroism of the Castles for their admirers. Similar to the stated purpose of their book, *Modern Dancing*, the Castles “aim to uplift dancing, purify it, and place it before the public in its proper light.”³⁵ However, *Whirl of Life* is impure in the way in which the Castles

³³ Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964),54.

³⁴ Julie Malnig, “Introduction” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 4.

³⁵ Castle, 17.

liberally fictionalize parts of their story. Fictional events are used to amplify the dramatic achievement of their success, such as when Irene is kidnapped by bandits hired by Broadway theater producer, John Crosby. John Crosby is a fictional character. Crosby is used to symbolize values for theatrical entertainment that would alienate the Castles from their audiences and from each other.

First the Castles take the audience back to the day they crossed paths at the beach. Vernon comments via inter-titles, “A walk down the beach, romance beckoning upon us.” Irene is on a date arranged by her parents with a wealthy theater producer, John Crosby. While playing a game in the water, Irene and Vernon find each other in the center of the circle formed by the group. The film cuts to Vernon telling Irene, “Dear, as I gave your Apollo like form a one-over, I knew it was love at first sight.” Witty references such as “Apollo” abound in their narration. The leisurely context for their meeting provides a point of reference for the origination of their story, its purpose, and its conclusion.

The Castles take pleasure in their seemingly surreptitious sharing of their story with the film audience, even offering ironic, tongue-in-cheek commentary on events of their story, especially when they seem to be behaving with rebellious innocence. The Castles let us know they recognize the exaggerated nature their life has taken on within the world of entertainment, such as when they kiss for the first time and comment that they gave birth to “The Castle Kiss” in the purview of John Crosby, who at the same time gets hit in the face with a tennis ball as a result of the distraction. We laugh with the Castles at the embarrassment they bring to such a serious theater professional who does not appreciate being vulnerable in public.

"Modern" was a misleading way to characterize the highly variable contemporary social and theatrical practices of dancing as leisure and entertainment, respectively. It was neither theatrical nor acrobatic like the burlesque dancing of the day nor was it as primal in its rhythms as that of the animal dances being done in dance halls. Modern dancing allowed the popular practice of social dancing to have a more universal appeal. It could identify with values of dancing as a means of growth and refinement for the middle class as well as spontaneous qualities of African-American vernacular dances. Diffusing social dancing styles under the heading of "Modern Dancing" had developed into a useful way to uphold the elite cultural values and traditions of the middle class with respect to art while still allowing for the signification of its contemporary nature. For example the maxixe was, according to Vernon Castle, "The easiest dance of all to do, and I think the hardest dance of all to do."³⁶ Essentially, the maxixe was an Africanized polka. A faster, more lively form of the Tango, the maxixe was brought to the US by European immigrants, according to the Castles' depiction in their introductory book *Modern Dancing*. It was promoted as another form of the tango to sell music. However, it was more refined than the two-step and often required more choreography, which suggests that Vernon's point about its simplicity and great difficulty lies in the fact that it could not merely be danced, it had to be performed. The emphasis on social dancing as a performance pulls it away from its lower class roots and provides it with an air of art. The Castles were immersed in upper class culture, which allowed them a lucrative position to capitalize on the uproar against social dancing by the middle classes.

At first the Castles were featured as dancers of popular animal dances, such as performing the Turkey Trot in *The Sunshine Girl* (1913) on Broadway. But, according to

³⁶ Castle, 107.

Marshall and Jean Stearns, “By 1914 the Castles had discarded the Turkey Trot as lacking in elegance,” and, “substituted a hectic elegance for the easy rough and tumble of animal dances.”³⁷ Animal dances were declining in popularity by 1912 and, “Instead appeared the smoother one-steps, hesitation waltzes, South American tangos and maxixes.”³⁸ Kendall continues,

In them, a ragtime exuberance was contained, smoothed out, and subtly dramatized. The couple’s positions were formalized.... They involved a conscious acting out of the musical mood – the one-steps and ‘walks’ were quick, light, and sunny, the Latinates ‘glides’ dark and smoldering. To do any of them took a dramatic imagination and a loss of embarrassment, connected with a lithe body and a daredevil sense of timing.³⁹

Kendall is referring to the general mood and style of theatrical presentation of social dancing. The Castles, however, encouraged a more personal interpretation of dancing in their instructions. Although the Castles encouraged the public to avoid the acrobatic and rough steps of animal dances, they did encourage a sense of informality and imaginative engagement with social dancing according to one’s own desire for how they wanted to be allowed to imagine themselves being seen in dancing. I would argue that the Castles simplified steps to allow for communication and inhabitation of them to be more direct and open – to include rather than exclude the public in social dancing as theatrical process.

The atmosphere the Castles manufactured for social dancing was related to the atmosphere of cabarets. And although sometimes risqué, the cabaret was less rowdy and more elite in style than burlesque, influenced by a European style that bridged entertainment and the avant-garde. Lewis A. Erenberg, who negotiated the formation of nightlife in New York City around the turn of the century, says, “Despite their diversity in other matters, cabarets were distinguished from other forms of amusements by their combination of floor show and tables,”

³⁷ Stearns, 97.

³⁸ Kendall, 92.

³⁹ Kendall, 92-93.

and, “the seating of patrons at tables was ... one that encourages greater intimacy between audience and performers and among the members of the audience itself.”⁴⁰ Additionally,

Erenberg states:

The dances, contests, and alcohol produced an atmosphere of public sociability in the cabaret. People went there to interact with others, to see and be seen, and to take part in a unique form of entertainment where they helped entertain themselves. Once the prosperous began reevaluating their public respectability, they could inhabit institutions where people of different ethnic, class, and moral backgrounds were seated at roughly equal levels, close together. The barriers that had separated people were coming into question, and the cabaret symbolized that questioning.⁴¹

The cultural elite and social reformers believed that ragtime dancing in public would have a negative effect on public morale. Dancing socially was particularly concerning because it was practiced in public, and allowed women a level of display that seemed to, for them, correspond to looser sexual mores.

According to Erenberg, “The cabaret posed a direct challenge to the cult of domesticity. Progressive and conservative critics who based their conception of civilization on the idea that women were essentially pure, religious, and moral were disturbed by women’s cavorting in dance in informal drinking environments with men.”⁴² The “external, lower-class” nature of dancing suggested a democratizing effect on the entertainment fare offered by cabarets. Changes in entertainment, as a popular, more social form of cultural practice, seemed to reflect for elite reformers that women could change in this way, too, especially if they inhabited spaces in which other women were on display and appearing sexually liberated through dancing. According to Kendall:

⁴⁰ Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. (West Port, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 122-123.

⁴¹ Erenberg, 133.

⁴² Erenberg, 80-81.

The country's real ambivalence about social dances might have kept people from seeing what was in them – just as it had with “classic” dancing – except that a number of chic young couples appeared: they danced on Broadway, presided in the late-night cafés and palaces and conveniently embodied the whole dancing mania. The ragtime industry created them partly to be imitated – they posed on song covers, modeled clothes, wrote dance instruction manuals. But their main function was to demonstrate, which the best ones did with a daring and inventiveness that finally no one was ashamed to copy.... And of all the couples, the most beloved was (the Castles).⁴³

Many evaluations of the Castles' significance as social dancing reformists are made in association with images of them or accounts of them produced through materials that marketed them to the public. They come across through indirect accounts as more conservative than their own evaluations of dancing through their book and their movie.

The Castles reoriented the primitive significance of ragtime dancing – its “animal” style” – away from risqué cultural styles that were entering cabarets from below and brought to the floor a more simple, playful, and romantic form of social dancing that appealed to the innocence of Victorian ideology and also to the intimate European form of café dancing. Their social dancing style could be characterized as “modern dancing” without the pretentious appeal to classical ideals for modern art to instruct or mature or modern ideals for loosened restrictions on the movement of the body in public. Through *Whirl of Life*, the audiences legitimated the Castles' style of dancing, and reorient the elite discourse about their dancing from indirect accounts to direct accounts about their development of social dancing into modern dancing. The Castles want to represent their story as a remarkable experience through *Whirl of Life*. They do not instruct their audiences on how to dance but reflect for audience their own pleasure in taking on a life in dancing that exceeded their own identification with it. The Castles identified with dancing as a pleasure that reflected their desire for one another and found legitimacy for their romance according to the pleasures reflected by others who watched them dance for the first time.

⁴³ Kendall, 96.

Whirl of Life is structured by the formation of audiences that propel the story. The Castles' first dance is for a personal audience on the beach where they meet. Then, in Paris, they are asked to do an impromptu dance in public at Café du Paris by the club owner at the request of a Russian official for a "tip". And finally at the end of the film we see the Castles dancing for their own audience at Castles by the Sea. The Castles produce their audience as both commodity and art. Their success is both commercial and artistic. *Whirl of Life* intends to demonstrate the way in which the success of the Castles' dancing in Paris is reproduced on a larger scale in America. After being cheered by the café crowd, the Castles comment on, "How differently we were received... smiles our way," which is followed by a newspaper clipping announcing, "All of Paris had fallen victim to their graces." When they return to America they find out that a dance wave had swept over the nation. The film cuts from their story to a montage of various communities dancing socially: kids, women, blacks, everybody, followed by the announcement: "Everybody's doing it..." which quotes the famous ragtime song from 1911 by Irving Berlin about animal dancing. Then, the film tells us, "Meanwhile, Crosby is sinking money into his new play." The film suggests that the Castles invested in the dance wave that was already in full swing when they returned, and had actually already been building before they left for Paris. But their investment in it is implied to be one of a defense against the idea that dancing may be a threat to society.

The film also implied that Irene's fashion sense was the reason that they were able to successfully refashion the dancing that was of concern by making it modern – making it into an art, as they had in Paris. However, the appeal of the dancing for the Parisian audience was that ragtime dancing was a curiosity, and Vernon and Irene Castle seemed to have demonstrated a less vulgar form of what they had only heard about from news sources. Following the montage

of dancing communities, the film features a montage of Irene parading in a series of fashions, most likely designed by “Lucille,” Irene’s personal fashion designer from the early teens and into the 20s. According to Golden:

Irene had found a clothing designer who was perfectly in tune with her chic, pared-down style “Lucile” (also known as Lady Duff-Gordon after her 1900 marriage) had been in the fashion business since the late 1890s. ... Her designs were noted for their long, sleek, look, low necklines, and slit skirts – tailor-made literally for Irene Castle.... Irene had Lucille send her three or fours gowns a week, at a huge cost. Irene was clearheaded about what styles suited her as a woman and as a dancer.⁴⁴

Irene comes off as even more rebellious than Vernon, often encouraging him to defy the status quo. Vernon is always playing the role of the comedian. He plays along with Irene’s desire for adventure and resistance; she initiates and he plays along, especially playing into her upper class familial and social context as if it is a stage for their romance. In her world, Irene is represented as in demand romantically. But after her marriage to Vernon, Irene is conveyed as being in demand as a star. Vernon does not seem to compete for her in the film as much as save her from being treated as a prize. Vernon’s role as a comedic performer provides her the opportunity to live adventurously. Their life together is represented as an adventure for which dancing is a metaphor. Their life in the film is constantly on the move, never stabilizing. They are always looking for work, which departs farther and farther from the opening scenes of upper class leisure prior to them secretly marrying and then eloping to Paris for a job offered to Vernon. Irene encourages her servant Walter to assist them in their ploy, and then invites him to join them in Paris. However, upon Vernon’s failure to succeed, Walter provides them with the means to sustain themselves financially by teaching American craps to Parisian street dwellers and winning at his own game. The Castles playfully acknowledge their debt to Walter, who plays himself in the film.

⁴⁴ Golden, 63.

Irene is represented as being progressive in her choice to marry and perform with Vernon in spite of disagreement from other men, particularly from the jealous New York producer, John Crosby, and her disapproving father, Mr. Foote. Vernon's resistance is portrayed as more passive than Irene's, quite explicitly playing the role of a hero more than actually being a hero; Irene is portrayed as more active in being culturally defiant, leading Vernon, who in the film and in their dancing, provides the perfect frame for her progressive image. Refinement for the Castles is not a conservative form of progress. In the film we see that their refinement results from an unconventional path of working or looking for work, the success and commercial potential of which is judged not by the elite or pretentious patriarchal figures represented by Mr. Foote and Crosby, but by their audiences, which includes an elite, but ironically, European audience that legitimates for them their social dancing abilities at the Café du Paris. Paris is a rather iconic context for the formation of modern art and one that transcends the boundaries of their home and family: America. The Castles' own story pre-sold *Watch Your Step* as a myth of their own courtship, which was narrated through a progression of music and plot highlighted by a set of dance-sequences that featured dancing by the Castles.

Their simplified style of dancing complemented the simplified forms of ragtime songs that were being produced after 1911. They appeal to a balanced, democratic and transparent image of modern dancing framed as traditional by their own marriage. The Castles created a simplified ideal of dancing which the public could also inhabit by consuming and dancing their style in various public places. *Whirl of Life* unifies these experiences through the simultaneity of shared space of the audiences between Castles by the Sea and the film audience. The Castles are represented as taming a broad, unorganized, variously enacted popular dance craze by producing a unified, more imaginative atmosphere that reflects their reality as a fairytale that could also be

inhabited by the public. “In the years of the dancing mania,” Erenberg points out, “the ballroom teams personalized many of the fears and dreams of urban life and offered guides as to how the dances were done and life could be lived; the upper and middle classes performed styles established by the Castles, the premier ballroom and cabaret artists of their day, and looked to them for clues on new relationships between men and women.”⁴⁵ Thus Erenberg conveys the way in which popular ballroom dance teams and exhibition dancers made social dancing more personal and theatrical at once.

The history of exhibition social dancing as entertainment has its origins in a genre of popular song known as dance-songs. The distinction between the new form of dance-song and earlier forms of folk songs was that dance-songs were used to promote new dances or dance fads, especially the cycle of ‘animal dances’ that became so popular around the turn of the century.⁴⁶ According to Stearns, “Among the thousands (of ‘innumerable songs “adapted to the ballroom”) published in the teens, a few of what might be called ‘dance-songs’ with instructions’ indirectly aided the survival of vernacular dance because they were derived in part from folk sources and sometimes described how to perform a specific dance.”⁴⁷ The origins of social dancing as something embedded into the song for a participant style of reception by a public can be traced back to the mere reference of dances in lyrics. For instance, the Stearns point out the Turkey Trot was circulating through song before it became a popular and marketable social dance in a genre of dance songs.⁴⁸ A ‘transitional’ song from New Orleans entitled, “La Pas Ma La” encourages listeners:

Then turn around and go the other way

⁴⁵ Erenberg, 147-148.

⁴⁶ Stearns, 95.

⁴⁷ Stearns, 95.

⁴⁸ Stearns. 96.

To the World's Fair and do the turkey trot

Although the turkey trot originated as a simple dance from less economically and culturally privileged communities in the west and south, it, like all animal dances, “spread among a more general public” in the “cultured east.”⁴⁹ Dance-song lyrics gave instructions on how to do new dances that were usually simplified from their original forms to be more easily performed by the public.

According to Rick Altman, qualities of closure and the fostering of easy recognition through simplistic rhythms distinguishes popular song from classical music. Altman claims that it is only possible to recognize classical forms of music after increased exposure over a long period of time. This is, according to Altman, because classical music lacks the ‘linguistic’ dimensions of song. Songs have lyrics; classical music does not. Through its ‘linguistic’ content popular songs, which usually have simple structures, foster stronger connections with images and narrative.⁵⁰ The lyrics of the dance-songs transformed social dancing into its own discourse according to the way in which the song put instructions on how to do the dance into narrative form. The songs told stories that incorporated dancing as a theme, which was usually tied to a ritual of courtship that dancing signified for its consumers. Thus dance-songs adapted popular dances into forms that gave them mythic dimensions, which could be experienced over and over again to provide the listener with consistent expectations for the pleasure provided by the song.

Whirl of Life produces a unity of the couple and their audience at Castles by the Sea and does not produce strict narrative finality or closure. The Castles’ story ends in a state of mobility in dancing, about which a projectionist commented afterwards that perhaps there had been some

⁴⁹ Stearns, 96.

⁵⁰ Rick Altman, “Cinema and Popular Song: The Lost Tradition,” in *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, eds. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 18-30.

loss to the end of the final reel of film, a loss of narrative resolution⁵¹. Their story seems to be perpetually in motion as they whirl around the dance floor, the camera over and over again cutting back and forth between their performance and the violent struggle ongoing outside between Crosby and the bandit by the sea, until the cross-cutting intensifies quickly to its denouement: Crosby being tossed to his death and the Castles completing their opening night performance in their own venue to thunderous applause from their Castle by the Sea-audience. The shared unity of the audience celebrates the life of dancing over the violence of the self-possessed theater manager. What makes *Whirl of Life* and the life of the Castles truly progressive is their own self-possession as popular social dancers. It appears that the Castles consume their lifestyle as much as they participate in representing a distinguished way of inhabiting one.

The Castles' story of dancing in *Whirl of Life* is not represented realistically. It is represented as an artificial true story about commercial success. The film is styled upon popular adventure narratives. The Castles inhabit and share their story through a mythic context of a modern cinematic feature. The Castles, relaying their story from their home on the day of their third anniversary, bring together their "real" audience in the film with the real, modern audience of their film. In this way, *Whirl of Life* seems to allow the film audience to also inhabit the adventure along with them. In each dance of the Castles for an audience in the film, dancing is reflected as a simple matter of the heart in a dramatic atmosphere that reflects approval from the public rather than officials, such as John Crosby, Victorian moralists, or Irene's father (who disapproves of Vernon's request to marry Irene in the film, responding, "No man with brains his feet instead of his head will marry my daughter.") For the Castles, the desires of audiences for them are placed above the desires of producers in the conceptualization of their dancing style as

⁵¹ MoMA projectionist (February, 2014).

a popular entertainment. The desires of audience for entertainment are reflected as more simple and unpretentious than those of the elite financiers or the moral reformers.

All of this comes back to their identification with social dancing as a theatrical milieu for self-expression. *Whirl of Life* is quite theatrical in the sense that it appeals to the illusion of the Castles inhabiting roles in which they play themselves. The material form of that illusion is the social dancing entertainment they create for themselves and their audiences, which includes the costumes, the live music, the songs, the setting, and the audience – the entire atmosphere that brings to life the Castles in the filmic imagination. This entire atmosphere could be consumed symbolically at this time through the purchasing of products and fashions with the Castles name, but this would be fragmented from their presence in the performance. *Whirl of Life* reorients their story to the center of their entertainment. And their story is one in which they inhabit a space surrounded by an audience

Crosby is represented as wanting to capture the Castles' audience by capturing Irene. He attempts to alienate Irene from Vernon in order to feature her as an attraction in his own theater. Crosby sees Irene as a commodity that he would like to share with his own audience. The Castles want to produce their own fantasy from their reality and produce a story of success in which they can actively participate as producers – to role-play, to pretend, and to imagine—to appear amateur—along with and for their audiences. They openly acknowledge that their dancing is not for art but for transcendence over the categories that would use art and tradition to put them above their audience.

Thus Vernon and Irene portray themselves finding acceptance from spectators who witness their first dance on the beach. The film creates a binary of patriarchal opposition to their success through Irene's father in the early stages of their story and John Crosby after they return

to America from Paris. Crosby and Mr. Foote both share an interest in Irene and see Vernon as an undesirable romantic and professional interest in her life. Vernon, however, submits to Irene. The film emphasizes her self-display for the audience (the camera) and on the other side of that projection is Vernon, who both frames her personally by his romance and professionally as her companion in dance. Therefore, we can see social dancing as a cultural practice that dissolves the personal and professional relationship between them and their audience. Presumably Vernon invented the “Castle Kiss” before they married. The film audience is positioned as a witness to the process by which the Castles imagine themselves generating their own brand.

But the story atmosphere into which the brand discourse is incorporated signifies the brand as more authentic than the commercial genres of the kind of entertainment they produce or compete with. The story represents their relationship as exclusive from the dominant landscape of culture and tradition because dominant culture sought to alienate them from one another. The brand of the Castles, rather than alienating, is expressed as unifying a new form of power that is achieved because of the organic desire between them and for them before they were ever a brand. The symbolic realm of fiction allows for greater admission of branding as a process that manufactures desire through symbolic cultural values. The process of the expression of desire between the Castles cancels out the artificiality of a branded product. In a sense, the story lets us in on the process without acknowledging that it was really a manufactured process at all.

The sequence of scenes portraying the moment that they kiss for the first time and subsequently go about asking Irene’s father for approval to marry highlights their pleasure in imagining themselves as resistant to traditional standards. In telling the story to the film audience the Castles take pleasure in knowing they were, and are, on display, simultaneously

entertaining the film audience while provoking frustration from John Crosby and Irene's father, respectively.

The strict boundaries between stages and audiences were disintegrating as professionalism became more synonymous with amateurism. Social dancing as an entertainment could confuse matters to a greater extent than other popular arts because it was based in something that was never really art in a traditional sense: popular dancing, specifically ragtime. Ragtime was mobile and ever changing in relation to songs produced for dancing. In his book on the popular arts, *The 7 Lively Arts*, Gilbert Seldes, writes, "Undoubtedly those who can should preserve these provincial and rooted dances; but it is idle to pretend that dancing itself can be a subject for archaeology. It is essentially for action, not for speculation."⁵² Seldes connotes that social dancing cannot be studied in a material form. Dancing's meanings are represented by the person dancing and by the cultural context in which they are dancing. But because the representation is contained by the body of the dancer rather than left behind in a material form, dancing can only be evaluated through mediations, which necessarily transform the frame of perspective in which it was originated. The contexts by which social dancing is mediated will inform the meanings it produces. The Castles' image was deconstructed into material elements, such as photographs, books, film, accessories, health and beauty supplies, and even hairstyles, all of which signified their appearance as modern dancers. Through the Castles, social dancing was represented as a modern life style that could be inhabited beyond the sites in which they enacted it. Their products provided sources of symbolic reception for their dancing as well as sources for the imagination of the public as social dancers. Film reconstructs and integrates elements of

⁵² Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts*. (Dover Publications, Inc.: Mineola, New York, 2001), 268.

popular social dancing into an active and mobile context for the imagination of social dancing as productive of folk relations in imaginative and theatrical fashion, which is too say, as popular art.

The Castles' career benefited from the management of their agent, Elisabeth Marbury, who, by 1914 had arranged for them to have their own exhibition and teaching venues, the Castle Club, a rooftop cabaret, and the Castle House, a dance school located across from the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.⁵³ Social dancing had become a large-scale business, and the success of the business, at least initially, "depended on the linking of dance lessons to broader cultural needs and desires."⁵⁴ The marketing of products through social dancing culture linked social dancing with higher social status as well as values and beliefs that were associated with learning to dance since the nineteenth century, such as, "improved self-confidence, social interaction, physical dexterity, and life enjoyment."⁵⁵ The Castles were not only a brand, but also a site for spinning off related branded products.

In her introduction to *Modern Dancing*, Elisabeth Marbury tries to alleviate concerns that there is a 'moral danger' in dancing. *Modern Dancing* was intended to re-conceptualize the issue of the morality of social dancing as it became more popular and importantly had a middle class public interest in getting formal instruction on how to do modern style dances. The church and the press were calling for social reform and responded to the youth-led movement in dance and music with alarm, believing that the public displays of unrefined movement to contemporary music was corrupting traditional moral ideals stemming from the Victorian era.

⁵³ Susan Cook, "Passionless Dancing and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle" in *The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. William Washabaugh. (New York: Berg, 1998), 141.

⁵⁴ Juliet McMains, *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 68.

⁵⁵ McMains, 68.

Instead of considering dancing to be morally unhealthy, Marbury asks that her readers regard dancing, *if* it is correctly performed, as an important aspect of social development: “Castle House (is) the model school of modern dancing, and through its influence the spirit of beauty and art is allied to the legitimate physical need of healthy exercise and physical enjoyment.”⁵⁶ Marbury regards physical displays of movement as a natural requirement for the maintenance of good health and as gratifying humans’ natural desire for physical activity; with social dancing, physical activity becomes a pleasing activity that benefits health rather than a symbolic, representational practice. From this perspective, beautiful and artistic dance is just as natural as the physical need and desire to move. Marbury reduces modern dancing to a discourse of naturalism that is qualitatively similar to the way in which animal dancing appealed to primitivism as a symbol of freedom from restriction. Marbury, though, signifies social dancing as more pure than the desire for freedom. She differentiates dancing as an instinctual desire for freedom to move but asserts that it requires guidance. However, the Castles were less interested in identifying with naturalism and reconstructed social dancing’s status as an artificial form of dancing as an art into an art that took pleasure in self-exhibition through artifice. Dancing for the Castle’s was something of a way to express oneself through dramatic imagination of the body through fashion.

According to Marbury, if dancing does not appeal to the classical and official stipulations for what constitutes natural, or otherwise good art, it is not the fault of the dance. Rather it is the fault of *the dancers* who degenerate dancing by evacuating the natural and beautiful qualities from the dance. For the Castles, the beautiful qualities of the dancing were constructed and decorated to appear as such. If the public learns to dance by using the Castles as a model, then

⁵⁶ Castle, 20.

they will be more likely to mature into the moral and social values represented by the Castles. From the standpoint of the Castles, though, engaging in modern dancing was to be free to stylize their image. I argue that Irene was at the center of the image of the Castles commercial enterprise.

Marbury believes that youth who want to dance should have “proper knowledge” of dancing instead of approaching it as “forbidden fruit.” She asks that social reformers make a clear distinction between modern dancing and popular entertainment. According to her defense, the Castles are professionals because they have established a value for their form of modern dancing that adapts the traditional values of classical arts to modern values of physical health and beauty. Marbury puts the dance instructor at odds with unmediated demonstrations of ‘eccentric’ dances like the “One Step” or “Tango” which are ‘exaggerated and elaborated to excite the jaded audiences of (musical comedy).’⁵⁷ The intention of writing the book is not to curb the popularity of dancing but to transform its negative reception by the middle class elite, whose views were supported by the Press and the Church, by creating a more refined site for its demonstration and, ultimately, its public social practice. The Castle House is positioned as a source of refined cultural education that is modeled on the dominant site of “home” as a site for producing Modern Dancing in order to appeal to middle class audiences and set it apart from the public sites of social dancing as aimless leisure. The elite are more likely to appreciate social dancing as an exclusive art than as a popular entertainment. Irene Castle, however, “mirrored a new age, she improvised some of its features – calf-length dresses, low-heeled dancing pumps, little Dutch caps – and she was probably the first American woman whose ideas had such an impact on

⁵⁷ Castle, 26.

fashion.”⁵⁸ The Castles appeal to fashion as a reflection of their subjectivity upon dancing rather than to organic qualities of the body in dancing as Marbury does.

The Castles were progressive as modern dancers in the way that their film was significant as an early form of a dance movie. The Castles promote fashioning oneself in a way that functions in a theatrical manner. The Castles divert depart from elite ideals that value art as a source of enlightenment and moral refinement. Instead they appeal to theatricality and artifice as a source of liberation from exclusive, symbolic forms of identification with cultural practice. The products that were manufactured to imitate their fashion have materiality that the classical values expressed by Marbury do not allow for. However, the Castle House is more conservative, according to Marbury’s representation, because it tames the theatrical experience of social dancing through an instructive and ritualistic process of refinement, most importantly of the audience.

The Castles’ values, I believe, were feminist in a critical sense according to the way in which they promoted popular cultural practice as a means of amplifying personality through artifice. The Castles embodied the image associated with the kind of “high life” emerging in American culture. The high life is more progressive than notions associated with “high art.” In her book on the untamed imagination of female, free form dancers of the nineteenth century and their transition from progressive to quaint in the twentieth century, Elizabeth Kendall describes the high life as, “lavishly modern, featuring electricity, loud music, fancy décor, but was so unfamiliar it seemed fantastical.”⁵⁹ The Castles’ public venue for social dancing appeals to a desire to embody the mood of modern experience, which is complemented by their expression of modern dancing styles as a source of renewal for the atmospheres that originally produced them.

⁵⁸ Kendall, 98.

⁵⁹ Kendall, 95.

Although they do prescribe certain steps and attitudes for social dancing, they encourage the public to remain open to changes and differences as a result of the performance. Dancing is encouraged to remain reactive, reflective, continuous, fluid, and responsive. Socially active dancing allows the dancers to appear to express the imagination of the music rather than submit to the music as a higher, immaterial symbolic context for an art of dancing.

The Castles tame the fantastical, unreal qualities of the modern mood of contemporary life developing in America by inhabiting it professionally and theatrically as real people. However, they do not vanquish the fantastical qualities of the mood. The Castles in fact amplify fantasy by expressing their own relationship as one imagined according to the way in which dancing corresponds to life – as representative of the imagination of the dancers interpretation of the life of the music rather than achieving a reflection of music as an art. The Castles’ image as modern dancers reflected a narrative of transition from traditional marriage to modern marriage in which the ceremony was mobile and continuously reflected as a process of communication. If modern social dancing was symbolic of how to “arrange oneself in relation to others in a fast moving world,” the Castles offered the public steps according to which they could rehearse and imagine different ways of inhabiting the rhythms of the modern world without loss of their sense of community.

Interestingly, in the instruction portion of the book, Vernon explains, “Beyond doubt, the Tango, correctly practiced is the essence of the modern soul of dancing... For it is not only a dance, it is a style; to master the Tango one must first master its style, absorb its atmosphere.”⁶⁰ Vernon indicates how the concept of modern dancing was abstract in nature as a style or mise-en-scène interpreted by dancers’ bodies rather than just a form personified by a performance of

⁶⁰ Castle, 83-84.

specific steps; the dancers' bodies function as a stage upon which an atmosphere for the dance gets expressed. The body is not an open canvas but more like a photograph, which is reflective of reality. Modern dancing is represented by any possible dancer that inhabits the world of the dance floor or the world as a dance floor – as historical and differentiated and who has the power to construct a story by actively forming a relationship to the frame provided by music.

In *Whirl of Life*, the audience is represented as the most modern and historical milieu for modern dancing. In the film, the audience changes and is refashioned by context but always structured similarly in relation to dancing, no matter how successful, popular, and mediated they become. The Castles employ the cinema as a modern milieu that corresponds to their own imagination of social dancing through which their lives may be expressed as an adventure, a melodrama, and fantasy – a fantasy of their own achievement. The Castles' story provides a *mise-en-scène* for the audience's imagination of progress and resistance towards the subordination of their own stories to the myth of entertainment as being beyond reality, like a high art form. The Castles project social dancing as a modern art form that appeals to folk values of community in which differentiation is possible from within.

2.1 THE STORY OF VERNON AND IRENE CASTLE

Arlene Croce, in her seminal book on the famous pair of musical stars, *The Astaire and Rogers Book* (1972), begins her introduction to the production of *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* thusly:

RKO bought Irene Castle's story for Astaire and Rogers in 1936 but didn't schedule it for filming until 1938. When the movie opened in New York, Mrs. Castle, then forty-six, told Bosley Crowther in the Times, "I'm sure they would rather I had been dead. They even waited two years for me to kick off, I suspect, after I had sold them the story. But when they found out I was indestructible, they went ahead and made it. And I still don't feel particularly ancient."⁶¹

Irene seems to be distrustful of the way in which the acquisition and production of her story by RKO and enacted by Astaire and Rogers would seem to transform her story into a subject of archeology – as a relic for dancing as art, which would be complemented and acquire greater value if she were dead. Astaire and Rogers were dancing professionals that informed dancing as an art of the film musical, and the continuous production of films together over time allowed for audiences to desire to inhabit again the fairytale imagination of romance that Astaire and Rogers produced. In *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, Astaire and Rogers to inhabit the fairytale context of the modern musical and amplify the story of the Castles through a strong set of cultural oppositions that lead viewers to, "Compare the prospective lovers one to another."⁶² The two films in which the Castles' story is portrayed are similarly structured by their brand's rise to popular appeal. Their courtship is represented as that of an amateur (Irene Foote) from a well-off middle class family falling for a semi-successful professional, comedian (Vernon Castle). The intimate, fire-lit setting of the opening of *Whirl of Life* is reflected in the intimate, moon-lit parlor of Irene's home where Vernon proposes to her. The film is a curious instance of the musical in which the couple reconciles their cultural differences early on. But, as in the history of the film musical, the diversion to the dancing is a break from the progress of the courtship narrative. *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* produces a more extended narrative that expresses the courtship of the Castles through the binary of personal romance and theatrical romance.

⁶¹ Arlene Croce, *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book*. (New York: Outerbridge & Lazard, Inc., 1972), 162.

⁶² Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 145.

The success of the formation of their romance into marriage depends on their ability to reconcile their mutual appeal for eccentric styles of performance. Vernon though is a professional working on the stage in slapstick “ham” comedy, and Irene is an amateur with a love for entertainment and entertainers, especially Bessie McCoy, who Irene imitates for Vernon and her family at her family home after she meets Vernon on the beach in New Rochelle.

In *Whirl of Life* and *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, the Castles’ success is dependent upon influencing audiences to desire and derive pleasure from consuming their style rather than persona’s they take on in a theatrical manner. When Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers embody the Castles as both dancers and lovers, their success not only imitated the Castles success but went beyond it in terms of popular visibility. Fred and Ginger had generated a popular appeal for musicals that led to a cycle of dance musicals that appealed to film-goers’ desire to see Astaire and Rogers perform to new musical numbers by the likes of Kern, Gershwin, and Berlin. The production of popular songs for film musicals provided them new opportunities to dance together. Interestingly, as famous innovators of social dancing into a popular entertainment, the Castles provide Astaire and Rogers a new opportunity to perform together in roles closer to themselves rather than the characters. The film requires less performance of song as an art of the musical but at the end of the film, their story is reflected through music. After Vernon gets killed, a medley of music evokes all the various moments in which they danced together.

Although both films portray Vernon and Irene's marketing as a brand, they do so in terms of the contagious effect of their dancing on the public. The dancing montage sequence in *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* implies that the Castles dancing has the power to originate folk traditions of consumption. The mass popularity of the Castles is interesting because it is

represented as rather eccentric in nature. For instance, we see husbands gawking at the sight of their wives' bobbed hair. Thus women's imitation of Irene is signified as a style with originality – a uniqueness that sets the Castles and their audience apart from other classes. Thus the musical version of their story amplifies more explicitly the cultural and symbolic significance of the Castles' status as popular cultural entertainers. They individuated themselves without becoming a parody.

The success of the Castles' dancing is represented through the montage sequence as an emergence of a modern form of folk cultural practice because it brings together the public through ritual practices around manufactured products. Imitation of the Castles' dancing allows Astaire and Rogers to individuate their own power for self-expression. Through mass consumption of the Castles as a brand, audiences had – in the paradox of mass consumption – become "themselves". The same is true for Astaire and Rogers performing the Castles in the film. It is almost as if Astaire and Rogers appear more like Astaire and Rogers rather than as characters. From a material and historical standpoint of representation, branding originates a kind of industrialization of social dancing culture that functions like social dancing. The montage of the contagious effects of the Castles' successful formation into a model for modern rituals of popular cultural practice cuts back and forth between the public consuming the Castle brand and Astaire and Rogers reproducing different dances branded by the Castles.

The Castles' dances are sequenced according to dances introduced in their book, *Modern Dancing*, which is materialized in the film as a Book. The Castles seem to materialize to life from the pages. While the Castles theatrically inhabit the dances they introduce in the book, bringing them to life for various audiences in different locations. The public is represented bringing to life the Castles' manufactured products – even Irene's hair is signified as a product.

All of these physical products are transformed into something organic through consumption. The organic significance, though, appeals to the kind of natural and health related value of learning to dance from the Castles. I believe it is Marbury's traditional discourse that relates more strongly to the biopic of their lives than the Castles' own filmic discourse of communication and reflection of the folk within the milieu of the modern context. Their original dancing on the beach is positioned as a social event beyond institutionalized instruction or industrial manufacturing. The Castles in *Whirl of Life* are seen manufacturing for themselves and their audiences a similar kind of immediate, active, and communicative social relationship through social dancing. The modern significance of *Whirl of Life* seems to be actively directed toward a critique of attempts to objectify them or contain them to the stage.

In the montage sequence from *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, the public consumption is heightened by mobility, moving through streets and passing by others who bear the Castles' look, sometimes wearing clothes or hairstyles identical to one another. The mass production of the Castles is transformed into a folk culture that is primarily limited to their own communal context, especially the home where the public primarily limits themselves to adapting to a lifestyle of the Castles. The binary of the relationship between folk public audience and folk popular entertainers is unified around their appeal to theatricality and a lack of originality in the public as dancers or performers.

In his study of the "Folk Musical" subgenre of the "American Film Musical," Rick Altman says, "In keeping with the principle that all folk elements are borrowed from the American past and colored by a euphoric memory, the typical folk musical represents aspects of the American scene as transformed by popular arts."⁶³ In this sense, *The Story of Vernon and*

⁶³ Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 277.

Irene Castle is a typical folk musical in which the story of Vernon and Irene Castle is the soul of the modern musical which Astaire and Rogers renew by absorbing the atmosphere of the Castles' dancing styles. The film biopic of the Castles, to an extent, uses their story to instruct Astaire and Rogers in a new way to frame their role within the history of the formation of the Hollywood Musical into a popular art as innovating. However, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* produces some critical poses for Astaire and Rogers in dancing that allows a kind of critical awareness for the audience of them as actors and professionals on display. Astaire and Rogers were the closest thing the musical had to the dance film, and for this they achieve, in the tradition of the musical, cultural reconciliation. For when they dance away from the film audience at the end of the film, they restore themselves to mythological stars of the art of entertainment.

3.0 EARLY TEENPICS, 60S YOUTH MUSICALS AND THE DANCE MOVIE

Social dancing was part of the rock 'n' roll subculture that was identified with modern youth in the 1950s and 60s. Dancing was used to express the behavioral attitudes of youth in proximity to rock 'n' roll, especially the professional performers that produced rock 'n' roll music. It is not surprising then that social dancing was a prominent feature of teenpics of the 1950s and 1960s. Dancing often served as a display of adolescent behavior and contemporary attitudes in association with the music they consumed. Rock 'n' roll teenpics, such as *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred F. Sears, 1956), *Don't Knock the Rock* (Fred F. Sears, 1956), *Jailhouse Rock* (Richard Thorpe, 1957), *The Girl Can't Help It* (Frank Tashlin, 1957), dance fad movies, like *Don't Knock the Twist* (Oscar Rudolph, 1962), *Twist Around the Clock* (Oscar Rudolph, 1961), and *It's a Trad, Dad!* (Richard Lester, 1962), and the cycle of beach party films of the mid to late 1960s starring Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello, such as *Beach Blanket Bingo* (William Asher, 1965), featured cultural tastes and behaviors of teens. The opening of *Beach Blanket Bingo* shows all the kids dancing on their beach blankets and singing to the audience, as if to invite them to their summer beach party.

Blackboard Jungle (Richard Brooks, 1955), a "social problem film" produced by MGM, was the first mainstream film to feature popular rock music on the soundtrack.⁶⁴ The opening

⁶⁴ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 59.

credits are set to “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley and the Comets, and, as Doherty states, “the impact was phenomenal.”⁶⁵ It sold over 2 million copies and topped the pop charts. It also stirred controversy as a result of, “minor incidents of violence had erupted during live rock ‘n’ roll shows and at theaters during the title sequence.”⁶⁶ The credit sequence is preceded by statement from the producers about their faith in American youth and their pride in the American system, stating that it is in this spirit that they hope to bring “public awareness” to the problem of “juvenile delinquency.” The statement scrolls up the screen to the beat of a military march on the soundtrack, which connotes a militaristic attitude for the kind of reform the film promotes. The cut to a shot of a blank blackboard on which the film credits fade in and then out to the lively beat of “Rock Around the Clock” produces a sort of liberating effect from the scrolling statement of the nationalistic discourse that precedes it.

Exploitation teenpics, such as *Rock Around the Clock*, feature dance styles that appeal to the types of dancing associated with dance crazes that developed in the 1950s and would remain a popular trope of youth oriented films into the 1960s. Youth vernacular was exaggerated to emphasize youth as a subculture, sometimes through colonial metaphors, which Doherty refers to, “as a way to categorize teenpics and to evaluate their ritual purpose for subculture and culture alike.”⁶⁷ Colonial metaphors of “imperial” and “indigenous” are used to align teenpics with either parent culture or teenage subculture.⁶⁸

Exploitation teenpics of the 1950s are symptomatic of the primacy of media in facilitating a culture of youth amusement in which they are positioned as spectators of their own subculture through a symbolic context of narrative. The films function as part of a network of

⁶⁵ Doherty, 59.

⁶⁶ Doherty, 63.

⁶⁷ Doherty, 74.

⁶⁸ Doherty, 74.

mass media in which teen audiences may negotiate their lives through the lives of teens in the films. New technological developments fragmented the industry of mass media into a more compartmentalized structure around media specific genres, production, and reception allowing youth more autonomy as a subject and market for commercial film. Filmmakers often featured dance fads in scenes in which teens listened to music in public. Rock bands and stars were often featured as performers in the fictional universe of teenpics. Popular dancing fads, especially the twist, sometimes provided inspiration for plots dramatically structured by cultural differences between generations. Recording artists, such as Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Chubby Checker Frankie Avalon, Sandra Dee, and the Coasters were featured in the films. In his book *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, Thomas Doherty says, “(Teenpics) serve as a kind of recognition of their subculture and hence a kind of validation and reinforcement.”⁶⁹

Doherty makes distinctions among teenpics according to cultural assumptions of taste based on gender differences. He identifies a taste for conventional musical and comedy aesthetics with female youth audiences and qualifies the “clean teenpics” as different than “rock n’ roll teenpics” because they “were light, breezy, and frankly escapist.”⁷⁰ “Rock n’ roll” teenpics use juvenile delinquency and social problem discourses to address fears about the moral deterioration of youth. His reading of the ideological significance of teenpics, though, is predominately founded by the same discourses of deviance and delinquency through which rock ‘n’ roll was viewed by producers and the public. Clean teepics according to Doherty were associated with girl culture and the innocent sexuality of teen idols whereas "hard" teepics were

⁶⁹ Doherty, 74.

⁷⁰ Doherty, 159.

associated with a male outlaw status and with overt sexual expression. Yet Doherty does not consider that both types of 1950s teenpics could be negotiated according to the ways in which dancing was represented by both hard and clean teenpics and provides a shared symbolic practice that liberates the gendered opposition on both sides of his classification. Doherty's classification of teenpics reflects assumptions of gender identification and desire held by the commercial industries that produced them. Through dancing, girls could be interpreted as resistant to passive consumption. Teen idols and boys could be interpreted as being liberated from sexual repression in a symbolic and representational fashion.

Looking at the index of Doherty's book virtually none of the dance-fad films are investigated. Dance fad-style dance sequences are treated as subordinate to rock 'n' roll performances and performers or otherwise are used to express the exaggerated imagination of the behavioral effects of music on the youth audiences. For instance, Doherty says:

Reflecting the industry's two minds about the teenage audience, the trade press told exhibitors to temper the usual ballyhoo with sound judgment. 'All these rock 'n' roll stars mean something to rock 'n' roll addicts, and they are very numerous. It's the most! They'll be dancing in the street, in the lobby, and in the aisle,' exulted Motion Picture Herald's adviser on selling approaches, who was cautious enough to conclude his pitch with the warning: 'Don't let the dance all-night. The all-night dance-a-thons can get out of control – and do you more harm than good.' Many exhibitors who played the film had an additional worry in resistance from local law enforcement officials, newspaper editorialists, and civic groups.⁷¹

When Doherty mentions the "elaborate choreography" for the title number of *Jailhouse Rock* (Richard Thorpe, 1957) he largely focuses on the formal qualities of the filmic representation of the rock 'n' roll star Elvis Presley, interpreting the pacing of the editing as an expression of youths' appreciation of the performer and the music. Dancing is associatively subordinated to the significance given to the camera. Doherty ultimately but not purposefully subordinates the

⁷¹ Doherty, 65.

representational significance of social cultural practice to institutional contexts of production and its moral construction of subculture practice. Scenes of youth dancing in the films may have been just as significant as the institutional discourses about the films that regarded dancing as a symbol of deviance and resistance to authority. Dancing may have provided for youth audiences an opportunity to imagine their relationship to commercial culture as giving definition and appearance to commercial song in a way that subordinated the idols to images of shared popular cultural practice. Doherty amplifies institutional and technological practices more so than youth practices as sites of understanding the teenage transformations in popular culture and society with which he is concerned. Doherty's ambivalence toward films inspired by dance fads, in particular – he doesn't mention any films that were explicitly produced as fad films--seems to ignore social practices such as dancing as signifiers for understanding meanings of commercial cultural practices of production and representation. Doherty classifies teenpics according the discourses of the dominant institutions that produced, marketed, and received them. He applies the moral discourses structured through their narratives and used to mediate the films to the public through sites such as magazines, radio, and print news to classify the genre of teenpics into subgenres.

The early teenpics *Rock Around the Clock* and *Blackboard Jungle* use social dancing to convey the modern liberation of youth from adult supervision. They conceptualize modern youth liberation by legitimating leisure and amusement as a source of investment in mass marketed popular culture and as a modern form of pedagogy, respectively. *Rock Around the Clock* identifies social dancing by youth as proof of rock's market potential, which depends upon making youth visible as potential consumers for commercial recording artists in the film. The narrative of *Rock* constructs a transformation of youth subculture practice into a mass market

production. The narrative ideology ultimately converges with the economic imperatives of the film to sell the music featured in the film. Youth dancing is featured as a sign of the pleasure of consumption rather than as a form of social dancing presented in the style of exhibition entertainment. *Blackboard Jungle* --which Doherty says was an adult film that only became a teen exploitation film when the rock song was added to the credits--uses rock music as a pedagogical tool to sugarcoat learning for ethnic minority students. *Blackboard Jungle* reconciles rock's association with delinquency by reorienting it from the subcultural to the institutional sphere in a much more conservative fashion than contemporary dance movies. In the sequence that follows the opening credits and that the rock song bridges, Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford), the film's main protagonist, arrives on his first day to teach English at an urban public high school and encounters in the schoolyard delinquents who do nothing but stare threateningly at the other youths dancing aimlessly.

Dancing to rock for amusement is framed as an innocent but childish form of behavior that the film exploits as not necessarily having negative moral and intellectual implications but making innocence vulnerable to deviance. The narrative tames the environmental conditions in which youth engage with modern forms of culture while also advocating for responsibility of adults to accommodate rather than reject contemporary subculture practices. The film negotiates and ultimately reconciles generational differences, and, attempts to accommodate the racial implications of the conflict by paralleling the marginalization of adults from modern youth with modern youth's marginalization of not just African Americans but all others that are not white males, including women and Latinos. It is important that the film ends with Dadier walking out of the school with Gregory Miller (Sidney Poitier), the only African-American student and the

only student with knowledge of music as an art, but who refuses to be “parented” by Dadier.

Doherty says:

The racism lurking beneath much anti-rock ‘n’ roll sentiment was brought to the surface by Asa Carter, executive secretary for the North Alabama White Citizen’s Council, who condemned the music as an NAACP conspiracy to infect white teenagers via the nation’s jukeboxes... Although the attitude of the parent culture toward rock ‘n’ roll was as often condescending as alarmist, the new teenage music had become a dramatic arena in which to play out generation conflict.⁷²

Blackboard Jungle produces a filmic and symbolic context to play out and reconcile cultural conflict over rock ‘n’ roll. *Blackboard Jungle* advocates for an adaptation of modern attitudes to traditional discourses of culture as a source of maturity and growth in which the school, and, symbolically, the “blackboard” takes the place of the jukebox. In dance movies, technology for the amplification of pop music takes over the stage and becomes a context for the amplification of professional maturity and cultural progress.

Dancing to music provides a powerful source of cultural liberation in dance movies such as when Ren performs his defense for dancing in association with the Bible or when Johnny reclaims his authority over the last dance of the talent show but with Baby – one of the hotel guests – rather than with another member of the entertainment staff. Both Johnny and Ren prepared and rehearsed for their performance prior to executing them, but were excluded from the folk construction of the performance on stage, so they bring their own music and their own bible, respectively. In *Footloose*, the DJ booth functions as a source amplification for the music at the prom and reconstructs folk cultural practice into modern folk practice, which is also popular because the cultural practices of consuming through technology is shared by the film

⁷² Doherty, 63-64.

audience. The technology of musical amplification in the films is the representational form of symbolic spectatorship enabled by consuming similar products and styles of music.

After an extended, jazz-infused instrumental break from the lyrics, the credits conclude and the song volume fades low as the film cuts to an establishing shot of an incoming train car to signal the arrival of the film's protagonist, Mr. Dadier, to the urban setting where he is about to interview for a job as an English teacher at a public school. An ethnic mix of black, white, and Latino youth is visible in the public school yard. The film then cuts to a shot of Dadier standing in the foreground of the shot with his head turned slightly to the left looking back, presumably to where he has left, contemplating the modern "jungle" he is about to enter.

Before we are introduced to the urban setting in which the film takes place, the music fades out completely. The youth are shown at play on both sides of the fence containing the schoolyard in front of Dadier. A group of children run through water spraying from an open fire hydrant that covers the street with water, creating a detour for passing adults in business attire. A woman comes into the left of the frame and pulls a young boy away, presumably scolding him for playing in the water. Just then, Mr. Dadier turns right and the camera pans with him. The song again bleeds into the soundtrack. Then, the camera tracks behind him up to the a cast iron gate until the gate spans the entire frame and establishes a physical barrier between him (as well as the film audience) and the schoolyard.

Again, Dadier pauses, and looks back to his left. In front of him at the center of the yard are two boys dancing to "Rock Around the Clock". Initially, it might be assumed that the song is used to associate rock music with the problem of education reform. The song contrasts with the tone of the opening statement about the film's intentions, energizing the proceedings apart from a "serious" discourse of a social problem drama. It will eventually become clear that learning in

association with popular culture, especially music, is significant to Dadier's teaching approach. But first, the film presents the music as a source of amusement and play via dancing. In the diegetic context (apart from the credits) the song's vitality identifies with the energetic movement of youth through the urban public environment and in the schoolyard. The song re-emerges on the soundtrack as Dadier arrives at the schoolyard and witnesses a group of adolescent boys dancing aimlessly, almost seeming to parody the culture of dancing to rock n' roll. They are amused and having fun, and not conforming even if they are all dancing.

There are at least three distinct couples of boys dancing in the yard. The perspective has transitioned from Dadier to two teenage boys in the foreground that have suddenly taken over our point of view upon the yard. They whistle at Dadier as he walks in front of them inhibiting our view of the boys dancing in the background. The perspective of the delinquent teenagers alienates the youth and emphasizes their resistance to integrating with the rest of the student body. Dadier and the boys seem to be in danger from the delinquent teenagers' point of view. Suddenly Dadier is cast as an outsider to the teenage youth as well as the delinquents once he is inside the public schoolyard.

In *Blackboard Jungle*, the new high school English teacher Richard Dadier resorts to using media, such as music, recording devices for playback, and movies to illustrate moral points from stories that reflect, but do not necessarily mimic, the stories of the working class youth that attend the urban school. Dadier has them listen to a recording of their own voices in order to promote reflection. Dadier encourages youth to see their reflection in media in order to understand why they need to change. Reading books is unlikely to become a common practice for the working class urban youth that Dadier teaches. Dadier, however, does not depart from the classic tradition of seeking traditional moral values in symbolic cultural practice. He chooses

more familiar discursive contexts, specifically ones that are more popular to his students. Dadier encourages finding popular cultural practice moral significance that reflects, indirectly, why it is immature and lacking in cultural value. At one point Dadier has the students speak into a recorder and plays it back for them. Dadier finds that making the students subject through recording technology only confuses them more. Self-representation through modern technology fragments and deconstructs ones sense of themselves as part of a community from the point of view of the adult “teenpic”. The narrative discourse of adult teenpics like *Blackboard Jungle* signifies representation of difference – its amplification – as disruptive and alienating. Dadier engages them in an associative reading of a simpler, more artificial modern text instead. Dadier projects a 16mm print of an animated version of “Jack and the Beanstalk” in the classroom. Dadier is in the foreground of the frame standing behind the projector. The film audience watches him project the film. Then, the film cuts to an exhibition of the film itself. It is as if the film is being screened for us as well, so that we are sympathetic to the interpretation by the youth. Their response provides visible evidence for Dadier’s claim that the youth may be enlightened if mediated through cultural products that are as immature (from Dadier’s privileged and exclusive perspective) as the students.

The students recognize that “Jack and the Beanstalk” conveys more than just a story, which proves that popular culture can be used to demonstrate the same values that elite art traditionally does. The scene intertextually establishes the ideology of *Blackboard Jungle* to form a sympathetic relationship with youth. But the film uses the modern technological sources of representation associated with teenagers, such as film and audio, as a context for reforming youth identification with popular culture by associating it with childhood myths that serve a moral purpose. Thus like the modern technology, the pop song merely frames the narratives,

which is much more conservative than the frame would indicate. The film employs popular culture as a symbolic moral context, which empties it of its representational meaning and denies it capable of providing a source of identification for differentiated response and communication among youth.

Blackboard Jungle demonstrates pedagogical principles intended to reform youths' and adults' relationship to real life. Modern media is modern in the sense that that technological innovations allow for public consumption beyond institutional and professional sites of consumption – music amplification, recording, and film projecting represented in *Blackboard Jungle* are all enabled by modern media production. Social dancing is also modern as a form of popular culture, but cannot be produced or incorporated as a text in the same fashion as media. Technology, however, is symbolic of organic social practices in dance movies because it has the power to amplify a context that can be inhabited to represent meaning. Even when dancing, dancing is never purely organic, the body is stylized, posed, and rehearsed before it even starts to move. The mobility of technology and dancing is the significance of their power, and mobility is represented as significant of change and differentiation. Teaching and instructing through media produces a passive encounter that inhibits response. In dance movies, performance itself is represented as instructive and active.

In his essay, "Rethinking the Intersection of Cinema, Genre, and Youth," James Hay suggests that *Blackboard Jungle* provides an alternative way of thinking the relationship between modern media, especially filmic media, and youth.⁷³ According to Hay, "For Dadier, the classroom film is simply one technology for 'rehabilitating' the classroom as an apparatus for a kind of training that links knowledge and proper conduct and for securing his own position as

⁷³ Hay, James, "Rethinking the Intersection of Cinema, Genre, and Youth: The "Teen Film," Genre Theory, and the Moral Universe of Planetariums," *Scope* (January 5, 2002).

moral exemplar cum critic/educator with that apparatus.”⁷⁴ From Hay’s perspective, the film legitimates the pedagogical importance of film in the classroom, supporting this view according to a moral of mobility. For Hay, technology mobilizes our relationship to the outside world and allows for more open negotiation of the world beyond the classroom. However, it is the drive to use education as a source of legitimacy for technologically based cultural practices that undermines the progressive significance that Hay gives to *Blackboard Jungle*. As a critic, Hay seeks to reform genre theories of the teenpic so that we may find legitimacy in them for his/our own practices of teaching film, especially “Teen Film”.

The youth are impressed by Dadier’s power to provide modern culture with a significance that relates to their lives. However, Dadier’s ability to do so is suggested to result from his privileged familiarity with the art of literature, which underscores the relationship he forms with the quiet African-American student, Gregory (Sidney Poitier). Gregory’s understanding of the art of music complements Dadier’s understanding of literature. Dadier tells Gregory in private that he is a natural born leader because he is smart. Both Dadier and Gregory are privileged because they have been subject to something more real than the youth have encountered – counter conflict that poses a threat of violence. Like the delinquents and Dadier, Gregory stands outside from his peers while being an insider. *Blackboard Jungle* uses rock n’ roll to correspond with its perspective of urban realism as well as to identify with youth relationships to media as either a source of unity and growth rather than a form of meaningful pleasure. Dance songs associated with dance fads, such as “The Twist” instructed youth to dance (“like we did last summer”) but lacked instructions on how to do it. Visual media provided a direct representation for youth of other youth dancing to The Twist, which was likely

⁷⁴ Hay, 2.

unnecessary for their abilities in dancing but the visual contexts provided a source of folk imagination within a modern fragmented media environment, of which youth were regarded by the commercial industry as the most important market demographic. Through narratively structured contexts of ideological representation, the diverse forms of manufactured products shared by the youth were reconstructed into a symbolic milieu that inhibited their own imaginative investments from finding expression from within the modern frame of pop music as they did when they danced. Viewers are allowed to contemplate contemporary youth culture as Dadier does and form a more critical relationship toward its practical significance for modern education. But Dadier uses education as institutional reform that ultimately isolates youth cultural practice and mass media from the public spaces in which they might stage their own performances.

Blackboard Jungle and *Rock Around the Clock* produce an intimate but stereotypical perspective upon public spaces where youth dance to pop music: the schoolyard and the social dance hall, respectively. *Blackboard Jungle* explicitly uses a pop song as a point of departure for the reform the narrative enacts. The film mobilizes the audience from the public space of the city schoolyard to the institutionally contained space of the high school. Dadier, the film audience, and the youth are contained by it and seek liberation from within. *Blackboard* tames engagement with rock n' roll culture evoked by the pop song, "Rock Around the Clock," and develops for the audience a pedagogical purpose for watching the film.

Mobilization of the film narrative according to the introduction of an outsider to a modern environment is a trope of dance movies. *Footloose* opens also by mobilizing the audience into a new environment in relation to its protagonist, Ren, who eventually seeks to reform the relationship between personal expression of youth and traditional community values.

The difference between the two films is evidently related to agency of perspective; *Footloose* transcends border spaces, such as the schoolyard, while *Blackboard Jungle* empties culture of the attitude associated with the schoolyard. *Footloose* ends in the kind of “freestyle” dancing to which we are introduced as a kind of state of moral vulnerability in *Blackboard Jungle*. *Footloose* produces a more liberating relationship to modern technology. From Ren’s individuated pose dancing to music on his Walkman outside at night on the poster used to market the film to his incorporation in the film on the dance floor with the rest of his peers dancing inside the school gym during the prom to music amplified by a DJ, technology is transformed into an industrial form that brings Ren together with his community rather than one that alienates him from them. *Footloose*, like other dance movies, represents that youth cultural practice can produce contexts for fashion and performance as a viable form of symbolic representation and response.

Neither Dadier nor the producers seem to actually see the youth as “wild animals” like the other teachers, and by extension seem to be in step with the modern values of the rock song on the soundtrack rather in opposition to them. The only difference is that Dadier and the teachers do not dance to modern music whereas youth do – adults are alienated from social dancing sites that youth occupy. *Footloose* makes this kind of proximity transparent at the end of the film with respect to Moore’s watching over the factory where the dance is being held without ever entering the space shared exclusively by the teens of Bomont. *Blackboard Jungle* opposes dancing as an appropriate response to music in association with education because it has no pedagogical potential for them. Like the music on the soundtrack, the relationship between youth and song is too immaterial in relationship to their own reality. The film generates a self-reflexive moral that suggests students may learn by interpreting their relationship to reality through media.

The film is much more self-serious as a result of its “social problem” agenda than the music and the youth who consume rock music in a playful, unpretentious way, as they are represented doing in the school yard from Dadier’s point of view. At first his point of view is ambivalent to the film audience. This pleasure, as well as Dadier’s pleasure in encountering the youth at play, is compromised by the deviants’ exploitation of public visibility on the border of institutional protection. Both the deviant and the feminized play of the boys dancing in the schoolyard are vanquished through the film, and the teenpic matures into an adult film.

In *Blackboard Jungle*, dancing is not represented as a performance. But dancing is represented with exaggeration. All the schoolboys are dancing with abandon in the schoolyard. However, the filmmakers use it to signify the youth as lacking control or direction. They actually seem to parodying youth dancing. I believe these early instances of youth film, which represent a relationship between dancing for amusement and commercial music, do the opposite. They relegate the social significance of dancing to the economic significance of institutional and industrial power and its values of patriarchal authority to rationalize culture for economic or policing purposes. Featuring dancing as evidence of a cultural reality beyond the film was intended to reinforce the audience's submission to the consumption of mass entertainment as a form of modern folk culture. Early work in British Cultural Studies that focused on youth subcultures can be of value here. Dick Hebdige thinks that subcultures can be distinguished from mainstream cultures by their deviant styles even if those styles are eventually co-opted by mainstream commercial culture⁷⁵ In his essay, “Posing ... Threats, Striking ... Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display,” Hebdige writes:

⁷⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (London, Methuen, 1983).

The politics of youth culture is a politics of gesture, symbol, and metaphor, that it deals in the currency of signs and that the subcultural response is, thus, always essentially ambiguous. I have tried to suggest that the very nature and form, the very conditions which produce it, dictate that it should always slip beneath any authoritative interpretation. For the subcultural milieu has been constructed underneath the authorized discourses, in the face of the disciplines of surveillance, It translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasures of being watched, and the elaboration of surfaces which takes place within it reveals a darker will towards opacity, a drive against classification and control, a desire to exceed. Subculture is, then, neither simply an affirmation or a refusal, neither simply resistance against symbolic order nor straightforward conformity with the parent culture. It is a ...a declaration of independence, of Otherness, of alien intent, a refusal of autonomy, of subordinate status. It is an *insubordination*. And at the same time, it is also a confirmation of the fact of powerlessness, a celebration of impotence. Subcultures are both a play for attention and a refusal, once attention has been granted to be read according to the Book.⁷⁶

Because youth culture is a subculture that is not fully defined, it is essentially ambiguous, according to Hebdige. Dance movies represent youth as finding its ideal, essential form of representation at the intersection of art and reality. Modern dancing, like modern dance movies are resistant to classification. Dance movies transform surveillance – being judged – into pleasures of being on display but find meaning in their assertion of display in institutional contexts for symbolic representation. The dancing displayed is not reducible to higher truths usually associated with elite art or ritual forms symbolic practice. The dance movie signifies politics in association with manufactured form of popular culture, such as songs, fashion and film. The dancing protagonist makes their meaning appear real or organic in association with performance. Products branded by symbolic cultural practices, like dancing, are strengthened on the market in association with “true stories” or strong association with characters from a discursive contexts that intensify the proximity of reality and fantasy. The pleasures provided by

⁷⁶ Dick Hebdige, “Posing ... Threats, Striking ... Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Ken Gelder. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 297.

dance movies are elaborated in the film through the final dance to a popular song and outside of the film through shared desire for the song.

Codifying dancing or defining popular social dancing as an art is not the purpose of dance movies. In dance movies, the dance protagonist refuse to be subordinate or to disappear from visibility – they keep moving past the missteps. The significance of defeating authority within the film is transformed into a market ambition outside of the films.

Stuart Hall refers to two styles by which youth dancing sequences were shot for two different youth films: *We are the Lambeth Boys* (Karl Reisz, 1958) and *Violent Playground* (Basil Deardon, 1958). Hall writes, “The dancing in the youth club was more relaxed and informal,” in the documentary directed by Reisz and so was Reisz’s approach to filming it.⁷⁷ “In the second film the dancing is presented as a rather frenzied and orgiastic affair,” Hall says.⁷⁸ Hall tells us that film style reflects the attitude of the filmmakers toward teen dancing and does not reflect their essential moral judgment of the subjects; even the documentary represents a moral attitude based on an interpretation of the dancing. The narratives do not construct a moral about dancing but feature it as an everyday event within the context of films about teen subculture practices.

That is not to say that Hall’s choice to isolate these events to illustrate his point about style and moral is insignificant. I see it as even more significant because it involves dancing, which always confuses the boundaries between social meanings and cultural meanings, which is why dancing is particularly confounding to pretentious practices of criticism and commercial genre appeals to standardization and differentiation as a system. In the case of dancing fad films

⁷⁷ Hall, Stuart and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 32.

⁷⁸ Hall, 32.

or films that document the subculture, the professional status of production contradicts the amateur status of the subjects. Hall advocates for style being informed by the quality of feeling produced by dancing rather than assumptions about youth subculture held by filmmakers or others. A liberating response is possible, “when a style emerges which is shaped by feeling as well as by skill and technical ability.”⁷⁹ Although dancing within a fictional film may be choreographed to appear social, the social significance of dancing is not canceled out and still presents an opportunity for interpretation of the feeling that comes from watching it. The standard of production advocated by Hall is one of transparently engaging the film audience in an interpretation of what it feels like to watch dancing via the camera rather than to experience how others regard it in terms of its quality and legitimacy as an art.

3.1 MODERN YOUTH MUSICALS: *WEST SIDE STORY* (1961) AND *BYE BYE BIRDIE* (1963)

Publicity for *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961) boasted, “Unlike other musicals *West Side Story* grows younger!” Youth musicals, such as *West Side Story* and *Bye Bye Birdie* (George Sidney, 1963), emphasized the revitalization of the musical in association with the energy of youth and a departure from traditional constructions of community around the formation of conventional romance that signaled a return to the home. Contemporary attitudes, social concerns, and practices associated with the formation of a youth subculture

⁷⁹ Hall, 32.

became a source of inspiration for a modern aesthetic. Realism was the basis of a modern rhetoric in which setting and social behaviors deviated from the artifice of classical Hollywood musicals.

Although studios produced large-scale productions about youth, these films still appealed to a broad demographic due to their maintenance of the musical tradition of integrating song and dance into the diegesis. *West Side Story* adapts classical styles of representation (tragedy and the stage performance) into the modern context of the musical, while moving the production from the sound stage to the streets and shooting on location in New York City. Much of the story is told through a hybrid of jazz dancing and ballet, which relates to its theme of violent opposition over the urban environment and cultural opposition to romantic desire between youth from different ethnic communities. The idea of a romantic couple divided between jazz and ballet was not new to the musical and this thematic would appear in numerous dance films to come.

As Jane Feuer points out, Hollywood musicals tend to downplay the professionalism of the entertainment by emphasizing the amateurism of the characters.⁸⁰ Feuer states, “It is precisely the distinction between singing and dancing for the love of it, and singing and dancing for profit in a formal arena, that distinguishes the professional from the amateur entertainer. This means that all folk art is amateur entertainment.”⁸¹ All social dancing entertainment is amateur entertainment done professionally. From the standpoint of post-50s Hollywood musicals, youth were identified with amateurism in the sense that the characters they played were not professional performers as well as the fact that they were not adults. *West Side Story* and *Bye Bye Birdie* represent youth verging on adulthood. Peer youth are positioned as an interior audience for the protagonists’ maturation in association with themes of first love. The ability to

⁸⁰ Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 13.

⁸¹ Feuer, 13.

effectively bring to their peers a heightened awareness of how cultural differences of generation, gender, and ethnicity and how competition for power and domination over territory and media alienate them from their romantic idealizations provides the basis on which the films legitimate their growth and transformation into paradoxical teachers about modern morality for adults and their peers. They are paradoxical because the values expressed by the films appear modern but are truly conservative in their critical views on media and public demonstrations of subjectivity, and the indirect ways in which they generate the renewal of traditional values of home and patriarchy. Dancing is stylized and non-representation by the filmmakers. Dancing is portrayed as an amateur means by which youth communicate. But dancing in the modern youth musical was not social dancing even though social dancing for leisure in public and on television was a major aspect of youth subculture practice in the 50s and early 60s. Even though social dancing is represented through the narrative production of the stories, the events are quite isolated. Social dancing brings a sense of realism to the ways in which youth socialize. However, public and social dancing in *West Side Story* and *Bye Bye Birdie* is stylized into symbolic expressions of the modern cultural differences that the musicals about youth represent.

Two in particular, the prom scene in *West Side Story* and the social club sequence in *Bye Bye Birdie* subordinate amateur qualities of social dancing because they appeal to the classical rhetoric for narrative dancing in the Hollywood musical. *Bye Bye Birdie* and *West Side Story* are musicals about youth. They are not exploitation films, like *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rock Around the Clock*, or social dance movies in which the subculture of social dancing is the primary theme of the narrative and in which scenes of exhibition are subordinate to a story about dancing. The discourse of 60s youth musicals upholds the maturity of the musical as a classical Hollywood institution aside from featuring more realist contexts and contemporary social themes that

appealed to cultural and political transformation, especially with respect desegregation and loosening restrictions on representations of sex and violence in commercial film production. The thematic maturity of film musicals belied the style and forms of art used to represent youth subcultural practices of dancing in symbolic terms. The films' producers demonstrate dance as a modern source of creative expression, and youth were socially symbolic of new forms of communication in modern media, such as mass communications, or a source of renewal for classical text, such as Shakespeare.

From the point of view of modern folk musicals like *West Side Story*, such uses of dance are productive of expressing deep symbolic meaning, perhaps even "coolly", but indirectly. The indirect discourse is conservative in relationship to historical practices of dancing by youth and the representation of dancing as a social practice. In dance movies, audiences are privileged to the maturing process of dancers in association with learning to dance, experiencing contemporary styles of subcultural dancing, or taking a stand against restrictions upon dancing. Professional maturity is canceled out by amateur maturity in a modern age, which is a more organic concept for progress and, specifically, identified with youth.

Youth cultures in dance movies are brought into more direct proximity around cultural practices, which are explicitly also tied to market consumption. Youth in dance movies are never really attracted to genres of popular song, specifically, except for idols that are exaggerated figures of real teen idols, such as Elvis Presley. Youth are attracted to the practices that give life to them. Hollywood folk musicals about youth professionalize the presentation of dancing according dancing as a high art and symbolically produce meaning about experience and is conceived by name choreographers, such as Jerome Robbins. It is interesting to me that Rick Altman refers so often to film musical auteurs when exemplifying his arguments. The work of

the dance authors indeed signifies film genre production as diversified but mystifies the critical process by which the author becomes exemplary.

The musical reconciled its classical tradition in association with subcultural practices of youth. The open and liberated nature of modern youth supported the significance of its own modern innovation to allow reality to be a foundation for musical performance. Live public social contexts, such as the streets in *West Side Story* and the television broadcast in *Bye Bye Birdie* are staged according to professional theatrical principles. Yet, theatrical forms of presentation are configured within a modern context, on the street and on the televised sound stage, respectively, to reorient their relationship to the real world from standing out to integrating within it as modern, mature spectators.

Although the musical still downplayed the professionalism of the diegetic world, it elevated the professionalism of musical productions by resorting to theatrical staging of dancing and singing within public spaces. The communal values of the folk musical became more closely identified with taming modern cultural practices of performance within the public environment or in spaces isolated from everyday reality, such as the youth dance hall. Thus *West Side Story* presents only one social dancing sequence. The high school gym social dance provides the source of the origination of the conflict for the rest of the narrative. It is a social dance because the music is signified as song amplified for the purpose of dancing even though the dancing techniques go beyond the bounds of amateur social dancing. Prior to the sequence, Maria (Natalie Wood) agonizes over her desire to wear a more revealing dress; the dance from her point view signifies the opportunity to mature into a woman. This sense of maturity underscores the desire of the sequence as well. At the gym dance the presentation of social dancing is constructed as a choreographed sequence that emphasizes the unification that dancing can

provide and its taming of cultural difference through a unity of movement. However, the maturity of romance that arises between Maria and Tony (Richard Beymer) disassociates them from the rest of the youth community.

Although ethnic differences are the source of the conflict in the film, the intense attraction of Maria and Tony for one another is represented as psychologically removing them from their social context. Unlike *Whirl of Life*, in which Vernon and Irene become increasingly aware of their presence and visibility after they meet, Maria and Tony alienate themselves from it. From the standpoint of the musical production and the film musical ideology, romance appeals to pastoral ideals of the past and tames the present. The modern youth musical tames, also, youth as historical subjects of cultural production, as Tony and Maria becomes subject to the art of the film musical.

Romance is signified as a more mature basis for representation. Theatricality takes over the filmic expression of the social dance. The entire space is transformed from openly lit to darkly illuminated colors that isolate Maria and Tony from the rest of youth. Their first dance in isolation emphasizes their real romance as a source of power over the environment. The art of social dancing is subordinated to a romantic art of dancing that allows for a more mature form of expression beyond the rest of the youth. The school gym dance is contained and opposed to way in which the youth engage more openly in the public environment. Their submission to inhabit the gym a group is a performance meant to appease the school authority's demands of control and uniformity. Maria and Tony are isolated from then on as tragic figures alienated by conformity and conflict within the public environment beyond the school. Public dancing in *West Side Story* signifies openness allowed youth, but also, as a result of being open, as in *Blackboard Jungle*, they are vulnerable to conflict beyond visibility of authority.

According to Jerome Delamater, “Musicals seemed stylized almost by definition on the stage, but the superior production resources of film present the possibility of greater realism. As a result, many of the filmed adaptations, shot on location, incorporate a conflict between the innate stylization of the musical genre and the realistic milieu supposedly necessitated by the serious issues of the material.”⁸² I agree with Delamater but I would also argue that location shooting didn’t incorporate stylization as conflict. The symbolic forms of musical discourse, especially dancing, have a different significance, which I would describe as “interplay of looking” rather than conflict. Stylistic difference is used to symbolize conflict but the forms of the dancing are not social – they are theatrical. Performing in the public environment suggestively brings it to life because it draws attention to itself as something to be viewed as a form of exhibition. In the case of *West Side Story*, the dancing is presentational rather than social even though dancing is signified as a form of expression specific to youth inhibited by barriers of cultural difference and repression from authority over the public environment. Dancing, thus, is also a way of playing it cool.

Conflict is significant but not on aesthetic terms. Performing in public destabilizes integration and produces appearances of social and cultural difference. The modern film musical reforms this kind of social subjectivity and makes it appropriately theatrical, either by producing isolation from the live public audience and transforming the live television stage into the form of a more traditional stage in *Bye Bye Birdie*, or positing the tragic results of enacting social subjectivity as cultural conflict, even if it is only performative in *West Side Story*. Finally, although *West Side Story* features an establishing shot over the real New York City skyline, the ensuing locations seem oddly empty of “real” life and look artificial in spite of being shot on

⁸² Jerome Delamater, *Dance in the Hollywood Musical*. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), 171.

location. Dancing in the post-60s musical seems to always have a higher purpose, which allows the musical to show off its art of representing reality theatrically.

West Side Story adapted the Broadway stage musical to the New York inner city streets of the 1960s. But as Rick Altman points out, the realistic turn of the musical in the 1960s was not original.⁸³ The desire for realism was tempered by an aesthetic imperative to reconstruct American folk art forms from painting and photography into a more graphic and vital performance of art by its association with youth. This is why Altman says critics are so quick to hail the 1960s film musicals as more original than earlier ones. But it is clear from films like *West Side Story* and *Bye Bye Birdie* that the difference was decidedly social as well as cultural. By this I mean, from a generic standpoint the folk musical moved farther and farther from the home. The home is uninhabitable until cultural differences are resolved elsewhere, in public – on the street, on the stage, and, especially on TV – until public space is reformed into something that can stage the reconciliation of a modern community in terms of traditional values previously supported by the home.

1960s film adaptations of modern theatrical musicals reformed public spaces in a conservative fashion, which would include staging Shakespearian tragedy in a modern fashion. Unity is often achieved but it usually among communities differentiated by generation, ethnicity, class, and gender according to the maturation of a youth protagonist, usually the female character, into a position of that reflects the role of an adult. This role is always rehearsed and performed rather than actually achieved, as I will show with respect to Kim Macafee (Ann Margaret) in *Bye Bye Birdie*.

⁸³ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 278.

West Side Story brings two opposing sides to a tragic barrier of their differences produced by the destruction of the couple. Maria turns the gun on both sides as a result. The possibility of dancing freely is destroyed with the death of the romance between Maria and Tony. Maria's red dress (which she had wanted to wear to the gym dance) symbolically expresses that maturity means realizing the impossibility of negotiating their differences and reconciling them on the dance floor for the sake of romance. But the awareness achieved by Maria is not openly expressed as the significance it has in association with what Maria speaks. She scolds the community that had just been dancing and singing about "staying cool". Now they listen lifelessly. The life of the film is limited to artistic expression. The film transposes the coolness of the modern musical from open expression in public through performance to the suppression of art in public for the sake of making art/romance more sacred. The film audience is left with little justification for watching musicals as entertainment. The streets lose their vitality – its organic possibilities for renewal and reproduction – with the loss of the couple, to romance and death, respectively. Dancing and singing are propelled by restriction and a desire to escape politics, which are signified by the story conflict over changes to modern urban life.

Bye Bye Birdie represents competition between modern and traditional cultural practices along generational lines. It resolves generational differences with respect to courtship from within the public view and in the direct context of the modern television screen. The television provided families with a link to the world outside of the home without having to leave it. From the position of the film audience, the television context of the production adapts the film screen to a modern screen that signifies a more public audience. In *Bye Bye Birdie*, Rosie (Janet Leigh) intends to use Kim McAfee as a symbol for the "swooning girls" that worship Conrad Birdie (Jesse Pearson) and make her immortal in the process. As a youth character of the modern youth

musical, Kim is signified as becoming almost out of touch with reality by her imagination of being kissed by Birdie on live TV. Kim is also suddenly out of touch with her youth community and their folk practices in association with marketing competition.

Kim is handpicked at random by Rosie to help create a sensation for Conrad Birdie and, associatively, the pop song “One Last Kiss” that Rosie’s “future husband”, Albert (Dick Van Dyke) writes. Kim is signified as source of symbolic meaning for Rosie’s own defiant desires and, ultimately, provides Albert with inspiration to defy his own mother and stand up for what he wants. However, Albert never really refutes the authority of his widowed mother. She finds romance with another man and the transgression of marriage after marriage supports the modern fashion by which Rosie pursues and pins Albert on TV. The unification of Albert’s mother provides Rosie her opportunity to become a wife and Kim Macafee to mature from a girl to a woman. Kim outgrows rehearsing romance through idols and her own identity through social rituals specific to youth. Early in the film, Kim is represented transforming herself into a boyish-girl. She undresses and refashions herself in oversized clothing and a baseball cap while singing and dancing around her room. Paradoxically, the name of the song is, “How Lovely to Be a Woman.”

Rosie tries to get Albert’s attention by transgressing her identification with youth culture and putting herself on display for a group of men at an Elks lodge. Her act of defiance, however, may be associated with youth defiance to traditional restrictions on how they express desire. But youth desire is raised to symbolic reflection rather than representational significance. The display of her body provides an entertaining transgression by Rosie in a private rather than public dance display.

Although youth also participate in dancing out of view of the public, it is social and not necessarily on display for anyone other than the film audience. *Bye Bye Birdie* constructs a theatrical presentation of youth dancing socially set to a live song performed by the teen idol Conrad Birdie. From the standpoint of contemporary youth viewers, *Bye Bye Birdie* exaggerates social dancing practices in association with Birdie, and the power of youth connection through technology is subordination to their mediation by in relation to Birdie. The film musical makes audio technology organic in the form of popular professionals. Youth dancing in *Bye Bye Birdie* is set in a local dance hall, seemingly apart from any adult intervention. Whereas Rosie is on display, Conrad Birdie integrates with the youth during his performance at the dance hall, and performs for fun and not for pay. Youth are subordinated to the power of authority and idols. The displacement of Conrad from media into the real world context of his fans is also what Rosie almost takes too far, at least from the point of view of the film, by setting up a kiss with just one teen girl, Kim. *Bye Bye Birdie* confuses the significance of the opposition between public and star by resolving not only Rosie's desire but complementing it with a critique of youth desire for popular culture as a source of constructing their own identity. And Kim's desire for Conrad is subordinated to Rosie's desire for marriage at the narrative level.

"Going Steady" implicates the way in which, in the 50s and 60s, youth had used modern media to communicate and negotiate their identification with notions of desire and romance. Conrad Birdie is representative modern teen idols, most notably Elvis Presley, which tended to ignite frenzy among adolescents. "Going Steady" unsteadily mobilizes among youth singing gossip to one another over telephones in various places, including a gym shower and a car, from which emerges a intensified expression of modern mass communication. The film shares the interplay of communication with the viewer, allowing the interaction between the youth through

the song to mobilize her through different spaces commonly identified with youth experience. The song intensifies as more and more youth pass along the information about Kim Macafee getting “pinned” by Hugo, all the while a telephone operator becomes increasingly overwhelmed by her attempt to keep up with patching the calls through to their receivers. Youth are represented destabilizing modern institutional structures of mass communication, and “Going Steady” evokes the significance of the film’s ending on a smaller scale. Rosie assumes a subversive position at the end of the film and uses it to restore *her* power over media. Rosie’s desire is economically driven, for she needs the song to sell by its live performance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Yet, the success of the song will complement the success of *her* romance.

The live television audience is ultimately displaced from the television stage. The film audience is adapted to the former position by the film. The symbolic meaning that the kiss between Kim and Birdie had for Rosie from a commercial marketing standpoint is displaced from the public stage and is replaced by the restoration of the more conservative desire that is expressed by Hugo for Kim after he sabotages the big moment. Birdie is not only subordinated to the needs of professionals– the producers that write his music and the youth that consume it. The dramatic construction of his image is subordinated to the real drama that ensues in a live television context for the public. He is transformed into a modern symbolic form of youth off of which to play the moral drama that had underscored the film all along. Hugo’s sudden spark of heroism is driven by his fear of Kim’s inclusion in a symbolic display of commercial worship. He bombards the live television broadcast of the Ed Sullivan show and punches Birdie before the symbolic kiss occurs.

Bye Bye Birdie defeats theatricality in a technological context of mass media only to restore the natural order of things in a conservative fashion. Hugo’s unpretentious symbolic pin

goes down with Birdie as insignificant and meaningless. Thus the film ultimately critiques branding. Kim matures into a woman, outgrowing the boyish girl she fashioned herself as at the beginning of the film. Rosie becomes the name of the song to which she and Albert dance on the studio stage at the end of the film. The live audience is subordinated to Kim and Hugo as well, and provides Rosie and Albert with a perspective upon their final song that reflects the symbolic identification of youth with popular song. Again, as in *West Side Story*, the significance of youth is reduced to a passive emotional register, which tames the active and lively representation of their emotional identification of themselves with song through dancing in public.

The desires of creativity and the desires to be a subject of creativity – to be the person about whom the song is written – are transferred to Rosie. Although she provides an opportunity for the audience and youth to transcend the boundaries imposed by commercial media and standards of professionalism, ultimately, the failure of her scheme results in her own romantic success. She devises a means of maximizing return in the most simplistic way possible, and in the most simplistic way possible achieves her goal. The producers of *Bye Bye Birdie* use her and her song as a reflection of its ability to reproduce the musical as art in a modern professional context for media: television. *Bye Bye Birdie* instructs mass audiences on the branding of youth subculture, especially positioning the home as victim of youth communication in association with media. Competition among women for power over men and competition among men and idols to become visible to girls transform value of display within a subcultural, public context. *Bye Birdie* matures the musical, which is the significances of its modern desire to instruct and lead youth according to their own symbolic practices and popular cultural symbols. The characters acknowledge it but are unconscious as to their complicit conservatism in universalizing difference among gender and generation. But the significance of the difference of

the kind of pleasure experienced through different industrial and social media contexts needs to be historicized rather than unified in terms of the different forms of practices of those who engage with it socially.

West Side Story and *Bye Bye Birdie* emphasize the roles of youth as resistant subjects within the realm of the musical genre. The films use their resistance to authority as a source of significance for the cultural imagination of performance within reality. Youthful imagination of defiance, however, is signified as cultural practice rather than critical practice by which to reconstruct past forms of expression through the opportunities allowed them by new technological advancements, specifically to use technology in both a social and theatrical fashion to represent *themselves* as historical individuals with real differences. That relationship, too, can be romantic, as I will exemplify in reference to the contemporary dance movie, especially in *Footloose* (1984), if used in a critically reflexive fashion that implicates the audience as spectators to a theatrical form of reality removed from institutional “theater”.

The representation of youth engaging with modern technology as means of sharing their fantasies and pleasures in relation to desire was defeated by attempts to legitimate the relevance through theatricality. The staged theatricality was put in proximity to youth, most organically in association with their subcultural relations to one another through dancing. Rosie and Albert’s love and Maria and Tony’s destruction amplify the amateurism of youth. The projection of youth desire is limited and visualized through a conservative view of romance in which the youth grow older and more self-aware of themselves.

In the context of the musical social dancing was used more aggressively as a symbolic expression for social differences such as class, ethnicity, and generation. In *West Side Story* dancing functioned as a kind of alternative to real violence while representing the way in which

youth dancing in public fragmented community relations into subcultures. Public space is signified as a site of competition through dancing, embodied in the adaptation of youth dancing to higher forms of modern dancing. In *Bye Bye Birdie*, youth manipulate technology to destabilize the power of producers to allow the Russian ballet to overshadow the presentation of their idol, Conrad Birdie. The Russian ballet dancers on display for the Ed Sullivan audience deconstruct into a parody of live theatrical presentation on television.

Tony and Maria seem to achieve exclusion from surveillance by the inhabitation of their desire apart from the milieu of the school dance. The film casts the milieu of the school dance in shadow and illuminates Tony and Maria in a balletic interlude that exceeds the potential of their organic imaginations. Kim and Hugo subordinated from their position of display by their superiors. Contemporary dance movies, as I will show in my next chapter, produce the traditional context for viewing theatrical displays into the milieu of youth subcultures. The dancers of contemporary dance movies interact more organically with modern technology and use it as a source of amplification for their assertion of subjectivity. Additionally, the unexpected pleasure had by authority figures in dance movies reflects pleasures given film audiences in watching the films and finding identification with youth subcultural practices and uses of popular culture and modern media to transform and resolve problems of cultural difference. Integration in dance movies legitimates youth subcultural practices of rehearsal and practice for maturation to be accepted by institutional sites that appeal to instruction. The dancing in dance movies, especially the final dance, appeals to a modern film audience's desire for dance protagonists to exceed the expectations that authority has for them.

4.0 THE DANCE FILM AS FOLK ART (1983-2006)

In 2004, two pop ballroom dancing movies were released: *Take the Lead* and *Shall We Dance*. These two films reflect a generational split in audience appeal and suggest that the dance movie was branded more intentionally according to styles of social dancing: ballroom dancing and hip hop dancing, specifically. *Take the Lead* was marketed to a youth audience and the *Shall We Dance* was marketed to a middle aged audience. Both incorporated ballroom and hip hop as sources of cultural discourse for rehabilitation, moral refinement, and liberation in association with the way in which they make visible dancers depending on their generational identification.

Hip hop is the property of the urban youth to whom Pierre Dulaine (Antonio Banderas) attempts to teach ballroom dancing as a form of “punishment” during after school detention in *Take the Lead*. Pierre Dulaine explicitly tells their parents that ballroom dancing is beneficial to their sense of respect for one another – as ladies and gentleman. Dulaine also teaches at a formal ballroom education center in the upper east side of Manhattan. When he brings the students with him to the professional studio as a kind of field trip, away from the detention hall dungeon that is their “jungle”/dance studio, the upper class students stare and alienate the lower class, mostly black students. Dulaine witnesses the lack of respect shown his “charity” class, and he begins to allow them to assert their desire for hip hop into the classes. The students compete in a competition and bring to the floor an eccentric threesome hip hop ballroom routine which the

judges disqualify. But the upper class debutante approves and shares her trophy, validating the assertion of the inner city school kids from below the judges' table.

In *Shall We Dance*, John Clark (Richard Gere) shows up unexpectedly dressed to dance with his wife, Beverly (Susan Sarandon), taking her away from her job and back to the studio with him for Pauline's (Jennifer Lopez) farewell party. The apology in dance movies precedes the final dance. John dances with Pauline in her final dance, while his wife looks on with the crowd with enchantment. The difference that sets the two examples apart are the milieus for the assertion of the dancers and the historical proximity to the Hollywood musical and the dance movie, respectively. The ironic narrative of adult growth and maturity in *Shall We Dance* is complemented by the milieu of John's assertion of himself.

Firstly, he adapts to the tango after reflecting upon the musical sequence from the self-reflexive musical, *The Band Wagon* (Vincent Minnelli, 1953). The film adopts the milieu of the narrative dance from *The Band Wagon* to the milieu of the after dark tango lesson he gets from Pauline. When he surprises his wife in the department store, the film shifts the aesthetic investments of the Hollywood musical to the more modern, commercially manufactured milieu of the cosmetics department where he finds and dances with his wife. The dance movie can be read as a modern form of the musical that reorients the modern sensibility of the late studio 50s musical to the commercial market in which the lifestyle of the musical can be consumed. The movie employs the commercial milieu to authenticate the modern musical as more realistic than the classical musical because it dances with infidelity.

Tyler (Channing Tatum), in *Step Up*, shows up at the last minute to dance with Nora (Jenna Dewan-Tatum) in her senior dance piece. He begs for her forgiveness and she agrees at the last second to drop the dance she had conceived in Tyler's absence for the dance they

choreographed together – Tyler plays a hip hop kid in the dance to Nora’s ballerina. Tyler through out the film is torn between how his delinquent friends regard him for participating in ballet dancing with Nora and how Nora looks at him for trying to “show up” for his friends. When she first sees him dancing, he is outside of the school showing off dancing to hip hop around his friend’s car and to the music amplified at high volume from the car stereo. Tyler shows up for Nora after his friend encourages him. Their dance is collaboratively produced, along with their friends, who wrote and play the music for their dance. Nora’s piece wins her acceptance into a dance company in Baltimore and Tyler is invited after the dance to enroll in the Baltimore School of the Arts. (BSA). *Save the Last Dance*, produced by MTV, also features a narrative structured by two characters that signify a binary that obscures the significance through a gendered binary of delinquency and defiance. Sara gives up on ballet after her mother dies and begins to assimilate with the urban youth in Chicago, taking part in night out dancing at a hip hop club underage. Derek (Sean Patrick Thomas) is a black student with whom Sara develops a romantic relationship and who has ambitions to go to med school. He is torn between loyalty to his best friend who chastises Derek for being involved with a white girl and for not having his back on the streets. Sara, like Nora, adopts the hip hop style with instruction from Derek – he and Tyler become ironic teachers for trained dancers, which is different from the position of Johnny to Baby or the indirect position of Alex to break-dancing.

Sara eventually reconciles with her father, an eccentric jazz musician, who was absent from her life growing up with her mother in the suburbs where she studied ballet. Sara is represented as finding independence, ironically like her father. But she is signified as transforming the deviant nature of his independence into a source of empowerment by going off alone, without Derek, to the audition. Sara does not go back to the suburbs – she goes to the

center of art, New York City. Just before she starts her audition, Derek shows up, interrupts the Julliard committee awaiting Sara's start, and watches her dance from off stage. His marginalized social position as an urban black youth is reconciled by being a mentor – on the sidelines – to Sara. Derek is a good hip hop dancer and teaches her how to dance and compete at the club with the other girls, all of whom are competing for the attention of Derek. Sara gives Derek moral guidance, which is associated with the high art values of ballet dancing. *Save the Last Dance* positions and poses the last dance of the film as a celebration of their assertion *outside* of their respective communities.

Nick and Nora, though, in *Step Up*, change positions. Nick enters into an institutional education, and she exits for a company in “Modern Dance”, significant to the history of confusing/manipulating high and low relations while also intensifying their close proximity within the context of “popular culture.” Nora will expectedly excel in modern dance having adopted the popular eccentricity of hip hop dancing to her repertoire. *Center Stage* was the first pop ballet dance movie produced after *Flashdance* and before *Save the Last Dance*. That film bridges the institutions of popular social dancing classes and the elite institution of the American Ballet Academy in New York City (a fictionalized school modeled on (and set in) the American Ballet Theater at Lincoln Center).

Dance movies, such as *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, *Center Stage*, *Save the Last Dance*, *Dirty Dancing*, and *Take the Lead*, and the series of *Step Up* sequels portray the popular forms of dancing practiced by youth as existing outside the realm of institutionalized instruction. The dancing styles encountered and participated in by the protagonists of contemporary dance movies are most often identified with hip hop dancing, such as when Alex encounters break dancing on the streets of Pittsburgh. She adapts the contemporary dancing style to her final routine.

Incorporated into Alex's choreographed routine, break-dancing signifies something modern and fantastic to the committee of the judges and the film audience.

As a dance style, Alex's dancing is difficult to classify, as it does not really fit into one single genre of dance. Nor is it social dancing. Her dancing incorporates acrobatic leaps, break-dancing backspins, a little bit of aerobic, and some ballet. The dancing is fragmented in style and presented through a series of edited shots from different angles, intercut with shots of the committee responding to the music from their chairs. Alex's dancing, though, seems to incorporate "flashes" of dancing that had been presented through dancing sequences earlier in the film, such as her dance to "Manic" in her apartment, the break-dancing she encounters on the street, and the modern theatrical style of dancing she performs at Mawby's.

The film brings the subcultural practices of dancing into an institutional context, and even though it is unclassifiable it is still pleasurable. Alex's dancing exceeds all of the earlier instances of dancing in the film but somehow it still remains, in the view of the authority of the committee and the commercial film audience, still new, unrecognizable, and resistant to being read or interpreted. Dance movies result in a representation of pleasure from the perspective of the audiences viewing the dancing in the film and the pleasure of the dancer. Ultimately, the dance movie affirms the legitimacy of the pleasure of not conforming, and foregrounds independence in a context that signifies communal folk values and judgment, which affirms the value of art not fully formed into a product even if the film itself is commodified.

Saturday Night Fever was released at the height of the short-lived commercial and international disco-dancing craze in Europe and in America. Disco was a dance-based phenomenon propelled by communities of mostly gay black men who developed an underground nightlife of their own, removed from the dominant hetero-normative spheres of leisure that made

them virtually invisible as a subculture. Gay men organized dance parties at city dwellings or converged for dancing at alternative bars. Alice Echols says:

Disco ... broadened the contours of blackness, femininity, and male homosexuality. Black musicians experimented with lavish, sophisticated arrangements that didn't always sound recognizably "black," and which became the foundation of disco. ... It was a culture that, in contrast to rock, didn't trade on "realness" preferring instead to revel in the pleasures of the artificial, what Walter Benjamin called "the sex appeal of the inorganic."⁸⁴

Saturday Night Fever is limited in its representation of disco dancing as a subculture. It only portrays Tony Manero encountering disco at the Odyssey 2001 in Brooklyn. Although Manero captures the attention of both women and men, his position is that of a local idol who draws attention to the center of the floor and brings it to life. Manero is represented at the center of the popular local disco dancing culture in which he participates. *Saturday Night Fever* appeals to disco's embrace of artifice and the inorganic, and it uses the sexual implications of disco's sexual politics to generate gender, generational, and class conflict. *Saturday Night Fever* represents the popular culture of disco as fragmenting Manero's personal and familial relationships and the mythic imagination of power and mobility that modern disco dancing inspires is destroyed. Tony is destroyed by his encounter with the real economic and social realities of issues affecting his working class community outside of the nightlife. Ultimately, *Saturday Night Fever* produces a critique of the artificiality of popular cultural practices.

Flashdance adopts the cultural significance disco had for gay men by representing immersive experiences in music that defy desires for realism. *Flashdance* amplifies sexual subjectivity as a performance within contexts of representation and production. The lead character, Alex, assumes the power of the work of the film to infuse reality with qualities of

⁸⁴ Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 57.

excess and performance. *Flashdance* represents atmospheres of “work” with a heightened sense of artificiality. *Flashdance* also appeals to organic cultural values for the origination of modern dancing style and the formation of self-expression through contexts of artifice and theatrical display. *Flashdance* brings together the symbolic expressive practices of hip-hop subculture within the subcultural atmosphere of disco dancing. Both movements were ideologically driven by a desire for visibility and self-representation within economically depressed historical and social contexts.

Most other dance movies after *Flashdance* are inclusive of the subculture of the dancing they represent, portraying an encounter of the protagonists with dancing as an expressive popular practice beyond institutional sites of performance or instruction. *Footloose* only features break-dancing at the prom but includes atmospheric qualities that allude to hip-hop expressive practices and the historical and social significance of exclusion from visibility. Watkins points out:

The creators of hip hop devoted immense energy to carving out spaces of pleasure and recreation in the face of an eroding urban infrastructure devastated by a diminishing tax base, decaying public schools and parks, drugs, and political retreat from the redistributive policies born from the civil rights era. Hip hop began in public parks, on street corners, subway terminals, and in apartment basements. It soon moved to community centers, dance clubs, radio airwaves, and later the visual media – music video, television, and cinema – thus accentuating what analysts claim is one of the central themes in the movement: the struggle over public space, who occupies it, and how its resources are put to use.⁸⁵

The dance movies that emerged in the early to late 80s signify the subcultures of dancing in association with places of pleasure that are carved out in spaces below or beyond dominant sites of symbolic ritual practice. The struggle over public space is evoked by dance movies in relation to where innovative expressive practices are found or experienced by the protagonists.

⁸⁵ S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop and the Production of Black Cinema*. (Chicago and London; University of Chicago Press, 1998), 67.

Ariel (Lori Singer) brings Ren to see the train car where the town youth have decorated with statements from books and lyrics from songs that they have been restricted from engaging openly with in public by official authorities governing the town. Dancing is represented as an organic response to representation and an embodied context within atmospheres of display for self-representation. Although the film's music style is primarily rock, *Footloose* ultimately tames the openly confrontational attitude of rock to the atmosphere of social dancing and self-expression. Rock is shifted to the cultural representation qualities of music while dancing takes on the organic expressive practices of subcultural dancing as style. Ren exposes the constructed nature of dominant cultural symbols and wins approval for the incorporation of expressive practices associated with popular youth culture into the limits of Bomont without sacrificing the values of the exclusive nature of those practices shared among youth apart from dominant rituals that structure the community. According to S. Craig Watkins:

The intensification of racial and economic polarization in the United States produces space for the emergence of cultural practices that derive much of their symbolic efficacy from locations of marginality. The popularization of black youth expressive cultures in case in point. Despite high rates of poverty, joblessness, and criminal arrests, black youth occupy a dynamic role in the shaping of the popular cultural landscape. Many of the major culture industries – sports, television, advertising, music, cinema – incorporate the innovative styles and expressive cultures of black youth in order to appeal to their respective markets and revitalize their own commercial viability. Ironically, social isolation and economic marginalization contribute to the energy and imaginative capacities that enable black youth to participate effectively in the every-expanding universe of popular media culture.⁸⁶

The attitude, atmosphere, and dancing styles that are reflected by hip hop and disco culture correspond to the assertive attitudes of visibility taken by dance movie characters as well as the unconventional moves incorporated into the formal structure of the dance performance – even

⁸⁶ Watkins, 62.

Whirl of Life directly portrays African-American social dancing as a part of the modern dancing milieu in association with a newspaper announcement that America is “dance mad”.

The trope of interruption in dance movies as an impulse for assertion and consciousness occurs at key moments throughout the history of dance movies. Even the newspaper announcement in *Whirl of Life* energizes the Castles to respond by moving forward with plans to open their own dancing palace. John Crosby tries to interrupt their plans by kidnapping Irene, and then Vernon asserts himself and with the help of a dog and the Navy rescues Irene and puts her in front of the dancing palace audience where they belong. As a dancer Vernon deviates from hetero-normative ideal of masculinity, especially from the standpoint of his work. Unlike John Crosby who remains invisible in his position of power as a producer, Vernon asserts his visibility in public and ultimately the Castles retain control over the economic and spatial conditions for their engagement in contexts of public cultural practice and representation. The dissolving of boundaries between work and popular cultural practice seem to be reflected in dance movies as mixing up gender roles. Contexts for institutional cultural expression seems to allow for the representation of gender roles as constructed in association with artificial and commercially produced cultural in order to signify their constructed nature.

Saturday Night Fever does not represent disco culture as a historically situated organic subculture. Although the film departs from realistic displays of subcultural practice, it intensifies a realistic relationship to dominant cultural forms of popular expression in association with its working class setting. Tony’s working class context assumes the subcultural significance of the historical disco dancing subcultural milieu and its organic embodiment of sexually suggestive display through commercial industry products for popular consumption. Tony fashions himself on movie idols instead, including Farrah Fawcett. He does divert from familial tradition and the

film is blunt about the fact that patriarchal authority fragments Tony's self-awareness of being "on" on the dance floor.

Saturday Night Fever corresponds to the way in which commercial cultural symbolic practice and capitalism could be liberating for gay, or queer subjectivities like Tony's. And, quite frankly, I think dance movies, even though I've only alluded to it so far, function similarly for queer subjectivity. As commercially produced and heavily branded cultural productions, dance movies appeal to the experience of "coming out" as a process that ends in a public and open assertion of identity. Dance movie protagonists eventually defy exclusion with assertion in a very theatrical fashion that draws a lot of attention to the body. Additionally, the male protagonists are usually raised to critical consciousness in association with a feminist subjectivity and speak out in a way that is reflective, strong, and sensitive – without violence.

A very early expression of queer subjectivity in relation to social dancing occurs in *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* as well. Irene nervously awaits Vernon's return to the Café de Paris to take a brief leave from the war to dance again at the place where they first asserted their desire in public. Previously just before Vernon decides to enlist (to the shock of Irene), Vernon performs a burlesque-style number for the troops. In the number he plays a soldier dancing with his girl. The girl is played by a rather large manly-man in drag. Vernon seems uncomfortable with the eccentricity of the number, as if the brawny, "masculine" male dressed up as the girl calls attention to Vernon's (and Astaire's) femininity as a dancer. Vernon runs off stage and immediately enlists. "Coming out" of the meeting, from an office in the wings of the theater, Irene can immediately see what Vernon has done. It is as if calling attention to the artificiality of gender as a construction throws Vernon off from his sense of "realness" as social subject.

Before Vernon returns on leave to dance with her, the film portrays Irene at their home alone with their manager Maggie (a character based on Elisabeth Marbury). Irene is dressed in pants and wears a fashionable tie. It is signified as one of Irene's eccentric tastes for fashion, but rather indirectly. When she awaits Vernon back in Paris, she has been restored to a beautiful dress that emphasizes her feminine features. Her sentiment while waiting is fearful and sad that Vernon may not show and that something bad may have happened. But he does – he asserts his presence in formal national army attire and they immediately take the floor in a waltz that commemorates their first dance together in Paris and the start of their fame. This will also be their last dance together, and the film restores their gender appearances according to fashion but the sentimentality of the sequence allows Vernon (and Astaire) to restore also his sensitivity and lyricism which is expressed as being given expression through his display of Irene for the audience.

The tension between war and dancing cannot be missed but the film ultimately transfers the gender confusion of being an outsider in a world war and an outsider to traditional roles of patriarchy and home to a more conservative view of Vernon as a hero who sacrifices his pleasure as an entertainer and an entertainment idol to fight for his country. In this way *The Story of Vernon Irene Castle* is a rather conservative film but still creates some uncertainty about the significance of the stark changes in appearance Vernon and Irene go through after the war disrupts their professional and romantic union. There is a vague suggestion the film takes a critical view of war in association with the gender confusions connoted by Vernon and Irene's fashion transitions. Though, the film seems to suggest that Irene purposefully exaggerates her power and independence through less feminine clothing designs in order to subvert attention to her sense of vulnerability and fear while Vernon is on active duty. However, sublimated "voice"

of the costuming in association with visible anxieties over gender identity in times of political unrest tames any critical assertion the film may be making about war. In all dance movies, we see the dance movie protagonists speaking out and standing up before taking the dance floor.

The most blunt expressions of queer subjectivity and representation of surreptitious expressions of desire in association with dancing to pop music occur in *Flashdance* and *Dirty Dancing*. Alex embodies the tension of gender and subjectivity of male aggressive display and feminine lyricism in her final dance, while Johnny and Baby both come out and mutually support their visibility as feminist, sexual, and fetishistic of popular culture. They objectify the song but do not disassociate it from its accommodating function as an expression of desire for one another, which is how I read Johnny's lip-syncing of the lyrics to Baby and her pleasure in his enjoyment of "singing them to her". Additionally, I think one could read quite explicitly Johnny's famous lift queerly, as a feminine and organic phallic symbol of power, and hence excitingly modern, and kinda "dirty". According to Jane Feuer:

The main reason that teen musicals have not been considered musical is the absence of diegetic singing in them, although diegetic dancing is quite common. The idea that the story is told through the numbers is an element of the classical musical that seems definitional to some. But the use of pre-recorded music in *Dirty Dancing* in no way represents a separation of the elements. Everything is done to link the pre-recorded songs to the diegesis. In most numbers, the non-diegetic music is at least thematized, or it is rendered diegetic by being played on a phonograph within the scene. The climatic number in which Johnny reappears to dance with Baby in the final show commemorates their summer together with the song "I had the Time of My Life"; at one point Johnny appears almost to sing the lyric to Baby. This represents not a separation, but a fusion into a new set of conventions more palatable to the teen audience than those of the classic musical.⁸⁷

I am arguing that dancing and the body are culturally significant as a representational register that asserts the organic and physical relationship to public and historical spaces of representation in ways that signify more realistically the proximity of socially and industrially produced forms

⁸⁷ Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 131.

of expression. Popular symbolic practices shift to the forefront of display for the subjects and allow for greater assertion of individual subjectivity upon representational practices. Their use of dancing corresponds to the way in which dancing functions for youth subcultures beyond sites of institutional theatrical practice as well as in relation to commercially produced forms of culture. It brings more attention to visibility of the subject apart from the industrial products and technological sources that mediate them. The close proximity of the historical subjects to technology allows for liberation from its representational content and stronger appearance of individuality within the act of performing them. Johnny openly visualizes his expression of the music to Baby in the process of dancing socially to the song. The imitative quality of the expression demonstrates an open but still intimate communication of his pleasure in a way not commonly associated with men, unless they are men in musicals. Miming to the song in public is a way of inhabiting it as a performance and in this way Johnny's mediated expression opens up a space for an appearance of Johnny as emotionally communicative in ways that depart from classical rhetoric of the Hollywood musical but uphold a reflection of artificiality within a social milieu.

Additionally, *Dirty Dancing* uses dancing to represent the close proximity of classic social dancing practices to subcultural cultural practices of social dancing. It produces a binary opposition of high art and low art in association with their shared relationship as social dancing practices. The cultural opposition is amplified through social forms of symbolic practice. The generational binary opposition so common to the classic musical is represented with greater cultural and historical meaning in relationship to social dancing. The incorporation of the lift below the stage in the final dancing sequence supports the significance of Baby's assertion of subjectivity. At this point the entertainment staff also asserts their presence from behind the

audience. They suddenly move forward in unison toward Johnny as he beckons Baby's departure from the stage and to also inhabit the space of the audience. Baby is lifted down from the stage by the entertainment staff dancers who have moved ahead of Johnny. Baby runs toward him and jumps into the now famous lift in which she appears to signify freedom of a bird. Johnny's support of Baby in the lift beyond that stage signifies the way in which he exceeds expectations to support her from the point of view of the folk audience. Initially, they had practiced the lift in the water, which concluded a rehearsal dancing montage segment. During their first show at the Shelldrake, Baby almost went into the lift but backed away and improvised a few gimmicky moves. But in the midst of the real audience when Baby is seen as Baby and has a judgmental audience, she exceeds her limitations as a dancer and renews their expectations of her as a liberated woman.

The pleasure of the film audience is also propelled by this interruption of the viewing space. When the audience gets up and starts to dancing in the space where they had been watching the performance, we see "ourselves" also entering into a paradoxical relationship with pop music, like Johnny miming the performance but only indirectly. The assertion of visibility of by the audience in continuation of the final number shifts the performance to a more social register, which is still less representational (at least from the perspective of the sequence of dance scenes that have come before it in the narrative) than the final dance we/they have just witnessed. Subcultural communities assert their visibility in relationship to artificial and manufactured culture. Johnny and Baby's inhabitation of the center of the floor dancing with the audience reflects the way in which their pre-conceived performance to pre-recorded music – as themselves in public – inspires the folk audience to mimic their attitude in close proximity to the stage. As Johnny does when he lip syncs, their imitation of the theatrical dance performance by Baby and

Johnny as just dancing, brings more attention to the artificiality of entertainment and commercial forms of expression. *Dirty Dancing* separates the elements of song and its organic expression to emphasize the liberating potential of immersion into sources of myth and fantasy within social and public spaces that depart from folk and embrace the reunification and renewal of community allowed for by theatrical participation in reality.

Tony Manero outwardly rejects disco because he becomes self-aware that immersion in a fantasy of power over desire as dancing king of the disco at the Odyssey is destructive and that he is powerless over the economic and social depression of his working class community – his pals idolize him and girls sacrifice their dignity to get close to him but he is powerless to help them. Tony's confidence is thrown off when his pursuit to get Stephanie to go out with him is not successful. Stephanie desires to assimilate into Manhattan society and treats Tony as a step backward. Tony seems drawn to Stephanie for her ability to match his talents at disco dancing. When Stephanie refuses him, Tony begins to develop a stronger sense of self-doubt. Additionally, Stephanie makes him self-conscious for his lack of education mocking his unfamiliarity with Shakespeare over a coffee date Tony practically had to beg for after his initial attempt to charm her fails. Stephanie tells Tony that he would not assimilate with Manhattan social culture unless he learns a little something about real art and literature - that his dancing is insignificant. Stephanie makes Manero feel naïve for believing that his hair or dancing talent, which he works to perfect, even teaching disco classes at a local studio in his off time from the paint store, might provide him with greater social and economic mobility. The deconstruction of Tony 's mythic imagination of himself is reflected also by his brother's decision to leave the seminary for which his mother idolized him. Tony's friend takes his own life after admitting that he knocked up a girl he does not love and cannot afford pay for her abortion. He throws himself

off the Brooklyn Bridge. Tony's deconstruction culminates with his rejection of the trophy he awarded at the disco dancing competition because he feels he was privileged over the Puerto Rican couple by the judges.

Unlike most dance movies, the competition takes place out of view of an authority and beyond an institutional site of theatrical display. The dancing in *Saturday Night Fever* is entertainment, and relates to the way in which dance movies amplify the popular folk dancing as productive of power and new conventions of movement. The film, however, is structured, somewhat similarly to *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, by a conservative take on eccentric and subcultural forms of fantasy in association with commercial culture. For both films, the models for liberation are stars – real stars, the real Vernon and Irene Castle and the stars on the Hollywood posters that adorn Tony's bedroom.

Saturday Night Fever transfers the attention of disco dancing as a subculture away from gay subjectivity and reorients its economic and social significance to working class male subordination. Hence, the ambivalence of the ending as an indication of Tony's achievement: he asserts himself in Stephanie's world – her Manhattan apartment that she can barely afford. *Saturday Night Fever* is a transitional film in the formation of the dance movie as a genre, which began with *Flashdance*. *Flashdance* brings into close proximity the subcultural practices of disco and hip hop and mixes them in a way that relates to their fragmented and commercially oriented relationship as popular social practices and industrial practices of cultural production. *Flashdance*, like *Dirty Dancing*, mobilizes popular cultural practices that are subculturally situated and commercially oriented into a site that is structured for performance and theatrical representation.

Rick Altman refers to the way in which the folk musical subgenre models its sets on traditional artistic practices, like painting and photography.⁸⁸ Essentially, Altman suggests that folk musicals, even if they use real locations are prefabricated on pictorial precedents familiar to the audience from traditional art from the past. Dance movies reconstruct recognizable sites of theatrical reception to mimic subcultural traditions of engaging with popular culture in public. Dance movies reflect modern ideals because they allows for the assertion of the subject's personality as a result of posturing themselves within realms of reality artificially. Within the milieu of dance movies the characters and the artists that produce or manufacture the commercially produced culture they consume and represent are independently situated. Altman continues:

Whether or not a specific model is employed, however, the effect is always the same: folk musical sets are characterized by a conventionalized realism in which the conventions are borrowed from the vocabulary of American regional art. Instead of recalling the visions of the spectator's personal past, the folk musical brings back instead those works of popular art through which previous generations have taught us how to see the American past: calendars, magazines, photographs, paintings, film.⁸⁹

But do dance movies bring back the popular art of social dancing as a modern frame for viewing contemporary subcultural practice? Do dance movies ultimately make subcultural habits appear conventional? It depends on how we interpret Altman's understanding of "conventional."

Dirty Dancing opens with dancing to pop music filtered through black and white film photography. The black and white film signifies the social dancing as taking place in the past in correspondence to the 60s pop song "Be My Baby" on the soundtrack. However, the dancing being displayed is highly unconventional and the sexuality of the display is amplified by close ups of gyrating dancers. The closing of the film reconstructs the same kind of social dancing

⁸⁸ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 277.

⁸⁹ Altman, 278.

among the characters with whom the film audiences have become familiar. The folk community of the resort inhabits the setting for the dancing along with the entertainment staff, but the proximity of the stage amplifies the performative nature of social dancing. The narrative of *Dirty Dancing* represents the shift from the opening to closing of the film as a process for Baby of rehearsing with Johnny their relationship to contexts marginalized from the public and contexts of inclusion within public. The dance movie filters the photographic and filmic quality of the opening through the traditional context of the theater. Therefore, the traditional folk practice is modeled on the modern expression of subcultural practice in association with an atmosphere amplified with a song produced during the 1980s rather than the 1960s. The film shifts the music to a contemporary register to reflect the diegetic reality in the context of the present – the film audience’s present.

The historical setting is filtered through the non-visual form of modern song, which associatively relates the dance movie to the traditional register of representation of the classic musical. The folk subgenre is animated by the subcultural practices of dancing introduced in the opening sequence rather than the modern art of film animating the subcultural form expression. The dance movie goes to history rather than art for its artistic precedents. Instead of animating them through the vision of an artist, which Altman ultimately refers to as the authority over the representational sphere of classical musical practice, the dance movie animates reality through the community. And ultimately the dancing that results is social dancing. The audience in the film becomes part of the realm of representation driven by social subjects from within the frame rather than outside of it. The film audience is then reflected and framed by dancing that is not “ready made” in the tradition of folk dancing.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Altman, 282.

The folk musical's tradition of reconciling cultural difference through gender and romance is upheld in a critical fashion by *Saturday Night Fever*. Tony and Stephanie are going to live together but there is a sense of ambivalence about whether they will remain together. The ending restores unity to the couple but appeals to a realism that supports reading it as a "New Hollywood" version of the "American Film Musical" in which the "artist" is isolated and alienated from his community. In his essay, "The New Hollywood Musical," J.P. Telotte examines the expressive significance of music within contemporary musicals, including *The Buddy Holly Story* (Steve Rash, 1978), *Footloose*, *Flashdance*, and, in particular, *Saturday Night Fever*, films that prominently feature music and dancing in a more realistic manner than the classical Hollywood musical. Telotte says:

(Saturday Night Fever) graphically demonstrates the importance of particular industrial forces on film. For its symbiosis between film and the music industry – one wherein the soundtrack of songs by the Bee Gees helped to sell the film, just as the film allowed for the release of what would eventually become one of the top-selling record albums – *Saturday Night Fever* helped to establish the importance of the record "deal" and soundtrack to musical film.⁹¹

Telotte points out that many New Hollywood Musicals end in a freeze-frame, which calls into question the freedom from restrictions placed upon personal expression that the films seem to celebrate. He finds the way in which the films demobilize the diegetic celebration of liberation contradictory. Thus according to Telotte, the modern musical transfers the social significance of engaging expressively with music away from representational context and reorients music as something to be consumed apart from fantasy. The bridge in *Saturday Night Fever*, as well as the bridge away from town in *Footloose*, signify for Telotte, icons of escape but no real escape is

⁹¹ J. P. Telotte, "The New Hollywood Musical: From *Saturday Night Fever* to *Footloose*" in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale. (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 58.

ever possible.⁹² Thus we see Manero in freeze frame in the apartment with Stephanie even though he has crossed over to Manhattan, and Ren (Baby and Johnny, too) are finally contained by the worlds distant from contemporary urban reality signified by the music and dancing, the iconic expressive elements of the Hollywood musical. Therefore, according to Telotte, liberation, too, remains a fantasy.

Disco music liberated gay culture from the commercial culture of rock n' roll that had dominated the 1960s music scene. Often DJs mixed musical styles developing locally in New York City with new European forms of music of African and Latin influence which circulated through non-commercial or more independent record producers in the later 60s. Disco was dance music, and for a good part of the late 60s and 70s it lacked a commercially branded genre identity because it was not labeled by stars and songs as much as it was the DJs who fabricated it from a mixture of music since it was also often produced live on the spot by DJs. Whereas disco dancing emphasized and asserted visibility, or at least the imagination of it when it was underground and not institutionalized, disco music originated as a creative impulse of DJ's to sample and "perform" music on the spot through new innovations of audio technology. Disco music, though, was eventually commercialized and branded by stars such as Donna Summer and the Bee Gees. The latter produced the hit soundtrack for *Saturday Night Fever*, and arguably the soundtrack propelled the film's rise to becoming a blockbuster. From a reception standpoint, *Saturday Night Fever* achieved visibility as a dance movie.

Marketing of the film, too, highlighted the pop elements of the film, especially the modern star quality of John Travolta. His image branded the movie and drew on the display of his body and his surveying of his body in the mirror as a commercial star image. The camera

⁹² Telotte, 59.

amplifies his surveillance and the disco music signifies the moment as constituting an assertion of his own subjectivity to himself in the mirror. That sequence is arguably the most memorable and encourages the audience to idolize Travolta only in underwear and gold chain. In this way, the film represents Tony as a self-produced modern male pin up, intensifying the intersection of the branded images and the real image of Manero in the mirror. Although Manero is silent, immersed in the music on the soundtrack (there is no diegetic audio source represented in the film), Manero's sense of power is represented as self-produced and empowered for him by his reflection. At the family dinner scene that follows, his father knocks Tony on the head over a gripe with a pork chop, and Tony exclaims, "I work on my hair a long time and you hit it ... he hits my hair!" Tony finds appreciation for his "work" when he dances and takes over the atmosphere of the disco. Alice Echols states:

For gay men accustomed to being surveilled and harassed on the dance floor and arrested during bar raids, the tightly seamed disco mix was especially meaningful. Denied the opportunity of uninterrupted dancing with other men, gay men took to disco like a drug. Nonstop music was central to the "throbbing lights, the engulfing sound, the heightened energy, and the hyperbolic heat," which together created what gay journalist Andrew Kopkind described as the feeling that "the world is enclosed in this hall, that there is only now, in this place and time." From the beginning, discos foster the feeling of being a "timeless, mindless state." At the loft you felt "cut off from the outside world" as soon as you walked inside.⁹³

Although *Saturday Night Fever* does not represent the subcultures that gave meaning to disco as a release from reality, it certainly evokes its associative relationship with the expressive practices around music by the disco subculture of the gay community in 1970s Manhattan. *Saturday Night Fever* did bring international visibility to disco culture, but the gay subculture was marginalized completely from the symbolic universe of *Saturday Night Fever* – its presence lacked representation as part of Tony's story. The gay sensibility was almost undetectable because the

⁹³ Echols, 57.

atmosphere of the film was so far removed (but so close) to the space of origination of gay disco culture. In that lies “Fever’s” paradoxical status as a dance movie.

Multiple dancing sequences are exhibited throughout *Flashdance* in a few different contexts, which include dances by Alex and her fellow female entertainers at the local bar, Mawby’s, her best friend, Jeanie, in a ice-skating competition number, an elongated workout session by Alex in her loft apartment and, finally, her audition for the conservatory judges. All of these performances are produced through rhetorical strategies common to the Hollywood musical by which the professionalism of the performance is downplayed by the non-professional context in which the performance is produced. As in music videos, a pop song on the soundtrack structures each. Although it is not a song sequence, the break-dancing sequence modernizes the semi-professional relationship by which dancing in dance movies is qualified: the music comes from a boom box in the street, the performance is inter-cut with multiple performers and various songs.

Flashdance retains an ambiguity around the street performance as a style of dancing and music. *Flashdance*, I would argue, preserves the significance of breaking’s ambiguity and spontaneity at a filmic level, and follows with a sequence that playfully mimics the spontaneity through an ironic city symphony orchestrated by Alex. The street audience and the traditional audience, respectively, are similar to the narrative audience interpreted by Jane Feuer in *The Hollywood Musical*, but also different.⁹⁴ The street audience for the break-dancing exhibition forms spontaneously around Alex and her friend Jeanie. This is the primary rhetoric for folk performance in the Hollywood musical. Unlike traditional Hollywood musical narrative audiences, the street audience of *Flashdance* is not integrated into the performance like the

⁹⁴ Feuer, 31.

children in *An American in Paris* (Vincent Minnelli, 1951) or the modern arcade audience that forms around Fred Astaire in *The Band Wagon*. Nor is the display of break-dancing individuated by the performers at the center. The break-dancers perform in front of the street crowd toward the film audience rather than directly to them. The performers are a community of black youth. In *An American in Paris* the youth are led by Jerry (Gene Kelly) and are transformed into a localized folk performance for the everyday spectators.

The conservatory audience of judges for Alex's audition mimics the forms of response displayed by the street audience for the break-dancing performance. The film inter-cuts shots of their physical reactions to watching Alex dance: feet tap the floor and hands and pens tap the desk but seem to do so in spite of themselves. Significantly, both the street audience and the critical audience are like "us", the film audience for whom Alex's desire identifies: feeling the music, not "up there performing."⁹⁵ In this way, according to the ideology of *Flashdance*, Alex is like the audience that "sees" the music rather than literally sings or dances to it. This is at once social and still theatrical because it transforms the professional context of the audition into the non-professional significance of spontaneity.

The break dancing scene is followed by a sequence in which Alex and Jeanie continue through downtown Pittsburgh and playfully interact with a traffic cop at rush hour. His authoritative role is playfully parodied by the soundtrack orchestration of classical music that accompanies ballet performance. The latter sequence responds to the break-dancing scene that precedes it, showing Alex and Jeanie defying the cops attempt to maintain control over the street traffic. *Flashdance* liberates the street rather than reforming it as the contemporary post-60s musical had. Authority of the older, white-gloved cop is adapted into a performance rather than

⁹⁵ Feuer, 31.

alienated by the filmic performance. Like the break-dancing exhibition, this scene has an inclusive quality that inhibits the slight parody of traffic control from alienating the cop from the film audience or Alex and Jeanie. Instead, the street cop is, too, provided the quality of an entertainer, engaging the audience in pleasure in spite of himself. *Flashdance* creates an atmosphere of the street in which real people become part of the show, even to the extent that the traffic cop is a real person already noted for his flamboyant gestures.

Thus the film demonstrates the potential of public space and public performance to become a source of significance for professional entertainment exhibition, which is what Alex as well as the filmmakers do when she dances her audition piece at the conservatory. The final exhibition at the audition is intended to defy expectations for performance by the elite panel of judges. Their pleasure reflects the kind of pleasure experienced by public audiences when they encounter performance in public. Thus the film is driven toward a kind of adaptation of high and low cultural practices. Alex also incorporates a break-dance move to top off her piece. And although the final audition performance is not public, it is not official either. It is an unofficial performance that only functions as entertainment for the film audience. The elite audience, therefore, is adapted to the film audience. Both desire Alex's achievement – they admit her and thus admit our style of reception. But significantly elite culture submits to popular reception. The committee reflects the pleasure of the everyday spectators to the break dancing on the street. Alex's dancing commemorates as Alex the perspective of mass entertainment from the perspective of subcultural practice in public environments. *Flashdance* produces a renewal of the pleasures of the folk milieu within the transitional context of the audition space. Her successful audition legitimates our pleasure as well as Alex's own in association with the semi-official context of spectatorship.

The romance plot, as a traditional component of classical art and the classical Hollywood musical, has a critical function within the narrative. It provides a framework for the modern and classical relationships negotiated by the film, especially constructing the significance of the traditional musical through an alternative form that corresponds to dancing rather than a literal musical: the ballet. In spite of exploiting gender ambiguity as a source of desire for Alex, and, apparently, for Nick Hurely (Michael Nouri), her boss, the filmmakers deny a complete reconciliation of Alex into a unified heterosexual romance. The denial of unification is, I think, intended to bring to bear the ability for non-traditional desire and imagination upon conservative values that intend to universalize modern performance through art discourses. In this way, *Flashdance* allows for a moral of openness and transparency without complete unity as its purpose. It maintains a distance from classical art and tradition.

The romance plot is represented in association with professional ballet as an elite cultural practice. The association between romance and ballet is indirect within the narrative. The final sequence in which Michael hands Alex a bouquet of roses after her successful audition reflects the earlier point in which Alex watched a ballet performance with her friend Hanna. *Flashdance* mimics ballet cultural practice to critique elite values of ballet culture that have alienated Alex as well as the paternalistic tendencies of her boss at the steel mill in which she works. At different points, Alex is alienated by both the ballet and by Nick. However, Alex is vocally defiant towards Nick, whereas she is insecure among the ballet community – in fact she is completely silent, as the film emphasizes her alienation through looks from the other ballet dancers upon Alex at the application office. The very last scene brings both the ballet (and by association, Hanna) and Nick together as two poles of desire negotiated in a critical fashion by Alex.

The film makes a subtle impression that Hanna is a lesbian through a montage of photographs from her early life in the 30s. She is primarily photographed with other women, who have a kind of alternative style and manner, which is less classical and more modern. The primary aesthetic discourse of *Flashdance* is stylized photography and fashion, which adapts non-professional exhibition contexts or otherwise, non-traditional entertainment contexts into entertainment. The lighting and framing take their cue from music on the soundtrack. In other instances, which are non-musical, the film seems to pay homage to the gritty aesthetic of film noir and the femme fatale, of which Alex is an ironic modern figure, a cross between the femme and the psychologically unstable detective investigating and negotiating herself in proximity to various forms of performance. She often erupts with bursts of anger and physical aggression in matters where she feels she or others are being exploited or made a fool. *Flashdance* doesn't, like Alex, articulate literally or forthright about non-normative sexual subjectivity. Rather it uses its stylistic compositions and mise-en-scène to evoke an ironic orientation to gendered subjectivity and sexuality.

Gender appearances and sexual identity are, therefore, visible but are not explicitly expressed in an essential fashion. They are evoked for interpretation. It leaves open boundaries with regard to social relationships in order to stage a critique of exclusive forms of cultural practice. *Flashdance* is a filmic dancing practice that is not based in reality, naturalism, or essential qualities of social subjectivity. It really has no history as a style even though it reflects upon other real histories of dancing styles for the performance it ultimately produces. The subordination of the social and personal desire opens up possibilities for questions of cultural qualification about certain modes of performance that are part of a larger political landscape that

isolates and alienates alternative subjectivities of desire, especially in regards to femininity and queer sexuality.

This form of silent subjectivity but visible identity is what both connects the film (as a dance-movie) to the musical drama and allows it to depart from it. This is the significance of watching ballet rather than the musical, at least from the standpoint of the Alex's achievement of being visible as a person through her performance. This departure is not enough to place the dance-movie into a category as defined as a cycle or a subgenre – it is not a musical but a different articulation of the musical from the perspective of its entertaining effects. In fact, it adapts the musical to the ballet by imagining it through the frame of popular song, which is reflected by the city symphony sequence.

Presenting a bouquet of roses to the prima ballerina is a convention of the curtain call at ballet performances where typically the *danseur* will extract a single rose and give it to the ballerina. Midway through the film, Alex attends a ballet performance with her elderly mentor, Hanna. At the end of the performance Alex's desire to be a ballet star is expressed by a close-up shot from her point of view of the ballerina handing a rose to her male costar. Hanna says, "That could be you some day". Of course, this is the significance of Alex's achievement at the end of the film, but also its queerness. The position that Hannah suggests Alex could occupy within the ballet context could either be that of male or the female – she could be either. If we imagine *Flashdance* as a modern form of a ballet dancer's journey as an individual apart from romantic unification within the bounds of performance – Alex effectively occupies both positions. She accepts roses from Nick and gives a rose to Nick beyond the context of her performance for the audience. *Flashdance* could be considered as a modern dance movie as well as a modern ballet movie because it is filmic rather than theatrical. It incorporates ballet while transcending it. What

Flashdance does alienate is elitism, and this is evident from the history of its middle class reception.

Although Alex accepts a bouquet of roses from Nick on the street beyond the deconstructed ballet stage, she makes an uncustomary gesture of handing back a rose from the bouquet given to her by Nick. Alex refuses to be a star isolated from the public, as she felt isolated from ballet culture or as Tony felt isolated from disco culture. Again, the film produces a form of inclusion in the final achievement. In the final frame, Alex's presence as a star of the film is muted by her enactment of a star ritual of the stage in the street. I think the final frame signifies Alex continuing to enact resistance to exclusion from artificial romantic traditions by performing the commemorative ritual of ballet performance apart from the stage and in the street. The final freeze frame denaturalizes the realistic conditions of the film's and Alex's final expressive gesture.

In *Shall We Dance* (2004), the amateur ballroom dancing pupils at Ms. Mitzy's ballroom dancing school are walking together on the streets of Chicago and stop briefly to contemplate and reflect upon their excitement for their participation in an upcoming ballroom competition for professionals and amateurs. In the window display is a television for sale on which "Girl Hunt" sequence from *The Band Wagon* is featured. From the point of view of the film audience, this televisual image is reflected in the glass of the window. It is reflective of the contrast between social dancing and a narrative dancing in the film musical, specifically one in which the dancing is part of a show in which the characters from the film take part and play other characters in a dance sequence that is symbolic of a cinema sequence from a film noir. The dancing in this sequence from *The Band Wagon* is silent aside from the sound of the orchestrated music – the

characters performing the sequence do not sing. This is the inverse of the dance sequence in a dance movie in which the songs feature words that the characters do not themselves sing.

The noir-ish quality of the sequence and emphasis on the femme fatale is additionally reflective of the plot of *Shall We Dance*. John diverts from his routine on the train home to his family when he sees Paulina in the window of Ms. Mitzy's studio. Her silence in the window attracts him and leads him to enter the studio and sign up for dance lessons. His fantasy is reflected in the sequence from *The Band Wagon* but his story is much more innocent in the sense that he does not enter into a sexual or romantic relationship with Lopez. He desires only to dance with her and bring to life the kind of desire she reflects for him and which he feels has been extinguished by the routine of his work and the contractual kind of relationship his marriage has seemed to develop into. Later, after Paulina is leaving the studio with John, she tells him her story – where she came from, how she became interested in dancing, and also the eventual loss of passion for it she experienced after a falling out with her professional ballroom dancing partner. Paulina's partner had allowed her to fall in front of an audience by missing a step when he glanced at another woman on the floor. She lost her trust and confidence and resorted to teaching instead of performing. Paulina expresses her childhood fascination with dancing as transforming life from black and white to color but the symbol failed her and rendered that the symbolic imagination of reality was deceptive – that the fairytale of dancing did not equate with real romance – that it was just a performance. John's non-sexual attraction for Lopez is resolved by her instruction with him afterhours in the studio after she tells him her story. They go back to the studio and she leads him into a tango that reflects the modern dancing sequence from *The Band Wagon*. After, she says to John: "Be this alive, be this alive tomorrow." Ironically, dance movies imply that real performances should not be performances at all – they should be

inhabitation of performance to the extent that the dancers commit to acting as though they are really the characters they inhabit.

Although John does compete and starts off well, his performance is interrupted by his realization that his wife, from whom he has been hiding his diversion into the world of ballroom dancing, is in the audience. The recognition leads him to trip up his partner, her dress rips, and standing embarrassed she runs off the floor, leaving John vulnerable and exposed to the rest of the audience. John is now no longer enabled to inhabit the world of ballroom dancing fully, for his wife has destabilized his performance and made him stand exposed as the real John. John becomes self-conscious of who he really is, and imagines that the audience can now see him. Ultimately, *Shall We Dance* reverses the modern ideology of the *King and I* in which Anna teaches the King of Siam to dance. John agrees with encouragement from his daughter to make up with his wife and teach her to dance too. John essentially agrees to inhabit his marriage with the feminine romanticism of the movies, and arrives to the department store where his wife works dressed in a tux with a rose. She says, “I don’t how” and he replies, “Yes, yes you do. You’ve been dancing with me for 20 years.”

Dance movies imply that dancing can change how people see society and their relationships to others. For the most part the romance plot is subordinate to the dancing plot of the dance movie but *Dirty Dancing* reorients the dance movie plot to a more traditional context of ballroom dancing but mobilizes more strongly the folk musical subgenre into the dance movie narrative. Thus after the enormous success of *Dirty Dancing*, ballroom dance movies became a specific cycle of the dance movie. At the same time, with *Save the Last Dance*, the dance movie more strongly developed into a hip hop cycle as it moved away from the earlier popularity of rock music and MTV and hip hop became a more universally (and internationally) recognizable

style of music that corresponded to a style of dancing that could be associated as club or modern social dancing. Additionally, hip-hop dance movies, after *Center Stage*, began to incorporate ballroom dancing as the significance of social dancing and somewhat ironically as the significance of deviance from standards and techniques promoted by institutions for dance education. The *Step Up* franchise always features a ballroom dancing segment through which the romance is rehearsed between the protagonists beyond the view of their peers associated with the official dancing. And in *Take the Lead* the students at the inner city high school are taught ballroom dancing as a form of detention for disobedience. As a more structured style of dancing, ballroom dancing provides a context for working through cultural differences and exploring new articulations of traditional styles of dancing. Similarly, dance movies explore new articulations of film musicals by reconstructing its rhetoric of song through the contemporary and social practice of dancing to popular song.

The final dance of *Take the Lead* features a competition in which the students deviate from the classical ballroom style by including hip hop dance moves and, additionally, a three-person ballroom dance demonstration for which they are disqualified. In spite of their disqualification, their performance is recognized as remarkable because it entertains the audience in the film and the film audience. The final sequence of *Step Up Revolution* takes it further, featuring two final dances: the first is an elaborate hip-hop spectacle in the fashion of a “mob” in which the dancers interrupt the official opening ceremony for a new hotel development in the ethically vibrant but economically depressed community on the shores of Miami beach; the second, after the mob has wowed the audience of officials, even influencing the Mayor to dance, the entire crowd of now integrated dancers and officials are presented with a contemporary duet from the protagonists – the daughter of the hotel mogul and the parentless boy from the

community whom she has fallen for. The acceptance of the romantic relationship of two people from different classes most often marks the end of the dance movie. After *Step Up 2 the Streets*, dance movies represent audiences forming within the community, and away from dance floors and stages all together. The final dance integrates the club crowd outside of which the dance crew puts on a dance performance for the club crowd that has followed them outside from the dance competition going on inside and the high school dance teacher from the high school of performing arts also gets word of the street dance and shows up as well. The elite teachers from dancing schools, business proprietors, parents, and official civil authorities integrate in a folk fashion with the rest of the communities around performances taking place in the streets that exceed the expectations of the most technologically equipped movie theaters. The dancing seems to be taking place all around the audience in *Step Up Revolution* right along the beach in Miami.

In a way, these films have a more masculine quality to them because they make invisible the theater as an atmosphere for theatricality. Ever since *Step Up*, dance movies have electrified the street. They make the imagination of inhabiting spaces of reality theatrically through dancing socially almost unimaginable, almost as unimaginable as the technical feats of the dancing on display. The dance movie bodies seems to be rendered organic formations of technology in association with an emphasis upon dancing technique as a definition dancers' individuated personalities. Even though *Footloose* did not end in a theater, the social dancing site of the prom suggested a kind of subcultural relationship to the wider community in which it was situated. It was as if Reverend Moore and Vi were reflecting on the school dance as a movie, which reflected for them, like Vernon and Irene, the past origination of their romance. The prom could only make that impression artificial. Even though Alex dances at the conservatory away from the streets, her style of dancing departs from balletic lyricism and the audition space is subcultural to

real main stage performance of ballet, which we had seen her attend earlier. The achievement of the dance movie is its power to transform the elite crowd into a crowd that appears subcultural but also reflects the (technologically) mediated ways in which modern audiences form relationships with cultural difference: as pleasure and entertainment. Unlike the folk musical, dance movies did not turn the crowd into a vision of a unified traditional community about to embark upon modernity. In the dance movie, they are paradoxically looking back upon the past while looking forward to the future, for which youth have been the organic source of signification since the 60s. In the contemporary street dance movies, the dance crews turn the street into a space for dance art in which the streets appeal to renewal of theater through modern technology. If *Saturday Night Fever* ended in a space much too secluded from the pleasures its pop music milieu would inspire in mass audiences, contemporary dance movies end in spaces altogether too immersed in reality as a transitional space into the real commercial market. The bodies of dances are reflective of the technology they use to amplify music. The bodies of the dancers seem to tell the story of modern technology on artificial terms more so than reveal artifice as a powerful source of agency in reality. Thus the achievement of pleasure of the dancing produced at the end the *Step Up* sequels is commemorated with professional contracts to market brand name products, specifically Nike shoes. The fantasia of the contemporary dance movie in the age of new media transitions social dancers into the milieu of new media in the form of real commercial products. The brand products deny dancing its power of *insubordination* to reality. In the contemporary dance movie social dancing is subordinated to an industry of brand sponsorship. Dance movie characters are signified as becoming a source of renewal of desire for products, like film musicals, that generate a sense pleasure from symbolic participation in social dancing as a folk art of commercial entertainment.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Dance movies: *Whirl of Life*, *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, *Center Stage*, *Save the Last Dance*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Shall We Dance?* (2004), *Take the Lead*, and *Step Up* portray popular forms of subcultural dancing practiced – after 1950 – primarily by youth as existing outside the realm of institutionalized surveillance. These spaces outside of view of authority are represented as vital spaces of resistance without intention to resist. The resistance is a pose – a fashion – a look – that cannot be classified. Dancing is without violence. However, because the spaces are not directly policed, those who participate in them are vulnerable to things that can be destructive both from within the subculture or from without by the dominant culture.

In dance movies, the youth strike poses to music and they behave in ways that are regarded as meaningless or unproductive. The problem is, it seems, that, interestingly, they struggle with communication. They do not seem to have developed the capacity to assert themselves or stand up for themselves – step up or take the lead. The most popular dance movies, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, and *Dirty Dancing* are decidedly fashionable titles (and as they appear on posters and in ads) and yet somewhat meaningless. They in a way brand the posture of the movies. All the films signify the dance protagonists, from the point of view of authority in the film, as deviant. The characters want to dance in ways that lack any depth assigned to an art of dance. Additionally, the characters are mainly young or, if not, regarded as behaving immaturely for stepping outside of the home or diverting from a job or

participating in dancing that is away from the school. Dance movies emerged at a point in time when there were some major industrial shifts and major innovations in technology that influenced uses and practices around music representation and production. For instance, MTV became popular at the same time as *Flashdance*.

Youth were the biggest market for music since the 50s, and so too for the technology on which to record, listen, and amplify it. The mobility of audio technology enabled its consumption in different places, especially in public, but also its reception in the home on television by which the television doubled as visual and audio source for pop music. And music could be brought to school, to church, and to work. It was everywhere, or at least the technological shift gave forth to such an imagination of ubiquity. Music in this sense, I think, took on a new symbolic significance for youth in the way that music transmission lacked constraint and the way in which the imagination of those who listened to music could be inspired and what images it inspired evaded surveillance.

Dance movies did not intentionally exploit the imaginative potentials allowed for by new conditions of reception of music. However, the conditions themselves did produce new poses that would not have been possible without the possibility of engaging with music socially and beyond the private theaters of home, instruction, and structured spaces for dancing. Movies created a mass media stage that visualized the exclusive sites of symbolic practice around music and made them appear as veritable sources of origination for something new. But resistance to authority was not new – it has been style of youth, and youth have since the industrial revolution been the visual symbols – essentially, the brand – of deviance. Dancing constitutes a positive way to market that deviance.

It could be said that dancing is a conservative way to express defiance and resistance because it lacks communication or stability, especially beyond visibility as a subculture. But the poses themselves function as looks and as something to look at without real communicative potential, and this, I think, is productive of dissent from authority or structures that usually inhibit representation of difference or marginalized classes. The music has long been manufactured and sold for popular consumption. Early on, during the time of the Castles' popularity, it was marketed along with images that featured poses in dance. At first the story linking the image to song could only be interpreted, witnessed and interpreted, or physically practiced to produce a reflection. The Castles gave it the symbolic form of a life in narrative without reducing the music to a documentary discourse that would take seriously the public imagination of them as either heroes or as defiant. At the same time they look appear defiant and heroic in their film, and they look like they are really having fun representing...

Vernon and Irene Castle begin their story in *Whirl of Life* as though they are like children playing at the beach where, as they recall for the film audience from their home on the day of their third anniversary, they met for the first time. Every audience of the film is positioned within the Castles' time, as anyone who watches the film is watching the film on their third anniversary, no matter when or where. The experience of watching the film is evoked as a representation of a memory – a reflection – that the Castles actively generate into visibility. For they actually play themselves in their “story”, which is symbolic and expressive, like dancing, of the historical conditions of the musical milieu within which it takes on an appearance of a real song. Therefore, the Castles are mutually active as storytellers and as subjects of the story – its art. Both positions are illusory but the immediate position of telling allows an appearance of authority over the imagination of the story – the art of their story.

The Castles position their story about dancing in the past from the point of view of the present. Their first dance is sub-textual to the final dancing sequence at Castles by the Sea. The narrative represents a maturation of their first dance together, that grows through a process of dancing different dances, in different places, for different audiences, always dancing again as they did the first time but with a difference. The further they go from the original time, the more elaborately decorated and prefabricated it becomes. It becomes a performance of the original and ultimately the milieu reflects, conceptually and spatially, the basic conditions of their first dance – by the sea and close to home. The first dance was not a folk dance, however. It was not part of a ritual, and in fact it is evoked as liberation from repression. They finally give up on hiding their attraction from John Crosby and assert their attraction for one another in public, even if they seem to have taken pleasure in making passes behind John's back. The first dance, though, was spontaneous. There was music man on the beach with his monkey and he created the conditions for their response.

The process of the narrative in which the Castles reproduce over again the first dance in different contexts gives definition to their dancing together as a ritual – a folk practice. The meaning of the changes of context is progress. The Castles' progress is discursively signified as maturity by which, through all the drama and obstacles – familial (Irene's Father), professional (John Crosby), and cultural (social reformers) – depicted in the story of dancing, they finally stabilize into something more solidified and indestructible: a brand. The artificiality of the brand – “The Castles” – is tamed by the artifice of their story, which has qualities of history in terms of mobility and change through time and space. The significance of the change is visibility.

The Castles' visibility empowers them so much that they are liberated to tell their story as an artful form of amusement that has fun with the “truth” – to exaggerate it and communicate it

like dancing in which they fill in parts (the steps) together. Even the story of making the film is reflected as an art of the original labor process of producing the film. They make it folk, setting the milieu for their story in their home, fire-lit and illuminating the life of the story (telling) from within. But this is the thing: it is a milieu. It is an art. It is an atmosphere the Castles have constructed to represent for their audience an original form of the *popular* tradition of going to the movies. In fact, their story really begins and ends on the beach. The film's discourse of repetition and reproduction within new conditions of representation evokes the rest of the narrative as a series of performances by which the originating dance (of their life) is not "perfected" but matured into "Castles by the Sea".

The industrial process is much more simplified, pretentious, and, rationalized than mature, assertive art of inhabitation. They inhabit the space of their own artifice within reality and apart from the traditional stage. The Castles' art is an immature art of the industrial and manufactured process of production, and they embrace it. They love it. But do they really defeat it? They imply that they do but on social terms. Along the way they illustrate for the film audience that they proved wrong assumptions about their choices, especially those of patriarchy: "No man with brains in his feet instead of his head is going to marry my daughter," said Irene's father. We know he did not. Even if he did, and he probably did say something to that effect, the cultural and political implications of the assumption matter more than the truth. Dancing as a source of production defies reason. It defies intentional art. Thus even when it is "art" as ballet or modern dancing or any thing theatrical or filmic, the bodies of the dancers dancing it are removed from the source that "authored" it. Social dancing is free from the intentions of authorship and the elitism of auteurism. Popular social dancing, the art of dancing socially uses

folk cultural practice of ritual as narrative discourse for maturing social dancing into popular art – Modern Dancing.

Therefore, *Whirl of Life* reconciles product and body through the binary of consumer and dancers. The last dance is much “louder” and dynamic and moves at a faster speed than the original. It is a “popular” reconstruction of the original framed by a “popular” construction of the folk audience at the beach. The maturing process involves a lot of transition and disruption. John Crosby tried to disrupt the Castles dancing together on the beach but was silenced by the other girls watching with enchantment. Vernon unassumingly saved Irene from Crosby’s advances at the beach that day, and their audience of girls saved them from Crosby’s attempts to intervene. The film signifies that the audience has allowed them protection from the devious desires of producers like Crosby. The audience is represented as the heroes of their story because they looked and reflected their own pleasure in watching Irene and Vernon take pleasure in dancing by the sea. Since the first audience was only made of girls (and Crosby) the closing audience of men and women suggests their popularity has also matured.

Dance movies that emerged in the 80s had a more diverse audience, especially one that crossed generations. Dance movies appealed to the baby boomer generation and to contemporary teens. The commercialization of popular music, specifically, mixing rock, disco, and hip hop styles and their incorporation into narratives that featured attitudes of teenpics of the 50s and 60s, produced a less traditional expression of folk and a more modern expression of youth. Both differences are related to technology and the construction of authority as unstable, vulnerable, and open to change in relation to dancing as a socially symbolic practice, which reflects youth subcultural practices from below gaining symbolic power through artifice.

Dancing as social practice is signified in the films as creating a visual space for performing and looking that seems to communicate something about what it means to be young and romantic but also resistant. The same technology that allows for diversions from view of authority is also the same technology that accommodates and amplifies the assertion of visibility. In the way in which dance movies retell the story over and over again between them, signify the representation of the story in symbolic fashion – as a series of poses in the dances at the end of the film, and the way in which they make older traditions and standardized genres of dancing look unfamiliar, dance movies provide the older tradition of musicals an appearance of being modern, maybe even more eccentric and sexy. But that is not true. They are just as romantic and just as traditional as the popular musical. They are just able to get away with being “Innovative” because they posture themselves in ways that rely more on visualization, fashioning, and pop song, all of which define the essence of the words and narratives of popular dance movies.

They break away from narrative at the end. But it is in the last dash break into a dance that makes them seem unresolved. But *everything* was resolved as soon as Alex, Ren, Johnny, and Baby stood up their “fathers”.

The dancing styles encountered and participated in by the protagonists of contemporary dance movies are most often identified with hip hop dancing, such as when Alex encounters break dancing on the streets of Pittsburgh. Alex incorporates break-dancing moves into her audition dance. Incorporated into Alex’s choreographed routine, break-dancing signifies something modern and fantastic to the committee of the judges and the film audience.

Alex’s dancing is difficult to classify, as it does not really fit into one single genre of dance. Her dancing incorporates acrobatic leaps, break-dancing backspins, a little bit of aerobic, and some ballet. Alex’s dancing seems to incorporate “flashes” of dancing that had been

presented through dancing sequences earlier in the film, such as her dance to “Manic” in her apartment, the break-dancing she encounters on the street, and the modern theatrical style of dancing she performs at Mawby’s. The dancing is fragmented by a series of edited shots from different angles, sometimes repeating leaps in slow motion to draw the viewers’ attention again to what they have just witnessed. In addition, the scene is intercut with shots of the committee physically responding to the performance from their chairs. Alex’s dancing seems to awaken them from their passivity and exceed their expectations.

When she enters the audition space, the committee seems disinterested and uncaring for what they are about to witness. The costuming and posture emphasizes their stodginess. None of them look like they could have ever been dancers or appear as one might imagine a professional dance instructor to appear. They appear, though, as one who does not care for classical art might imagine one who does not care for popular culture to appear. Earlier in the film Alex tells her boss with whom she is romantically involved about going to the symphony with her father as child. He father told her, Alex says, “If you close your eyes you can see the music.” The audition dance is orchestrated to allow the film audience to see the committee seeing the song with qualities of music. Alex’s story is the music we see if we were to close our eyes instead of looking at her dancing. The committee, which looks nothing like an audience for *Flashdance*, responds the way in which an popular audience might respond to seeing “*Flashdance*” for the first time, which is also like Alex seeing break-dancing for the first time in the streets of Pittsburgh.

Therefore, the audition dance positions the film audience in two positions at once: Alex seeing break-dancing for the first time and the committee seeing *Flashdance* for the time. Neither story is really there in the dance, and neither is there an audience. Only Alex and the

committee are included in the frame, which film audiences in various historical and spatial contexts of reception contextualize and signify as popular. It is my claim that dance movies actually leave invisible the representational and historical aspects signified by the final dancing sequence. Alex's story and the story of modern street dancing, as a vernacular form of dancing, are not there. Each is subcultural to the dancing. The film audience is extra-cultural as a modern film audience, for when they encounter *Flashdance* as a product, through posters, songs, or conversations about the film, audiences who have seen *Flashdance* would imagine others as part of the story of *Flashdance*. Thus the audience only becomes subject of the dance movie in their consumption of it in mythic form.

Dance movies brand audiences watching popular culture as if it were folk culture, as if *Flashdance* inhabits their reality as break-dancing inhabits Alex's reality – in symbolic form. When watching the final dance in dance movies, audiences are already watching themselves watching the movie since they have already seen the story, the dance moves, and the entertainment context for exhibition dancing wherein their identification as a modern film audience lies. The entire final dance is symbolic of everything “historical”, which has a subcultural position to the “artistic” presentation of non-art dancing as if it were ballet.

The film brings the subcultural practices to dancing into an institutional context, and even though it is unclassifiable as art or popular (from the point of view any other dance sequence that came before it) it is still pleasurable. Alex's dancing exceeds all of the earlier instances of dancing in the film but somehow it still remains, in the view of the authority of the committee and the commercial film audience, still new, unrecognizable, and resistant to being read or interpreted.

Flashdance was a blockbuster that resisted agreement as to what it was, and probably the most female-centered blockbuster ever produced. Alex loved ballet and classical symphony music. She threw a brick in Nick's window when she suspected him of cheating, opened up the car door while driving through a tunnel when she found out he talked to a friend on the conservatory board to get her an audition. Alex proceeds to walk away, throwing her high heels at him, and says, "I'm not going to the fucking audition." When she find him waiting for her at her apartment entrance to explain, Alex, wearing a trench coat and smoking a cigarette, throws her fists in his direction. Alex has the behavior patterns of delinquent. Dancing does not necessarily tame her – she's untamed. She's afraid of "disappearing" and "disappears" when she dances. When she dances she does both, getting lost in the music and asserting herself in poses that are variously executed by three other dancers for which Jennifer Beals provides only poses and looks to signify "her" presence. *Flashdance* is not a mature dance movie but it is feverish with desire and sexual display. And Alex is not a real person. But she is fantastically as the model for the movie on the posters, as is Ren and Johnny and Baby.

Dance movies result in a representation of pleasure from the perspective of the audiences viewing the dancing in the film and the pleasure of the dancer performing their stories for audience's that appreciate art. The pleasure for the film audience is not just with the dancing but with seeing the elite audience responding positively to non-art dancing as if it were popular song. The dancing makes the song artificial as real art, which it is. Ultimately, the dance movie affirms the legitimacy of the pleasure of not conforming, and foregrounds independence in a context that signifies communal folk values and judgment. The acceptance of the dancing as not quite art – but better – affirms the value of art not fully *matured* into a product with qualities of complete

narrative closure. Subcultural dancing, such as historical hip-hop, is that without closure. The life of dance movie emulates that kind of relationship for popular audiences of the films, which imagine them as different moves in an ever-changing story of original, organic, and popular representation responded to with symbolic, artistic, and artificial representation, which is what is signified by consumption. I think this why popular dance movies: *Saturday Night Fever*, *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Save the Last Dance*, and *Step Up* were so successful in their original historical contexts and beyond.

Products and images fragmented from the narrative contexts generate an incomplete discourse of the original experience of watching the movie. Audiences desire to complete that process by restoring the memory inspired by the songs or any other product tied in with the film. In this way, the commercial marketing of the dance movies appealed to the folk musical's tendency to play on art of the past. But the past was significantly intensified by the fragmentation of the industry into individuated media markets and the innovation of technology that brought the experience of consuming popular culture closer to consumers' bodies.

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