



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

A Cold Blooded Murderer Calls For a Revision

*Rick Altman's Subgenre Division
Of the American Film Musical*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Sigrún Karlsdóttir

September 2010

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Enska

A Cold Blooded Murderer Calls For a Revision

*Rick Altman's Subgenre Division
Of the American Film Musical*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Sigrún Karlsdóttir
Kt.: 180871-4389

Leiðbeinandi: Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir

September 2010

Abstract

The following essay is mainly based on Rick Altman's subgenre division of the American film musical genre. Altman claims in his book, *The American Film Musical* (1987), that all American film musicals can be fitted into three musical subgenres: the fairy tale musical, the folk musical and the show musical. The purpose of this project is to test the validity of Altman's theory by applying it on five well known musicals which are: *My Fair Lady* of 1964, *Grease* (1978), *Pal Joey* (1957), *Sweeney Todd: The Demoniac Barber of Fleet Street* (2007) and *Mamma Mia* (2008). The first part of this essay explains important concepts in Altman's theory, such as his definition of the film musical and the emphasis on a dual focus narrative. It also points out the relations of Altman's theory to structuralism and semiotics, and how Altman in many ways uses the methods of semiology in his analysis of the film musical. The most important and defining features of each subgenre are also summarized, but some facts regarding history and development of the subgenres are omitted. The analysis of the musicals makes up the largest part of this essay. Each musical is analyzed and fitted in to Altman's framework of subgenres, starting with the fairy tale musical *My Fair Lady*. The outcome of the testing calls for a discussion about genre mixing, the musicals genre's evolutionary progression, and the integration of different themes. The unique semantics of the musical *Sweeney Todd* and the creativity of Burton and Sondheim are also deliberated. At the end of this essay I discuss the validity of Altman's theory and methodology according to the result of this study.

Contents

Contents	5
Introduction.....	6
Altman's Theory	7
The Fairy Tale Musical <i>My Fair Lady</i>	10
The folk musical <i>Grease</i>	14
<i>Mamma Mia</i> : A Feel Good Folk Musical	18
<i>Pal Joey</i> : A Show Musical Sprinkled With the Fairy Tale Tradition.....	21
The Musical Mayhem: <i>Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street</i>	25
Mixing Genres	26
Conclusion	29
Works Cited	31

Introduction

Narratology is used to analyze all kinds of narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, such as historical texts, novels and short stories, where the narrative is mediated by a narrator.

In recent years, many narratologists have turned their focus on theatre and film, comic books and even paintings, where images are used for narration (Onega and Landa 2).

Narratology, a branch of structuralism, is therefore a method of a “general semiotic theory” (3). The study of genre and genre conventions is a method popular within structuralism. Although the word genre is a little hard to define exactly, the concept is known to be used as a categorizing “tool”. Films can for example be categorized into action films, comedy, horror, westerns, science fiction and musicals to name a few.

When studying film genres, scholars use a variety of analyzing methods and at least three approaches which emphasize either the structural, historical or cultural context of particular film genres, are well known. The structural approach involves listing typical themes, patterns in narrative, stock characters and recurrent visual symbols and signs. In many ways the patterns are analyzed like a language with identifiable grammar and syntax (Voss).

Rick Altman, a professor of cinema and comparative literature uses the structural approach for analyzing the American film musical genre. Altman suggests that within the American film musical genre it is possible to identify three subgenres; the fairy tale musical, the show musical, and the folk musical. In his book, *The American Film Musical* (AFM, 1987) he introduces his ideas and way of categorizing musicals into the three subgenres. After reading Altman’s book, and summarizing many of the defining features of each of his subgenre, I decided to use Altman’s ideas and methods to categorize five of my favourite musicals. These musicals span over five decades and at

least three of them can be considered to belong to the canon of film musicals. The film musicals I have chosen are *My Fair Lady* of 1964, directed by George Cukor, *Grease* (1978, Randall Kleiser), *Pal Joey* (1957, George Sidney), *Sweeney Todd: The Demoniac Barber of Fleet Street* (2007, Tim Burton) and *Mamma Mia* (2008, Phyllida Lloyd).

Altman's analysis and use of subgenres is in many ways well thought out and seems to be applicable to most conventional film musicals. There are musicals that are really difficult to pin down to a single subgenre because they adhere in many ways to more than one subgenre. Some unconventional film musicals, which draw different characteristics from various genres, are not compatible to Altman's subgenre model.

Before starting the analysis of the movies, Altman's definition of the film musical is reviewed, as well as his concept of the dual focus narrative, the ideology behind his theory and the most significant and defining features of each of the three subgenres.

Altman's Theory

According to Rick Altman, a film is categorized as a musical, when it contains a love plot, and a certain minimum of diegetic music (*AFM* 211). In films, music is referred to as diegetic when it is located within the action of a film; it adds something to the narrative and continues the plot (Van der Lek 27). Non-diegetic music is on the other hand music such as background music and other music, sometimes performed by characters in the movies, but with no relation to the storyline (32).

Altman says the musical demonstrates a dual focus narrative and tells the audiences and critics to look beyond the simple time line of events (*AFM* 17). The dual focus of the narrative is built around the two main protagonists, usually a man and a woman, with radically differing and even conflicting values (19). Scenes are juxtaposed to draw attention to the similarities and differences between the romantic couple and to link them

together in the audience's mind (22). This concept of a dual focus narrative resembles in many ways the ideas of the structuralist Lévi Strauss about binary oppositions, which occur in nature and by nature in the human mind. In Strauss' book *The Structural Analysis of Myth*, Strauss claims that by looking at binary opposites in a story, the analyser reduces the material studied to manageable level (Glazer).

As stated above, the structural approach in analyzing narrative involves listing typical themes, patterns and recurrent visual symbols and signs. The patterns are then analyzed like a language with identifiable grammar and syntax (Voss). Altman in many ways uses this method of semiology in his analysis of the film musical. Semiology refers to "the idea of a general study of the sign systems which make up our societies" (Allen 40). These ideas originated from the model of linguistics designed by the 20th century Swiss linguist, Saussure. According to Saussure, everything in society can be considered a sign and thus belongs to a system which can be studied like the system of language (41). It was however John Locke who was the first modern philosopher to use the term "semiotic" in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690 (Stam et al. 3). Altman draws a line between the semantic and the syntactic when defining the musical corpus. Altman suggests "that most Hollywood genres begin as cluster of semantic elements and achieve true generic status only when characteristic semantic elements are built into a stable syntax" (*AFM* 117). In a simple way we might say we have group of symbols and when we arrange these symbols in a certain way we get a definite meaning and understanding out of them. Through time, the arrangement of these symbols can change or develop, or even new symbols be added into it (117). According to Altman, important semantics features differ between the three subgenres; in the fairy tale musical we almost always see "palaces, resorts, fancy hotels, ocean liners and other locales frequented by the aristocracy" and in the show musical we observe "the middle

class world of theatre and magazine publication (centring on New York City)” and finally in the folk musical we monitor and go back to “the America of yesteryear, from small town to frontier” (124). Hollywood producers are well aware of the audience’s desire “to be somewhere else, someone else at some other time” and they try fulfilling these wishes by structuring the musical around them (127). Each subgenre therefore “concretizes a particular kind of make believe.” In the fairy tale musical it is the make-believe “of being in another place” often aristocratic, fanciful or even magical (127). In the show musical it is the make-believe “of being in another body” with emphasis on the spectacle and illusion of the setting. Finally the folk musical creates the sense of “being in another time” usually in some fond remembered past, for example, the nostalgic view of the America of yesteryear (127).

An important syntactic typology in Altman’s subgenre division is his approach to the coming together of the two stars in the film musical. In the first of the three subgenres, the fairy tale musical, the coupling of the main protagonists “accompanies and parallels (and frequently causes or is caused by) restoration of order of an imaginary kingdom” (126). A good example is the musical *Cinderella* and many if not all of the Astaire and Rogers’s musicals of the thirties. In the second, the show musical, the coupling “is associated with the creation of a work of art” (126). *Singin’ in the Rain* is an ideal example of show musical. Finally in the folk musical the couple formation “heralds the entire group’s communion with each other and with the land that sustains them” (126). *West Side Story* is an example of a film where the coming together of the romantic couple reflects the tension and the conflict within their community, even though the resolution to the plot is not conventional of films within the folk musical subgenre. Altman also points out other diverse features that are typical of each subgenre and reinforces or weakens a categorization of a film into a particular subgenre. On the

following pages I will categorize my favorite musicals according to Altman's theory, starting with *My Fair Lady* of 1964.

The Fairy Tale Musical *My Fair Lady*

The film musical, *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor) of 1964, is a film adaptation of the Lerner and Loewe stage musical by the same name, which was based on a film adaptation of the stage play *Pygmalion* (1913) by George Bernard Shaw. The film tells the story of a professor of phonetics, named Henry Higgins, and a common flower girl called Eliza Doolittle. Professor Higgins takes a bet from his friend Colonel Pickering that he can transform the common Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, into a refined lady with an aristocratic accent. The ultimate goal is to have the highest social class believe Eliza is one of them. Eliza agrees to this because of all the benefits which include living in Mr. Higgins's beautiful house and eating lots of chocolates. A young aristocrat named Freddy falls in love with Eliza, and Higgins, who has treated Eliza like an object rather than a person with feelings, has also and without realising it, fallen for Eliza.

The dual focus of the narrative is easily recognized in *My Fair Lady* and scenes are juxtaposed to draw attention to the differences between Professor Higgins and Eliza.

Adults of different social classes and aristocratic European settings are typical semantic elements of the fairy tale musical (Altman *AFM*, 142). The obstacle to the love of the male and female leads are usually within themselves and not caused by the obstruction of an older figure, as was common in comic plots such as "New Comedy" (143-44). Most of the characters in *My Fair Lady* are mature individuals and no children are seen in the movie. The main couple and protagonists are of different classes and Professor Higgins is considerably older than Eliza. The obstacle for their love is their different characteristics; he is a proud and selfish, misogynist bachelor who does not

know how to treat a woman and does not think he needs one. She on the other hand, is a common flower girl who thinks she could never belong in the upper class world. Eliza can be identified with real existence and this is the one to which most of the audiences can relate. Professor Higgins however symbolizes the imaginary, idealized or desirable, thus representing what the audience might dream of being and having, often noble birth and wealth (154). Nevertheless, in the development of musicals and especially the fairy tale musical, there has been a sliding from the emphasis on money and high birth to a greater stress on charm and personal skills. Like in the traditional fairy tale, it is often beauty for women and courage for men, which are the signs of their personal value (155). Mr. Higgins can be identified with the divine or unreal because he is rich and lives in a big house with many servants, he lives a life which is unattainable for most. Eliza on the other hand can be identified with reality since she is a common flower girl who has to earn every penny like most of us need to do. However, Mr. Higgins' wealth does not only come from his noble birth; his skills in phonetics seem to be the main reason why is able to maintain his life standards. Eliza's beauty is the element of her personal value that justifies her coupling to a man of higher social rank.

It is common in the fairy tale musical to expose the financial predicament of one the main protagonists at the opening of the film, to give immediate point of contact with most members of the audiences who will have shared such problems at some time or another (155). In the opening scene of *My Fair lady*, Eliza is at Covent Garden, desperately trying to sell flowers, and reaching out for every penny she can get.

The primary aspect of make believe in the fairy tale musical "to be in another place" does not only mean another geographic location place, but also a different social status, such as becoming wealthy and noble (127). In *My Fair Lady* this other place is the aristocratic standard of living. The audiences are able to see themselves (through Eliza)

as part of the aristocratic community. If she, the common girl, is able to change and improve her standard of living, than so can we.

The male lead in the fairy tale musical must not be too fat or too ordinary. He does not have to be a great singer first but needs to have a personal attraction and be able to move elegantly (136). Harrison, who plays Professor Higgins, does have substantial personal charm but the audience totally misses out on his elegance when moving around, and his singing is more like talking in all his performances.

The secondary characters in the fairy tale musical are often those of noble household such as man-servant or maid-servant (127). In some way this is the case in *My Fair Lady*; Higgins's maid-servant, Mrs. Pierce, has a considerable role in the film and she along with Colonel Pickering, Eliza's father, old Mrs. Higgins and Freddy Eynsford-Hill can be categorized as secondary characters of the film.

Altman uses three approaches to sexuality that is the driving force of the plot in the fairy tale musical:

Sex as sex: the plot is driven by overt sexual desire..., sex as battle: sexual energy is projected into bickering, fighting or a competition between potential partners... and sex as adventure: one partner's apparent fear of sexuality is compensated for by the other's lawless, uncontrolled drives (141).

This approach, that is, to connect sexual drive with energy or driving force is one of the fundamental ideas of psychoanalytic criticism sometimes called Freudianism (Barry 97). In *My fair Lady* the driving force is definitely "sex as battle" since Eliza and Professor Higgins argue through the whole film and no obvious signs of attraction are detectable until very late in the story.

Like stated earlier, the coupling of the protagonists in the fairy tale musical represents "the restoration of an order to an imaginary kingdom" (Altman *AFM*, 126).

When the two eventual lovers ultimately unite, all other problems seem solved, and those who seemingly were divided by differing class and status become merged in a blissful and contented union (145). The solution of the love plot in *My Fair Lady* not only assures the coupling of the main characters but also the merging of cultural values; Eliza, after she has learned to speak and behave like an upper class lady, is now suitable to enter the world of aristocracy.

My Fair Lady adheres in many ways to the fairy tale musical but adopts some of its features from the show musical. The typical plot of the show musical is the romantic triangle, and a staging of a show, where the protagonists are brought together by their shared profession. The success of the show is linked to the couple's achievements in their courtship (211). In *My Fair Lady* there are two triangles, the romantic triangle which is formed by Eliza, Professor Higgins and Freddy, who has desperately fallen for Eliza, and another triangle which is formed by Eliza, Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering. The second triangle is involved in a creation of a show which is Eliza's final test, the embassy ball, where she is put on display and tested on her social and pronunciation skills among the highest social class.

The obstacle of the couple's love and success is usually weak in the show musical (287-88). Like stated earlier the obstacle for Eliza and Higgins's love mostly exists because of their contrasting personalities, but Freddy Eynsford-Hill is also a rival and a hindrance to the couple's love. He uses every opportunity he gets to charm Eliza and win her over. He is, however, a weak obstacle; he is born into aristocracy but unemployed and unable to work because he has never worked and he does not know how. Eliza knows that if she marries Eddie she would have to support him.

Throughout the film Professor Higgins talks of Eliza as his project and creation. It is he who turned her into what she has become and that fits exactly into what Altman calls

the doubling of the male role (226). Higgins is the producer, the lyric writer and Eliza's teacher, but he is also, at least when his "project" is nearly finished, a man who is affectionate and with desires towards Eliza. Professor Higgins is the Pygmalion. *My Fair Lady* does not in any obvious way belong to the folk musical subgenre because it does not adopt any of the defining features of the folk tradition.

The folk musical *Grease*

The film musical *Grease* of 1978 was directed by Randal Kleiser, and is an adaptation of the Broadway stage musical by the same name, written by Jim Jacob and Warren Casey. Danny Zuko and the Australian Sandy meet in the summer time and fall in love.

Unfortunately, when the summer ends, Sandy has to return with her family to Australia and that seems to be the end of the new relationship. But Sandy's parents decide to stay in America and Sandy, without knowing it, ends up in the same school as Danny. At Rydell High, they meet again, but now under different circumstances; Danny is the most popular guy in school and a leader of a gang called the "T-Birds" and has to protect his reputation as a notorious womanizer. Sandy is however innocent and pure and does not seem to fit in, even though she is invited to join the group of "Pink Ladies," the school's posh girl gang. Through the film, the audience watches Danny and Sandy and their fellow students dealing with romantic and social dilemmas while dancing and singing fantastic, catchy songs.

Of the five films I chose to analyze according to Altman's methods the dual focus narrative is most emphasized in *Grease*. The main protagonists Danny and Sandy are contrasted with one another and scenes juxtaposed to emphasize their differences. A good example is the song "Summer Nights" where the protagonists take turns in singing without being in exactly the same place and telling completely different stories about the

same experience. The protagonists' friends, Kenicke and Rizzo "act as altered reflections of the main pair" and the story is told through the actions of the contrasting groups of "T-Birds" and "Pink Ladies" (Regal).

Out of Altman's three subgenres, *Grease* adheres most to the folk musical and can be categorized as such. Folk musicals are usually based on a folk memory or folk myth of the supposed American past. It may be a dream vision of some imagined past. Early musicals often totally ignore reality and concentrate solely on the reputation or romance of well known locations such as the Old South (*AFM* 273). The semantic emphasis in *Grease* is on America of yesteryear. It takes place in the fifties and the setting is Rydell High School where student dance, sing and have fun. The high school life is glorified and almost seen as in a dream where in a way reality is omitted.

According to Altman, the folk musicals will have a strong sense of family, sometimes portraying an older couple alongside the young romantic couple. The older couple may already be married and their interrelationship with the younger couple leads to a renewing of their own relationship. There is also a strong sense of community with all its troubles and joys used as a background to the plot. It is however quite common in the folk musical that other group such as fellow students or friends become a replacement for the family (274). In *Grease*, that is the case, the community is represented by the couple's fellow students and the film mostly takes place in and around Rydell High which substitutes a small town.

The main characters of the folk musical only find true love within familiar surroundings and usually they fall in love with someone that they already know and despite their superficial differences, they share the same basic values (277). In *Grease* the main characters already know each other when the film starts. They seem different but underneath they share the same values.

In the folk musical the resolution to the love plot parallels the resolution to the community problem (309). In *Grease* this community problem can be applied to the problems and dilemmas that the couple's fellow students are going through: Frenchy dropping out of school, Rizzo's potential pregnancy and the competition between the gangs of "The T-birds" and "The Scorpions". At the end of the film when the couple finally unites, the other problems are also solved.

There are evil figures in all folk musicals (*AFM* 289). In *Grease* these evil figures are the members of "The Scorpions". Leo and his girlfriend Cha Cha DiGregorio are the gang's leaders. These two make trouble whenever they appear on the screen, and they represent a constant threat to the couple and their friends at Rydell High School.

In the folk musical "one of the lovers represents the stability of earth and the other energy and movement" (307). In *Grease*, Danny is the one filled with energy and movement and Sandy the one who represents stability. Sandy, however, with her innocent charm and beauty, succeeds in taming her lover, and he in the end sublimates his wanderlust because of his love and desire for Sandy. However, Danny is not the only one that changes; Sandy decides to have a complete makeover and become the girl Danny would be proud to be seen with. She succeeds there as well.

There was no lack of folk music and spiritual songs to use in the folk musicals and the early musicals drew heavily on these sources. There were, however, difficulties with some spiritual songs, folk songs and folk dances because they were not easily fitted into a narrative. The composer Jerome Kern was an innovator in composing songs which were well integrated into narrative and action. Jerome Kern along with Oscar Hammerstein provided a model for the folk musical, both on stage and film, with their script and music in the stage production of *Show Boat* 1927 (285). All the songs were diegetic, that is, they continued with the narrative and added something to the plot. The songs expressed

the characters' personal emotions and secondary characters, or other performers, who were already present in a scene, became a chorus (285-6).

In *Grease* all the songs are diegetic and add something to the plot and when additional singers are required, they usually are characters who already are present in the scene. Most of the songs are expressions of personal emotions. In the typical folk musical any place is suitable as stage (319). In *Grease*, a bedroom, a car workshop, a drive-in cinema and various locations around the high school become a stage. The square dance, the line dance, and different group dances were defining features of the folk musical well into the forties (283). Even though the film *Grease* was produced in 1978, the line dance is performed several times in the movie in the form of the "Hand Jive Line Dance".

According to Altman the background past of a folk musical is mostly a prettified and nostalgic vision, with everything in its place, where peace and harmony reign supreme. The tension of the plot is heightened by interlacing unpleasant or frightening elements into this idyll which often makes the audience reflect back on upsetting aspects of their own past. This gives the folk musical subgenre its defining melodramatic tone and a certain depth which would be lost if the threatening and serious side would be all hidden (314). In *Grease* there are scenes and moments that might bring out uncomfortable memories and thoughts for at least some of the audiences: bullying (e.g. the "T-birds" picking on Eugene), promiscuity and teenage pregnancy.

Grease like other folk musicals is the messenger of folk values and principles (324). The main message is that promiscuity may have serious consequences and chastity will be rewarded because guys deep down want "good" girls. Rizzo gets punished for being promiscuous; she thought she was pregnant. Sandy however keeps her purity (virginity) but nevertheless gets her prince charming. *Grease* also emphasizes the importance of

education, that is, of not being a drop-out. *Grease* like most other musicals ends with symbolic representation of marriage; the romantic couple Danny and Sandy “fly off” in car and vanish into the sky leaving high school behind and starting a new chapter in their lives, as a couple.

There are not many building blocks of the fairy tale musical that can be attributed to *Grease*. Still, the man lead in the movie, Danny, played by John Travolta, knows how to move and has a strong personal attraction like required of the male lead in the fairy tale musical. He seems to dance and sing without putting any effort to it, as though it comes natural to him and his performances when singing “Grease Lightnin’”, “Summer Nights” and “You’re the One That I Want” are outstanding. *Grease* does not adhere in any obvious way to the subgenre of show musical but does however have one stage act, Frenchy’s dream where Frankie Avalon sings “Beauty School Dropout”.

Mamma Mia: A Feel Good Folk Musical

Mamma Mia, directed by Phyllida Lloyd, is a film adaptation of the West End musical by the same name. The music in the film is originally hits written and made popular by the Swedish band ABBA in the 70s. In the film the young and beautiful Sophie Sheridan lives in a small Greek island with her single mum Donna. Sophie’s intention is to marry her fiancé Sky and her wish is to have her father present. After reading her mother’s old diary she realizes that her father is one of three men with whom her mother had some kind of a relationship at the time she got pregnant. Without telling her mother, Sophie invites all three to her wedding with funny and unexpected consequences.

The dual focus of the narrative is noticeable in the film but instead of juxtaposing scenes between the lovers, scenes with the daughter (Sophie) and her mother (Donna) are put side by side and their lovers become secondary characters.

As stated above, most folk musicals emphasize the importance of family and portray an older couple alongside the young romantic couple (*AFM* 274). Even though Donna and Sophie's family is not big (in fact just the two of them), their relationship and love for each other is really strong. The film does also portray an older couple, Donna and Sam, and their relationship is indeed renewed since the film ends with their marriage. Friends also play a big role and are a substitute for a family, and Donna and Sophie each have two best girl friends, who share their secrets and joys.

Folk musicals are usually set in defined surroundings. If the setting is a town, it is a small town. When in a city, it is a specific neighborhood and if it is an agricultural environment then it is within a single community. The key feature is that everybody seems to know everybody else (275). *Mamma Mia* is set on a small Greek Island where everyone knows everyone and the plot takes place in and around Donna's hotel.

As stated earlier, the main characters of the folk musical only find true love within familiar environment and usually they fall in love with someone that they already know and share the same basic values (277). Sophie and Sky already know each other and are preparing their wedding in the beginning of the film. Donna and Sam also know each other, although twenty years have passed since their last meeting. The surroundings make Sam realise that he is back to the place where he belongs, and with the woman he has always deep down loved.

In *Mamma Mia* there are group dances like so often in the typical folk musicals; first all the girls and women dance on the pier to the song "Dancing Queen" and then the men in many ways copy them by dancing on the pier as well, when being a chorus to the song "Don't go Wasting Your Emotions."

Mamma Mia fits well into the folk musical model created by Kern and Hammerstein: All the songs are diegetic, that is, they continue the narrative and add something to the

plot. The songs express the characters' personal emotions and secondary characters, or other performers, who are already present in a scene, become a chorus (285-86).

As in most folk musicals, singing is a natural attribute of the characters in *Mamma Mia* and professional singers do not appear. The main actresses do however have fairly good voices but that cannot be said for all the characters. Pierce Brosnan, who plays Sam, is probably among the worst singers who have ever appeared in a musical, but does deserve praise for not taking himself too seriously. As in *Grease*, many places on the island are used as a stage for singing and dancing.

The coming together of the couple in the folk musical signifies a connection between groups within their community and the resolution to the romantic plot parallels the resolution of a community problem (309). In *Mamma Mia* there is no obvious community problem; the only difficulty, besides finding out which of the three gentlemen is Sophie's father, is Donna's lack of money. Marrying Sam means an end to Donna's financial worries.

There is no threatening dark and brooding character in *Mamma Mia* as so often within the folk musical. In the beginning of the film when the three potential fathers, Sam, Harry and Bill come to the island they all seem very likeable and all good enough to be Sophie's father. There is no competition between them though all of them would want to be Sophie's gene donor. As for the young couple, there is neither competition nor any malicious character trying to interfere in their coupling. As in *Grease*, unexpected pregnancy and promiscuity create a serious undertone in the musical *Mamma Mia*. It is however treated with humour and kindness which probably does not have any likeness in reality.

The film does not focus on the America of Yesterday like so often in the folk musical. The setting is, however, a small Greek Island which can easily be said to substitute a small American town since all the characters speak English. The film adopts

the make believe of the fairy tale tradition about being in another place. The beautiful island, the blue sea and stress-free way of live makes the viewer wish he was there. The film does not belong to the subgenre of show musical in any way because it does not adopt any of its defining features.

Pal Joey: A Show Musical Sprinkled With the Fairy Tale Tradition

Pal Joey is a musical film from 1957, directed by George Sidney. It is loosely adapted from the musical play of the same name. The setting is San Francisco. Joey Evans is a nightclub singer and dancer. He is a charming womanizer, who has a dream about opening his own nightclub. Joey becomes attracted to a chorus girl called Linda English and she, like most other women who meet Joey, gets carried away by his charms. Joey, however, is also romancing another woman, a rich and beautiful widow named Vera Simpson who happens to be a former chorus girl. Joey's intention is to get Mrs. Simpson to finance his dream of becoming a night club owner.

The dual focus of the narrative is obvious in *Pal Joey*. The scenes are juxtaposed between the main characters Joey and Linda and it is especially noticeable when they are shown in their separate but adjacent flats performing separate but parallel actions. The emphasis does however sometimes move from Linda to the other female protagonist, Mrs. Vera Simpson, since she is also Joey's potential partner.

The semantic elements of *Pal Joey* are representative of the show musical: the lives of entertainers when they are off stage. The typical plot of the show musical is a romantic triangle set in the theatre where the man and woman protagonists come together in their shared profession (AFM 211). This can easily be conveyed upon the plot of *Pal Joey*; Joey, Linda and Mrs. Simpson form the romantic triangle and Joey and Linda share a common profession as performers in the same club. However, what differentiates *Pal*

Joey from the typical show musical plot is the resolution of the design; the “success” of the show, in this case Joey’s club, does not display the success of the couple’s love. Their love and becoming a couple is not parallel to the failure of the opening of the club. However, since Mrs. Simpson is in the beginning of the film a potential half of the couple to be formed, the resolution of the plot parallels with the ending of Joey and Mrs. Simpson’s relationship: no Mrs. Simpson means no club.

American Vaudeville is an important source for the semantics of the show musical (201). The Vaudeville show was constructed from separate and unrelated acts with no consistent story line. In a similar way many narrative musicals are constructed solely to provide a platform for a series of unrelated musical numbers (202). In the club where Joey and Linda work, the acts seem to resemble a Vaudeville show, since there is no coherence or thread through the acts.

In general the show musical tends to emphasize the lavish and spectacular patterns created by the dancers and the chorus. This can distract from the personal talents of individual performers and the producer Florence Ziegfield with his follies in the first decades of the 19th century, can be mostly blamed for this state of affairs. By masking the talent of individual dancers and concentrating on the immaculate co-ordination of the group as whole, the dancers can be reduced to mere “pretty hoofers” (204). In *Pal Joey* the visual patterning of the stage acts is not so much emphasized, most likely because of the club’s small stage. But as often within this type of musical the women performers of the club, including Linda, are made to look kind of simple, with nothing to offer but their bendable, almost naked bodies, and they are presented as no equals of Joey. The doubling of the male role where man becomes producer and consumer is typical of the show musical subgenre (227). A perfect example is the scene where Joey watches Linda

rehearse her act on stage. Joey has become the director (poet) of the show but also watches Linda with his desiring gaze; he is both the producer and consumer.

As stated above, the show musical is a middle class genre that rarely portrays work of production (208). In *Pal Joey* this is not the case. When preparing the opening of the new club, “Chez Joey,” the employees are shown moving, fixing and cleaning before the opening night. The blue collar part is rather emphasized than hidden.

Though *Pal Joey* adheres in many ways to the show musical subgenre it does in many ways belong to the fairy tale tradition as well. The fairy tale musical’s formula on the formation of the couple parallels “the restoration of an order to an imaginary kingdom” (126). In *Pal Joey* the couple (Joey and Linda), which is formed during the film, does parallel the order of Joey’s imaginary kingdom, but in an unusual way. Joey has a dream of becoming a club owner and that club is his imaginary kingdom. Joey has the possibility to become a club owner but then he has to be with, and be submissive to, the woman he does not love, Mrs. Vera Simpson. If he leaves her he will not get the money for the club and he can abandon his dream of becoming a club owner. At the beginning of the film the club seems to be the only thing Joey cares for, but his character develops, and he becomes a better person. He decides to keep his dignity or what is left of it and decides to end his contract with Mrs. Simpson. He does not get his dream fulfilled by becoming a club owner but is rewarded by getting the good girl. In short, he does not get what he wants but rather what he is lacking.

In the fairy tale there is an emphasis on sexual desire, adultery, disloyalty and irony such as seen in the Viennese operettas (140). In *Pal Joey*, sexual desires are clearly displayed, that is Joey’s desire for both Linda and Mrs. Simpson. In the beginning of the film, Joey is attracted to Linda just because of her physical appearance and he just wants her like the many other women he has ever wanted. He is a womanizer and admits being

one. His attraction for Linda however, develops through the film and parallels with a character change in Joey. He becomes a better person because of his love for her. The sexual energy between Joey and Mrs. Simpson does, on the other hand, change into a battle because neither of them wants to be submissive to the other.

The primary aspect of make believe in the fairy tale musical “to be in another place” does not only mean another geographical location but also a different social status such as becoming wealthy and noble (127). Joey’s dream is to become his own boss instead of a performer working for others. If he succeeds he manages to alter his social status.

As in the film *My Fair Lady*, financial worries are identified right at the beginning of *Pal Joey*. In the opening scene, Joey is being thrown out of some town by two policemen. He, then arrives to San Francisco, unemployed and broke. He is in a situation which the common audience can identify with. Joey decides to apply for a job in a club, where his old friend Ned Galvin, is a pianist and conductor of the house band. Joey jumps on stage and sings “I didn’t know what time it was.” The club manager in the film, like majority of the audience of the film, immediately falls for Joey.

Unlike the common situation in the operettas, the male lead in the fairy tale musical must not be too fat or too ordinary. He does not have to be a great singer first but needs to have a personal attraction and be able to move elegantly (136). Frank Sinatra has all the features that a male lead of a fairy tale musical requires: he is charming and singing and dancing seems so easy and natural to him. The most memorable of the songs performed by Sinatra in the movie are “I Didn’t Know What Time it Was,” “The Lady is a Tramp” and “There’s a Small Hotel.” Sinatra’s singing and stage performance carry the whole film with a little support from Rita Hayworth who brilliantly performs “Zip” and “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered.” My next film is far from being a fairy tale or show musical but is a brilliant musical nevertheless.

The Musical Mayhem: *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*

The musical film *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* was directed by Tim Burton and produced in 2007. It is a musical film, adapted from the Stephen Sondheim stage musical, by the same name, of 1979. The play is however originally written by Christopher Bond in 1973. The musical tells the story of Benjamin Barker, who returns to London after having been in exile for 15 years, due to false charges brought on him by the notorious Judge Turpin, who desired Barker's wife. When Barker returns, as Sweeney Todd, he finds out from his previous landlady Mrs. Lovett, that his wife poisoned herself after being raped by Judge Turpin and that his daughter is being kept at that evil judge's house. Full of revenge and with the help of Mrs. Lovett, Sweeney Todd (Barker) turns to his previous profession as a barber with calamitous consequences.

Sweeney Todd: The Demonic Barber of Fleet Street is undoubtedly a musical. In the film there is more singing than talking and when there is talking there is usually music played in the background (Sondheim). It also falls into Altman's definition of musical since there is diegetic music that forwards the story line and a love plot, even though the solution to it is unconventional to say the least. Mrs. Lovelett does have feelings and admiration for Todd and dreams of marrying him. He, on the other hand, does not share these feelings, but in the latter half of the movie he seems to accept the fact that they are meant for each other, especially after Mrs. Lovelett comes up with her great business idea. There is also the young couple, Anthony (the young sailor) and Johanna (Todd's daughter) who manage to unite towards the end of the movie. Not many features in the movie can be attributed to Altman's subgenres, even though I have managed to find a few. The dual focus of the narrative is noticeable, but instead of contrasting the lovers against one another, scenes are juxtaposed between father (Todd) and his daughter

Johanna. It is, however, Sweeney Todd and his actions which are kept in main focus throughout the movie and the plot is driven by revenge and nothing else. The film's semantic elements regarding visual, social and economic realms do not in any way fit into neither Altman's model nor his ideas on types of escapism in musicals; the film is set in the gloomy backstreets of 19th century London, the surroundings, architecture and characters are gothic style. The main characters are not aristocrats, middleclass or show people but a barber and a pie maker. Besides being a musical, Sweeney Todd can be categorized as horror musical or a *Grand Guignol*, a film that deals with horribly gruesome material and features and "over-the-top" graphic violence (Zilber). Despite of that, the movie is not depressing to watch, the irony is never far and the presence of comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen, who plays the Italian barber, does make the film even more comic. As Burton himself puts it "I tried to make it happily depressing as opposed to just depressing" (Mardikar). I do believe he has succeeded.

Mixing Genres

Genre categorization can be a difficult task. The musical genre has become more complex due to its evolutionary progression. The integration of themes such as racial prejudice, marital disharmony, infidelity and capitalist corruption are widely found in older film musicals as in the more recent ones. The first musical films were, however, in many ways more naïve and did not mirror life as it is in reality; it was a world of romance, where love and happiness were dominant (Gordon 2). Until the 1960s or in the period which is often referred to as classical Hollywood, films were to a greater extent generic production, while modern American cinema has either avoided genres or recombined them "willy-nilly" (Altman, *Film/Genre* 123). Research has undoubtedly demonstrated that the most important factors in attracting people to a specific film are the

film's plot or story and its genre (Austin 74). That fact puts pressure on producers to make a films that combine different genres in the hope of attracting wide range of audience to the cinema and it makes them spend much of their time listening to writers trying to identify their scripts with as many genres as possible (Altman, *Film/Genre* 129). Altman says that a film does not need to follow a genre's logic throughout in order to be recognized as belonging to that genre and distinct genres may be combined with only minimal interference. Some features are even common to multiple genres (131). All of my chosen musicals are in some ways influenced by other genres. *My Fair Lady* and *Pal Joey* are for example often categorized as comedy musicals and *Grease* and *Mamma Mia* as musical romances. These four musicals, despite of influences from other genres, do fit relatively smoothly into Altman's subgenre division. *Sweeney Todd*, which is often referred to as a horror musical, does however not fit into any of Altman's subcategories for musicals although it is beyond dispute a musical. The horror genre has developed and changed through the years and since the end of the 1950s, a popular theme has been the evilness of society itself where monstrous forces are at work which will alienate man from his better nature (Woods 219). In the 1970s and 1980s the genre became particularly open to modification, from parody like in films such as *Young Frankenstein* and *Love at First Bite* to a pervasive blend of comedy and horror as in *An American Werewolf in London* and *Survivors*, or fantasy and horror like in *Gremlins* (218). In *Sweeney Todd* the main character changes and becomes evil because of the injustice done to him by society, or rather figures who rule within the legal system of the society. Like stated earlier, even though *Sweeney Todd* displays much of graphic violence and can be categorized as a *Grand Guignol*, the humorous side of things is however always present. Yet another genre that *Sweeney Todd* may belong to is the black humour genre

sometimes called black comedy, a genre of comic irreverence which carelessly attacks what are normally society's sacred and serious matters, often that of death (Gehring 167).

Like stated above the film *Sweeney Todd* is based on Sondheim's musical of 1979 by the same name. Sondheim is famous for making musicals that upset or challenge. He explores new territory every time he writes a musical, which does not always lead to financial success (Gordon 5). His works are unique and truly aesthetic because he "develops a new lyric, musical, and theatrical language for each work" (8). His work as composer and lyricist include many renowned musicals. Tim Burton, the director of *Sweeney Todd* is another creative genius who has directed numerous films. He seems to be obsessed with the ghastly and the supernatural which is displayed clearly in his films, which often portray a dark and dreary world, ghosts, supernatural creatures or anything strange and unusual (Poland 2). *Sweeney Todd*, in many ways, is a unique and bizarre work in the way it combines comic, tragic and even bloodthirsty elements. These elements are woven together, each with its own distinct dramatic features whilst reinforcing other, normally completely unrelated and contradictory elements (Gordon 220). Sweeney Todd is a vengeful and eventually tragic character who has suffered devastating events which precipitate his murderous rampage. His partner in crime, the totally amoral Mrs. Lovett, gaily adds to the outrageousness of the setting by exploiting Sweeney Todd's excesses through the addition of cannibalism to their list of hideous crimes. The musical manages to portray revenge, murder, dismemberment and cannibalism with a sense of comedy, even extending to the burlesque, which leaves the audience with a sense of deep unease and yet surprisingly entertained at the same time.

But what does the fact that *Sweeney Todd* is a successful musical that in no way fits into the musical subgenre model say us about Altman's theory? In his book *Film/Genre*, Altman acknowledges that genres cannot be treated as watertight and unproblematic

categories (127). He also says that the audience should beware of that the semantics of the subgenres change and develop through the years as “the map can never be completed, because it is a record not of the past, but a living geography, of an ongoing progress” (70). *Sweeney Todd* is a unique and exceptionally good piece of creative work. By going against all previous convention, Sondheim and Burton may have achieved to create semantics for a new musical subgenre.

Conclusion

After testing Altman’s methodology on my chosen films it is clear that his ideas and methods are extremely well thought out. His model of categorization is perhaps over simplified but I think that to establish a particular genre, certain boundaries must be set, even if it means that limited number of exotic musicals will not adhere to that genre or its subgenres. I was a little surprised to see how many features in four out of the five film musicals fitted exactly into Altman’s model. Two of my chosen films belong unquestionably to a certain subgenre: *My Fair Lady* is a fairy tale musical which also adopts a few features from the show musical. *Grease* is almost a “pure” folk musical because it contains very few elements of the other subgenres. *Mamma Mia* is also a folk musical. *Pal Joey* adopts almost equal features from the fairy tale and show musical subgenres. *Pal Joey* is, however, more of a show musical because the semantic elements are in many ways representative of the subgenre and the resolution to the love plot is more in line with the show tradition. *Sweeney Todd* does not adhere to Altman’s subgenres. Gloomy backstreets, with a gothic undertone, a working class protagonists and lot of graphic violence are not the semantics of Altman’s subgenres. It is a new kind of musical. Maybe it is just a unique masterpiece or perhaps it has altered the formula for semantics in the American film musical. Altman has developed an excellent framework

to classify the American film musical genre, but as in literature and other art forms, genres change and new genres and subgenres evolve. In the years since 1987, when Altman's book, *The American Film Musical*, was published, new ideas and methods have developed. Although Altman's model provides an ideal tool for analysing film musicals, his original framework will need to undergo some extension and updating, in order to remain a comprehensive and instructive guide.

Works Cited

Allen, Graham. *Roland Barthes*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Altman, Rick. *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University press, 1987. Print.

---. *Film/Genre*. British Film Institute 1999. Print.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: University Press, 2002. Print.

Dirks, Tim. "Horror Films." *Filmsite org*. 2010. Amc Network Site. Web. 15 Apr. 2010.

Gehring, Wes D. "Black Humour." *Handbook of American Film Genres*. Ed. Wes D. Gehring. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988: 167-186. Print.

Gordon, Lesley. *Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990. Print.

Glazer, Mark. "Structuralism." *The University of Texas- Pan American*. 1994. Web. 22 Apr. 2010.

Grease. Dir. Randal Kleiser. Perf. John Travolta, Olivia Newton-John, Stockard Channing and Jeff Conaway. Paramount Pictures, 1978. DVD.

Mamma Mia. Dir. Phyllida Lloyd. Perf. Meryl Streep, Amanda Seyfried, Colin Firth and Pierce Brosnan. Universal Studios, 2008. DVD.

Mardikar, Natasha. "A Gothic Double Act." *BBC News*. 17 Jan. 2008. Web. 5 May 2010.

My Fair Lady. Dir. George Cukor. Perf. Audrey Hepburn, Rex Harrison, Stanley Holloway and Wilfrid Hyde-White. Warner Brothers, 1964. DVD.

Onega, Susana, and José Angel García Landa. *Narratology: An Introduction*. London: Longman, 1996. Print.

Pal Joey. Dir. George Sidney. Perf. Frank Sinatra, Rita Hayworth and Kim Novak. Columbia Pictures, 1957. DVD.

Poland, Ryan. "Tim Burton: Postmodern Fantasy Meets Modern Ingenuity." *AssociatedContent - Movies*. 1 August 2008. Web. 1 May 2010.

Regal, Martin Steven. Teacher Presentation on the Hollywood Musical *Grease*. University of Iceland, Reykjavik. Apr. 2009.

Sondheim, Stephen. Interview. "Musical Mayhem: Sondheims's Sweeney Todd." *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber on Fleet Street*. Disc 2 Bonus Material. Warner Brothers, 2007. DVD.

Stam, Robert, Robert Bougoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis. *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and beyond*. New York: Routledge 1992. Print.

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street. Dir. Tim Burton. Perf. Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, Alan Rickman and Sacha Baron Cohen. Warner Brothers, 2007. DVD.

Van Der Lek, Robert. *Diegetic Music in Opera and Film: A Similarity Between Two Genres of Drama Analysed in Works by Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. Amsterdam: Rodopi 1991. Print.

Voss, Karen. "Session 3: Classical Film Genres" *Fathom Knowledge Network: The American Film Institute*. Web. Aug. 2001

Woods, Gerald C. "Horror Film." *Handbook of American Film Genres*. Ed. Wes D.Gehring. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988: 211-227. Print.

Zilber, Daniel "What is Grand Guignol?" *GrandGuignol.com*. 2006. Thrillpeddlers. Web. 21 Apr. 2010.

