"Tell me about it, Stud":

Queering the Dancing Male Body in Musical and Dance Films of the 1970s and 1980s

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 24 January 2020

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"But, by God, there'll be dancing."
Rupert Everett in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (Hogan, 1997)

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ABSTRACT

Heterosexuality is coded on-screen in many musical films from the last century as a "celebratory ideal." [1] This thesis explores the queer possibilities of the so-called heterosexual male in three films spanning a decade from 1977 with Badham's *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978), to 1987's *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino).

Each of the films I have examined foreground heterosexual romance. However, by looking at the male body in these films I have argued for the ways in which the male, dancing body works against these films' assertion of a narrative heterosexuality. I have shown how these films can be read as queer by the way they highlight the performativity of the male body, and through their camp aestheticism which complicates normative ideas about desire, sexuality and gender.

I interrogate claims emerging from work in musical genre theory, which describes the musical as "the most heterosexist of all the Hollywood filmic forms."[2] By examining existing theory on the role of the camp sensibility within musical film I argue that there are ways that the musical films analysed dismiss their narrative heteronormativity and instead mark themselves as queer. The films do this by aligning the performativity of dance with the queer discourse that uses as its cornerstone the notion of the performativity of gender and sexuality.

I have argued that these films portray an embattled masculinity coming to the fore within society (and cinema) in the 1970s, into the 1980s. The chapters in this thesis are organised according to the analyses' of the three films. The chapters explore themes of camp aesthetics by understanding camp's tendency to disrupt the clear disparities between 'being and seeming'.

[1] Brett Farmer, Chapter 6: Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical in Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p.77
[2] Ibid.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> "We may not go around talking to each other in song, but we often have a song in mind that expresses a mood, an unconscious thought, a dream. The musical takes the song from the back of the mind, dresses it in a minimum of convention and a maximum of glamour and projects it on the big screen. If it is done with taste and imagination, the audience will recognize their own dreams, their own moods reflected and magnified in this huge, enchanting mirror of life."
>
> John Kobal in *Gotta Sing Gotta Dance* (1970)

This project emerges from my own attempt to understand the evolving role that musical films have played in interrogating my own thoughts on the construction of gender. To use John Kobal's words, this thesis aims to examine how a set of musical films from the late 1970s and 1980s projects a "song from the back of the mind", glamorising, exaggerating and performing "conventional" heterosexual gender cultures to the point at which their naturalness itself is broken open.

My work proceeds from close textual analysis of three musical films spanning a decade from 1977's *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham) and 1978's *Grease* (Kleiser), into the 1980s with *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino, 1987). What this time span offers is an overlapping glimpse of an era that featured significant social change, not least in areas of sexuality and gender. Further, I believe the time aspect is crucial in revealing contestations on the emergence of queer theory in the mainstream film gamut (1970s -), as well as providing a backdrop for embattled masculinities to be seen on-screen. But to contextualise my interest in using musical films to further interrogate instances of normative heterosexuality and performances of gender, we need to look at the history of musical film.

It has been said that mainstream Hollywood films are primarily produced by and for cultures that align themselves with heterosexuality as the norm, and the

narrative content said films provide are almost always universally heterosexual.[3] Brett Farmer offers a few infamous Hollywood *musical* titles to make this point evident: *Twenty Million Sweethearts* (Enright, 1934), *For Me and My Gal* (Berkeley, 1942), *Royal Wedding* (Donen, 1951), *The Farmer Takes a Wife* (Fleming, 1953), and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Donen, 1954).[4] In short, "the musical as genre is predicted on an assumption of heterosexuality as celebratory ideal."[5]

Indeed, some film scholars have suggested that the musical may be the most heterosexist of all the Hollywood filmic forms.[6] "Patricia Mellencamp argues that the musical plays out and celebrates "the ritual of re-creation/procreation of the privileged heterosexual couple."[7] By extension, one could argue that these and the musicals of the 1970s and 1980s that I refer to as my source material, celebrate the privileged, *white*, heterosexual couple. Farmer draws on the words of Altman: "the Hollywood musical serves an important ideological function by "fashion[ing] a myth out of the American courtship ritual."[8] "The American film musical seems to suggest that the natural state of the adult human being is in the arms of an adult human being of the opposite sex."[9] Although this may seem to be the obvious *modus operandi* of the film musical, in this thesis I explore how the overtly heterosexual relationships in musicals/'dansicals' of the 1970s and 1980s offer rich opportunities for queer readings based on the performativity of the male body and the camp aesthetics of these texts.

In this dissertation I wish to look critically at the musical film texts at hand, and uncover their camp contexts. I will be asking in what ways the body – more specifically, the male body – has been used to explore camp in the sampled musical film texts. By focusing on the arenas of body politics, camp and the musical as

[3] Brett Farmer, 2004, Chapter 6: Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical in Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group) p.77
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Rick Altman, quoted in Brett Farmer, Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical. Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p.78

genre, I am also focusing on answering the question of how, at its core, camp is used to interrogate gender.

By analysing the three main filmic texts of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Dirty Dancing* (1986), and *Grease* (1978), respectively, I intend to focus on the central argument of how the overtly heterosexual plots of these films still have the potential for a queer reading based on the performativity of the male body and the camp aesthetics of the films. By using the heterosexual male body as a point of departure in this study, I intend to further analyse the juxtaposition between the perceived queer act of dance and the overwhelmingly heterosexual relationships the same male bodies are engaged in.

Therefore, this project's main research question is: How is camp used to interrogate gender norms in the musical films of the late 1970s and 1980s? Four key points that can be understood as avenues for answering the central research question are as follows: Firstly, why is there such fertile ground for reading the musical films of this time period queerly? In response to this question I contextualise the films in terms of the period of their production and look closely at the emergence of a new mode of masculinity that appears to come to the fore during this time period.

This leads me onto my second question that draws on Laura Mulvey's theories of spectacle and the "male gaze."[10] I wish to interrogate how the films discussed in this project largely overturn the tendency for the female star to be the centre of film spectacle in favour of a male body as erotic object.

Thirdly, in addition to a new masculinity becoming prevalent in the 1970s, this thesis uses the musical as film genre to question previously unquestioned norms. An example of this is particularly evident in the chapter on *Grease*, where the central question asks: If heterosexuality is so normal, why is there such a need to perform it so excessively?

[10] Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3 (1975) p.9

Lastly, there is a commonality shared by the three films discussed at length in this dissertation that aids to contextualise the importance of the third question: How has the labour of dance been utilised to further complicate notions of traditional masculinity? For this, I will turn to theory on dance itself to make sense of the relationship between males and the dancing activity. In this regard there is a constant duality at play within musicals. As mentioned briefly above, by claiming in their narrative outputs the insistence of heterosexuality these films mark themselves as being and fitting inside the mainstream. However with the performativity of the bodies as well as the aesthetics of the films, these musicals mark themselves as 'other'.

To reiterate, this dissertation looks to discuss at further length, five research questions that have shaped this project as a whole. Firstly, how has camp been used to interrogate gender norms in musical films of the late 1970s and 1980s? Second, why is there such fertile ground for reading the musical films of this time period queerly in the first place? Third, how do these films interrogate and subvert Mulvey's theory of spectacle and the "male gaze"; fourth, if heterosexuality is indeed so 'normal', why is there such a need to perform it so excessively within the musical film genre? And lastly: How has the labour of dance been utilised to further complicate notions of traditional masculinity? Central to all of these questions is the concept of camp, male bodies, and dance. Further, there is a constant harking back to the film's contextual basis (i.e. 1970s/1980s) which will help bolster the responses to these core research questions.

Pamela Robertson offers an example of the affinity the musical genre, camp, and women share in her book when she cites "the pleasure women take in artefacts like musicals."[11] In addition, as a performance art, and a key area of analysis in this thesis, dance according to Dempster (1988) has been closely associated with the female body for centuries.[12] A "predominantly feminine realm in terms of

[11] Pamela Roberston, 1996. Introduction. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (London: Duke University Press) p.7
[12] Michael Gard, 2006. Chapter One: A Story. *Men Who Dance* (New York: Lang) p.5

audiences, dancers, and teachers"[13] dance "during approximately the last 150 years has not been considered an appropriate activity for white men to engage in."[14]

However, things connected to the feminine in the annals of history have largely been regarded as something that can be dismissed, or, at the very least, not considered to hold too high a level of significance. It is in this regard that Simone de Beauvoir titled her 1949 existentialist book about the treatment of women in history "*The Second Sex*". But I believe it is for this very reason that the research in this project holds *its* importance. By marking femininity as something one is able to dismiss is wholly problematic. Therefore, as a site of femininity and/or, potential dismissal, the musicals in this dissertation demand to be investigated, analysed, and scored for their significance.

It is important to explain the reasoning behind choosing the sampled texts. I cite three main reasons, namely: the time period, the male stars/actors who play working class characters in the films and the way in which all films discussed foreground the act of dance.

Time Period

The Hollywood films of the 1970s and 1980s provide a fertile site to explore my interest in the performativity of the male body. As a moment when popular consciousness is shifting, the 1970s is an interesting era for cinema, especially the way in which it grapples with the male body. The term 'New Hollywood' gained widespread use initially to describe a wave of films and filmmakers that came to critical attention from the mid-to-late 1960s to the mid-to-late 1970s, a phenomenon also labelled as the 'Hollywood Renaissance'. Whether 'New Hollywood' refers only to stylistic changes in filmmaking or a complete overhaul of the traditional studio system of Hollywood's heyday, the 1970s has been

[13] Ramsey Burt, 2007. 1: The Trouble with the Male Dancer. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis) p.11
[14] Ramsey Burt, 2007. Introduction. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis) p.1

earmarked as a time fraught with change and transformation within cinema. In addition, within the 1970s, "multiple liberation struggles, including Civil Rights, Feminism, and sexual politics, converged with core economic shifts that transformed the US from an industrial based to a consumerist model."[15] As Harriet Stilley explains, "for hegemonic masculinity, this is a transferal from 'masculine' industrial labour and the physically expressive body to 'feminine' consumerism."[16] This sentiment is especially helpful in attempting to understand the potentially feminised, or queer ways the male bodies are constructed in these films. It is precisely this kind of cultural and societal subversion that piqued my interest in musical films from the 1970s and 1980s. The crises and contestations around masculinity in the period discussed in this thesis (1977–1987), provides a useful site for exploring, interrogating, and analysing something that is often implicitly *un*questioned: heterosexual masculinity.

There are evident differences between musicals from the 1970s and 1980s to those dated earlier in the 20th Century. The musicals from the 1970s and 1980s appear to offer more *varied* forms of masculine performance, whilst the musicals of yesteryear also featured the male body, but more as a means to convey a certain level of prowess and perhaps, by extension, a level of unquestioned supremacy. For the latter, images of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly are conjured up, flitting from one side of the silver screen to the next. As Carrie Rickey writes:

> … Fred Astaire defies gravity; Gene Kelly is earthbound. Astaire is spirit; Kelly flesh. Astaire is the embodiment of grace, Kelly of athleticism. For Astaire, dance is the vertical expression of horizontal feelings for another; for Kelly, it is the expression of self.[17]

Whilst the above denotes a sense of the ethereal and magical operation of the musicals of yore, the musicals discussed in this dissertation do not fit comfortably in either Astaire's "thesis" nor Kelly's "antithesis."[18] The masculinities discussed in *this* thesis work to display a sense of viscerality instead of ethereality. However, due to

[15] Harriet Stilley, From the Delivered to the Dispatched: Masculinity in Modern American Fiction (1969-1977) (Doctoral Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017) p.vii
[16] Ibid.
[17] Carrie Rickey, The Great Debate: Fred Astaire v. Gene Kelly (The Philadelphia Inquirer) *Iinquirer.com* (2009)
[18] Ibid.

the performative nature of dance and the musical film genre, both musicals of Astaire and Kelly fame and those discussed in this thesis foreground the body as spectacle. The older musicals display skill and prowess delineating the body as an immaterial and transcendent subject. Conversely, in the musical films of the 1970s and 1980s, the male body is shown to be athletic, muscled and on display *as a body* – portraying itself as erotic spectacle through the use of its intense viscerality.

Male Stardom

In studies of manhood prior to 1700, the male protagonist is almost consistently portrayed as the patriarch of the household.[19] The watchword here was honour: men's honour accrued from both their own and their woman's behaviour.[20] In her article for the *Journal of British Studies*, Karen Harvey notes Elizabeth Foyster's *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex, and Marriage* (1999) as a key contribution to the field of masculinity studies. The book notes how 'power' plays an important role in the formation of a man's identity, particularly power over females.[21] Further, Harvey explains how this historical masculine 'power' is also very clearly about sex:

> … Household order required a man to be in control of his dependents, but before a man could govern he had to have control of himself. An important expression of this was sexual probity: "Without the core of a worthy sexual reputation, all other contributing facets to male reputation could be meaningless" (Foyster, 1999) Yet men's sexual control extended beyond themselves. Foyster argues that "in the seventeenth century the key to male power in the household was thought to be sexual control of women as well as the self" (Foyster, 1999).

However, Harvey continues: "as men faced a series of anxieties—about women's sexuality, about men's inability to fulfill patriarchal models of the house-hold—a revised and reinvigorated patriarchy developed, which had at its core new ideas about sexual difference."[22]

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[19] Karen Harvey, The History of Masculinity, circa 1650–1800. *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April 2005) pg. 298

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid. (pg. 299)

According to Bryce Traister: to some degree, cultural "masculinity studies" has become a code term for "heterosexual masculinity studies."[23] Although this thesis pays particular attention to the emergence of the queer discourse in 1970s and 1908s Hollywood musical films, it is paramount to establish that these films still definitively slot inside of a heteronormative film economy. Thus, Traister's statement above posits much the same notion as this thesis, albeit making no claims toward the broadening of scope to include a potentially queer, or, homosexual angle.

As Traister states: "in a prescient 1979 article, Peter Schwenger began elaborating a paradigm of writing he called at the time "the masculine mode," a practice of writers "who, rather than neutralize, contradict, or simply ignore their male sexuality, take it as their explicit subject."" The same can be said for the three films discussed in this dissertation – more than simply negate traditional forms of heterosexual masculinity, the films opt to rather exaggerate their masculine characters to the point of near parody, or excess. What the latter suggests is a leaning toward a camp reading.

This dissertation considers the study of masculinity much the way Traister describes it in his 2000 *American Quarterly* article. Traister states that 'heteromasculinity' (heterosexual masculinity)…

> has come to operate within a two-pronged "crisis theory" of American masculinity: one is rooted in a new historiography of American masculinity that locates instability at the base of all masculine identities constructed within American cultural matrices; the second is derived from Judith Butler's influential theoretical account of gender as always performative and contingent.

Uncovering the ways in which American masculinity is unstable and shifting – most notably during the time period between 1977 and 1987 – forms a

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[23] Bryce Traister, Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies. *American Quarterly*, Jun., 2000, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Jun., 2000) pg. 275

cornerstone of this project's research. Moreover, a deep interrogation of Butler's theory with regards to the performativity of gender will be undertaken at multiple points throughout this dissertation.

What these films also offer is a contemporary take on the male musical star with the figures of John Travolta and Patrick Swayze emerging as the 1970s and 1980s answer to Astaire and Kelly. In addition, Travolta and Swayze share similar identity traits in all three films. Travolta and Swayze play working class, white male dancers. These film texts allow me to consider how questions of class are also central to the conversation at hand with regards to an emergent new masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s. Part of this new masculinity seen in the films recognises that there is a constant tension between the labouring dancing male body, and the potential feminisation of dance itself. The inclusion of the working class male physique attaches these films to a sense of reality rather than portray a (literal) alien world like in Jim Sharman's 1975 *Rocky Horror Picture Show* for example. *Rocky Horror Picture Show* features a protagonist in the form of Dr. Frank-N-Furter who possesses a hedonism and elitist attitude not evident to such an extent as the male characters in any of the films discussed in this dissertation. Whilst Tony Manero (*Saturday Night Fever*) and Danny Zuko (*Grease*) do not use dance as a form of labour/job like Johnny Castle (*Dirty Dancing*) does, their narrative worlds do still feature the presence of labour and class tensions as an everyday reality. For context: Danny works, sings, dances, and plays in a school workshop building cars. Tony works a dead-end job at a local Brooklyn hardware store, but labours for hours over choreography to win a dance competition.

The inclusion of the working class male identity with a focus on portraying realistic and visceral displays of masculinity is part of my reasoning for choosing these films in this dissertation. There are admittedly more transgressive and queer musical options from the same time period like, as mentioned, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975), or *Hairspray* (Waters, 1988) that, in my opinion, feature more overt examples of subversive masculinities. But by choosing the films as I have for this dissertation with their casting of heterosexual male actors revered in mainstream Hollywood (Travolta and Swayze), with the films'

foregrounding of heterosexual, working class male identities, the argument for these males' potential queerness remains all the more fascinating.

While labour and a working class identity is depicted in the male bodies discussed in this thesis, the action said bodies perform in is not the only defining quality of the men. By looking closely at the male *performative* bodies in the three films it becomes evident that the male bodies are also there to connote a to-be-looked-at-ness. These men are then both like the 1970s/1980s answer to Astaire and Kelly, but also vastly different to them. As for Travolta, Tricia Romano has the following to say about the lasting sexual appeal of Travolta's persona: "Several hundred people arrive … at the grounds of Hollywood Forever Cemetery for a screening of *Saturday Night Fever*, to ooh and ahh over his [Travolta's] unbelievably hot dancing solos and, of course, the blow-drying scene, oh, that blow-drying scene."[24]

Just as much as the male bodies in these films are associated with sex/sexuality, there is another commonality the three films share, namely, their narrative inclusion of sexual initiation. All three films trace the story of protagonists in their teens ranging from 17 to 19 years old. In this regard, sexuality is used often as a signifier of counterculture, as another means to subvert certain modes of acceptance within the societies the characters find themselves in. As McDonagh writes, the 1960s mantra of 'question authority' was firmly ingrained in 1970s films.[25] The perceived stability of sexuality became just one of the many facets that began to be deemed questionable, or, at the very least, questioned, in the 1970s.

Dance

The reason I have chosen the films that I have in this dissertation is twofold. On one hand, the films discussed all feature music as a core factor, but they also all foreground dance in a notable way. By using dance as a central factor I believe one can probe the areas of gender, sexuality and the body very effectively as dance is

[24] Tricia Romano, Grease: Making John Travolta a Sex Symbol Again. *Thedailybeast.com* (2014)
[25] Maitland McDonagh, The Exploitation Generation, Or: How Marginal Movies Came in from the Cold in Horwath, King and Elsaesser (eds), *The Last Great American Picture Show* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004) p.108

ultimately both a performative endeavour as well as an activity that focuses solely on the body.

Dirty Dancing and *Fever* foreground dance within their diegesis while *Grease* is a more traditional musical as it features an array of purposeful dance choreography built directly into the filmic tapestry of the musical. Differing slightly is *Dirty Dancing* and *Fever* that feature dance sequences but not as a means to break with "reality", but more as a continuation of built-in narrative developments. These types of dance sequences are narratively justified and do not require the same suspension of disbelief necessary to what a fully choreographed musical number would need (as in *Grease* for example). Of course the other obvious difference between *Dirty Dancing* and *Fever* to *Grease* is the latter's inclusion of singing. It is with this slight differentiation in mind that I often tend to use the terms 'musical' and 'dansical' in this thesis interchangeably. What the term 'dansical' facilitates is a film that foregrounds dance as a primary thematic and narrative tool. Whilst differing slightly is the 'musical' in a traditional sense that will "commonly use diegetic audiences" to dance *and* sing around the main protagonist(s), showing off how brilliant they are in performing their song and dance.[26] Dance is both a narrative feature and a site of spectacle in the films I discuss in this dissertation, therefore whether the films are technically a dansical (*Dirty Dancing* and *Fever*) or a musical (*Grease*), I group them all under the same banner as what I am really interested in are the instances of dance performance that are used to interrogate sexuality and gender norms. The core inclusion of dance is something all three of these films foreground.

I argue that the texts discussed make reference to the golden age of musicals to package film for viewers in the 1970s and 1980s. But, by doing so, they need to expand their notions of hegemony and respond appropriately to their contexts and surroundings at the time of their production. As Steve Neale writes, there was a seismic shift in musicals made in the 1970s, subsequently marking out a desire

[26] Susan Hayward, D: Diegesis. *Cinema Studies: The key concepts.* (London: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000) p.85

to "update the inherently 'escapist' conventions of the musical and render them [musicals] more pertinent to contemporary society."[27]

The political context of the United States at the time of the release of *Fever* and *Grease* in the 1970s, is also important to note. Shortly post-Vietnam, within a conservative Republican administration, films from the latter part of the 1970s in general seemed to reflect heroes like those heroes of Vietnam, but as markedly "manipulated, exploited, and left paralysed by the realisation of their powerlessness in the face of a corrupt system."[28] Keathley explains further that, "the overwhelming feelings of disaffection, alienation, and demoralisation that permeate these films are, in a sense, a displaced repetition of the intense trauma suffered by the Vietnam generation."[29] For men particularly at this time, "the post-war American epoch connoted one of expeditious adjustment for white, middle-class men."[30]

A tension between a conservative government (in the 1970s) and all the social strides that had been made in the 1960s – Civil Rights, Women's Liberation Movement, *et al.* – provided the backdrop for these films to be made. For example, *Fever* and *Grease* can be viewed as counterpoint to the then-current zeitgeist – turning against hegemonic and conservative views of sexuality and gender toward a new paradigm of modern masculinity, post-Vietnam. On the subject of *Grease*, Barbara Jane Brickman writes:

> … *Grease* and its 'teenagers' stand at a kind of liminal moment in the United States, fundamentally shaped by the crisis period of the early 1970s and influenced by the social movements and identity politics of the late-1960s onward and yet also anticipating, in part, the imminent Reagan-era backlash against liberal values.[31]

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[27] Steve Neale, Introduction. *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood.* (London: British Film Institute, 2002) p.3
[28] Christian Keathley, Trapped in the Affection Image: Hollywood's Post-traumatic Cycle (1970–1976) in Horwath, King and Elsaesser (eds), *The Last Great American Picture Show* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004) p.296
[29] Ibid.
[30] Harriet Stilley, From the Delivered to the Dispatched: Masculinity in Modern American Fiction (1969-1977) (Doctoral Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017) p.vii
[31] Barbara Jane Brickman, Introduction, *Grease: Gender, Nostalgia and Youth Consumption in the Blockbuster Era* (Abingdon: Routledge Focus, 2017) p.8

I agree with Brickman's sentiment that the teenagers in *Grease* – but also all of the youths in the films discussed – are portrayed to varying degrees as defiant youths. Brickman describes the teenagers in *Grease* as youths "who queerly subvert and deconstruct the dominant values and privileged [male] figures of the postwar conformist culture."[32] I concur with Brickman's statement when she claims that although *Grease* for example may bring us back to the end of the 1950s, the politics of the 1970s unquestionably shapes both its main characters and their expressed desires in the film.[33]

To return to what I have briefly touched upon: at the time of these films' production, the landscape of traditional Hollywood was shifting. Due surely in part because, as mentioned above, the 1960s saw the USA achieve many social strides toward a more liberal end. In the 1970s though, under a conservative administration, many films of the time became rebellions against a political conservatism. According to Brickman, Hollywood was in the early 1970s:

> … shook to its foundations by the Supreme Court-mandated dismantling of the studio system, by foreign and domestic competition, the most damaging of which came in the form of a more popular upstart medium [television], by an outmoded and tragically unhip Production Code, and by business failures that led to corporate buyouts and even shuttering of doors.[34]

However, as the Production Code "breathed its last gasp"[35] in 1968, its dissolution "promised a wide open future in which no topic was taboo."[36] It is within this social and industrial context that the films discussed came to fruition.

Another point of rupture for Hollywood's fight to remain relevant in the midst of rapidly changing societal shifts, was the vacuum left by Hollywood that gave rise to the film brat generation – a generation of filmmakers in the late 1960s/early 1970s who hadn't gotten their start in Hollywood, but rather from places on the

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Maitland McDonagh, The Exploitation Generation, Or: How Marginal Movies Came in from the Cold in Horwath, King and Elsaesser (eds), *The Last Great American Picture Show* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004) p.107
[36] Ibid.

fringes of Hollywood: "in television, film school and exploitation movies." [37] Filmmakers like George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Roman Polanski, David Lynch and Francis Ford Coppola constituted this generation of new wave American filmmakers that were pushing the boundaries of filmmaking at the time. According to McDonagh, these filmmakers "rejected the conventional ideals embraced and disseminated by Hollywood's venerable dream factory and produced a body of complex, ambitious movies characterized by ambiguous endings, cynical morals and puzzling, contradictory characters whose fortunes foundered on the world's casual cruelty."[38]

In many ways, McDonagh's sentiment above is reminiscent of Badham's *Saturday Night Fever.* As a film with "cynical morals" and "puzzling, contradictory characters," [39] *Fever* was also a quintessential 1970s film because of John Badham's own career to date. As McDonagh has listed the places emerging filmmakers in the 1970s received their career starts, Badham himself got his start directing television series in the early 1970s. Similarly, Randal Kleiser, the director of *Grease* made his name directing television movies and series in the early 1970s. Emile Ardolino, director of *Dirty Dancing*, got his start by profiling dancers and choreographers for the American public broadcaster, PBS. All three directors had true "New Hollywood" statuses – rising up through the ranks having gotten their starts in television.

Included in the list of radically changing attitudes starting in the 1970s was the gradual acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual culture into the (somewhat) mainstream. As a watershed year for the latter, 1969 saw the infamous Stonewall riots: a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the gay community against a police raid that began in the early hours of June 28, 1969.[40] At a time when women's liberation was making headlines, there was scope for an emerging discussion on men's liberation, too. For the male figure, post-Vietnam, Anna Claydon states how these "are men coming to terms

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, Stonewall riots. (Encyclopedia Britannica) *Britannica.com* (2019)

with the concept that their place in society is uncertain [especially if they do not conform to social expectations of 'the masculine' and perform another identity]."[41] Imagery in films of the time began to show "that being a man did not have to mean being part of the establishment or being part of patriarchy, or [even] believing in masculinism." [42] Although one of the films I analyse in this dissertation was produced in the 1980s, it was these foundations of subversive masculinity laid in the 1970s that gave way for *Dirty Dancing* to be made in the 1980s in the same vein as its counterparts from the 1970s.

Contrasting the latter part of the 1970s where Sally Kohn marks sex, drugs and rock and roll as defining features of the decade (most notably, "the sex part"[43]), are the Reagan 1980s. I discuss *Dirty Dancing* in this thesis and along with it its place in history. The United States in the year of the film's production (1987) was a prosperous one: known in hindsight as the Reagan years.[44] According to Roger Rosenblatt, the US was "famished for cheer" before they elected Reagan into office in 1981. [45] As a president coming into the "White House during a troubled period in US history,"[46] a combination of his conservatism and general likeability made him able to mark amongst his chief accomplishments, according to Richard Nixon, a restoration of America's spiritual strength. As a president that did indeed have connections to Hollywood, Reagan used Hollywood as a means to his end during his time in the White House. As a popular actor in his day, Reagan used Hollywood and the film industry machine in conjunction with his good old-fashioned ideals and morale boosting to propel America back into the spotlight as world leader.[47] In many ways, Reagan's "speeches, negotiations, and policies were often shaped by Hollywood."[48]

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[41] Anna Claydon, *Masculinity and Deviance in British Cinema of the 1970s: Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2010) p.7
[42] Ibid. (p.9)
[43] Sally Kohn, The Sex Freak-Out of the 1970s. *CNN.com* (2015)
[44] Ronald Reagan was the 40th president of the United States of America: in office from 1981 to 1989.
[45] Susan Jeffords, Chapter 1: Life as a Man in the Reagan Revolution. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) p.1
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid. (p.3–4)
[48] Ibid. (p.4)

These thoughts are interesting to consider when viewing Swayze's portrayal of masculinity in *Dirty Dancing.* While Swayze illustrates strength by way of his worked physique, the inclusion of dance into his persona as well as the film's camp aesthetics and the performativity of masculinity all create scope for a queer subtext that really underpins the 1980s machismo he portrays. As I discuss in my chapter on *Dirty Dancing* – Swayze's labouring and sexually performative body becomes a fascinating site for working through tensions around gender and power during this period in history.

DEFINITIONS

This thesis arose from an interest in musical film, particularly from the 1970s and 1980s. It developed from ideas of how although these films are indeed heterosexual, there is still the possibility of a queer reading based on the performativity of the male body through the medium of dance. Furthermore, these films could be deemed queer because of the inclusion of the camp aesthetics utilised within them. But how is 'queer' defined, what really is camp, and how will I use these terms to assemble my argument? This section will define these key terms as they will be used in this thesis.

Queer

"The very word queer invites an impassioned, even an angry resistance to normalisation,"[49] writes Ellis Hanson. Then how to describe it? Simply, queerness understands that we perform gender and sexuality, according to normative scripts that we for the most part unconsciously internalise in the course of our socialisation and acculturation.[50] It is through the repeated performance of these roles defined by scripts that produce a semblance of substantial gender and sexual

[49] Ellis Hanson, Introduction. *Out Takes* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999) p.4
[50] Bob Nowlan, Chapter One. Queer Theory, Queer Cinema in Juett and Jones (eds), *Coming Out to the Mainstream* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010) p.7

identities. Therefore, queerness is "a reworking of history with social constructivism very much in mind."[51]

Queer theory contends this performativity of gender and sexuality is a continuous process and is in fact highly unnatural (i.e. very much a product of what our specific culture dictates). [52] In addition, queer theory pronounces that this 'performance' of gender and sexuality is "(ultimately) unstable - there are always cracks, fissures, gaps, and holes in every attempt to naturalise performance – i.e. make it seem like gender and sexual identities simply emanate from biological nature."[53] In essence, queer theorists have argued that "we perform gender and sexuality, and do not 'express' what is innate or essential to our 'natures'."[54]

I am using the term 'queer' in this thesis to mark a flexible space that comprehends that gender and sexuality are in fact performative. I consider queerness able to analyse but also to resist, dismantle, or circumnavigate hegemonic systems of sexual oppression and normalisation.[55]

Because queer theory offers rigorous questioning of the very concepts of correctness, identity, stereotyping, visibility, and authenticity,[56] it provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for my argument that although the films discussed in this dissertation are overtly heterosexual, they have a significant queer subtext. These films are also sites of visual pleasure and foreground identity formation. Therefore, bringing queer theory to these films allows a more expansive way of examining the pleasures of these texts beyond readable within a heteronormative discourse. As Hanson writes, queer theory exists as well to multiply our pleasures and our personalities,[57] existing as a means "to interrogate more radically the critical presumptions we claim as our own."[58]

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[51] Ruby Rich, "A Queer Sensation". *Village Voice*, March 24 (1992) pp.41–44
[52] Bob Nowlan, Chapter One. Queer Theory, Queer Cinema in Juett and Jones (eds), *Coming Out to the Mainstream* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010) p.7
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ellis Hanson, Introduction. *Out Takes* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999) p.4
[56] Ibid. (p.12)
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

The musical has long been a Hollywood style or genre that has been associated with queer audiences, regardless whether said film has any gay characters in it or not.[59] I contend this is so because the musical genre mediates gender and sexuality in a variety of ways – both conservatively (i.e. hypergendering) and liberally (for example, drag). As Nowlan states:

> For queer theorists, 'queer' is, therefore, not so much an adjective or a noun that refers to the broad array of contemporary lesbigay identities, but rather a verb that marks out a shifting field of gender and sexual discourses and practices that work 'to queer' both the straight and the lesbigay.[60]

To be or identify as queer, or, act queerly means, above all else, transgressing, disrupting, and subverting straight norms and conventions.[61] However, in terms of media, a queer film is only queer in relation to practices of interpretation.[62] The basis of this dissertation is to uncover instances where overtly heterosexual filmic texts can be read as available for queer reading. In sum, queer cinema foregrounds the constructedness and performativity of social identities, especially articulated in terms of sexuality and gender.[63] Queer cinema revels in stylisation, and is often hyper-self-reflexive, and overtly interested in foregrounding intertextuality.[64] By use of pastiche and montage, irony and parody, highly minimalistic or deliberately excessive and frenetic manipulation of elements of *mise-en-scéne*, cinematography, editing, and sound, queer cinema queers by means of form, style, and content.[65] Furthermore, *camp* is a historically queer aesthetic,[66] "lending itself especially well to the performativity critiques popular among queer theorists and feminists."[67]

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[59] Ibid. (p.7)
[60] Bob Nowlan, Chapter One. Queer Theory, Queer Cinema in Juett and Jones (eds), *Coming Out to the Mainstream* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010) p.9
[61] Ibid. (p.8)
[62] Ibid. (p.17)
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid. (p.18)
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ellis Hanson, Introduction. *Out Takes* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999) p.7
[67] Johanna King-Slutzky, Camp. *The Chicago School of Media Theory, Lucian.uchicago.edu* (2010)

Camp

"Ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual"[68] are just some words used to describe the often-murky cultural "sensibility"[69] of camp. In her 1964 seminal essay '*Notes on Camp',* Susan Sontag attempted to comment on and define camp. Although, what ultimately comes out of Sontag's exercise in defining such a slippery term to begin with is the impossibility of the task as a whole.[70] However, in Sontag's essay, a strict differentiation is made from the outset that instead of referring to camp as an "idea", it is instead a "sensibility".[71] Camp is therefore a response to surroundings that are viewed through a very particular kind of lens. A lens that seeks to appreciate the details that may elude other admittedly more "serious" consumers of aestheticism and art.

Although a seminal essay on a subject that up until that point was largely untapped, Susan Sontag's '*Notes on Camp'* also produced a lot of criticism. This criticism has largely emerged from her apolitical reading of the connection between camp and gay experience. Bergman writes that '*Notes on Camp'* "not only attempts to be the last word, it also almost became the last one on the subject."[72] When *'Notes on Camp'* was first published in 1964, Sontag proposed that "homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense". As Bergman outlines Sontag's words he states how in contemporary times we can now see "how such a comment made her analysis a dead end." [73] In the early 1960s, amidst the enthusiasm of the civil rights movements including first wave feminism and fights for gay rights, there is little room to believe Sontag's contradictory statements on how on one hand camp is ascribed to being absolutely apolitical, however on the other hand it serves as the homosexuals' main vehicle of becoming integrated in a society that treats them like social pariahs (by way of aesthetic 'upliftment' through the unserious celebration of frivolity and flamboyance.)[74]

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[68] *Oxford English Dictionary,* ed. J.B Sykes, 7th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p.132
[69] Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 1964) p.1
[70] Johanna King-Slutzky, Camp. *The Chicago School of Media Theory, Lucian.uchicago.edu* (2010)
[71] Ibid.
[72] David Bergman, Introduction. *Camp Grounds* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) p.7
[73] Ibid. (p.9)
[74] Ibid.

King-Slutzky adds however that this theory has since been widely discredited (namely by Butler, Halberstam, and Robertson)[75]. The very connection Sontag herself draws between camp and the gay experience makes it difficult to consider camp ultimately apolitical. Camp is affiliated with homosexuality for a few reasons, and as Bergman outlines: first, camp exists in tension with popular/normative culture. Second, the person who can recognise and appreciate camp is often on the margins of society and belongs outside the cultural mainstream. And lastly, camp is affiliated with a self-conscious eroticism that questions the naturalisation of desire and turns values upside down.[76] It is therefore important to outline where Sontag really undermined camp's political intensity in her thesis on the matter. If camp truly is a gay discourse, it *is* ultimately political. Sontag's theory is political in the sense that she herself points out that camp is defined by "being as playing a role."[77] Despite being able to see this tendency in camp, Sontag fails to pick up on the political importance of "being as playing a role" for sexual orientation and gender.

Schuyler's definition of camp notes the inherent contradictions so evident in describing a sensibility like camp. He describes camp as a:

> … phenomenon that we seek to limit, to restrict, to claim as if it were a country where we could plant a flag and impose laws – about who is allowed in, and about when, how, and where camp operates. *Camp is only manufactured for gay men. Camp only occurs retrospectively. If camp can occur outside of homosexuality, it must be easily and exclusively defined as belonging to a certain group. Camp is manufactured. Camp isn't manufactured.* These are some of the restrictions critics have placed on camp. One reason for this, I surmise, is reclamation, but the reclamation of camp, it sees, doesn't empower, as other forms of reclamation do; instead, it segregates.[78]

What Schuyler's definition tells us is to an extent what Sontag attempted to convey in 1964 with her *Notes on Camp*. By delineating the enjoyment of the camp sensibility into certain subgroups makes an autocracy of camp that defies its very purpose. Similarly to Schuyler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asks the question, "what if

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[75] Ibid.
[76] David Bergman, Introduction. *Camp Grounds* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) p.7
[77] Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 1964)
[78] Michael T. Schuyler, Camp for Camp's Sake: Absolutely Fabulous, Self-Consciousness, and the Mae West Debate. *Journal of Film and Video* Volume 56, Issue 4 (2004) p.3

whoever made this was gay too?"[79] in relation to camp. Here Sedgwick makes a link between camp as a mode with queer recognition for audiences. There is a common thread between Sedgwick's sentiment and Schuyler's above. Descriptions of the restrictions critics have laid upon camp speak to this narrow view both Sedgwick and Schuyler hint at. The reality is however, that there exist multiple audiences for an array of cultural texts, regardless of sexual preferences. Sexual orientation is not the only determining factor when discussing camp. In short, camp makes gender and desire fluid therefore problematizing the very insistence of binaries within heteronormative society in the first place.

Perhaps nowhere else is this phenomenon of rendering gender and desire a fluid entity seen more clearly than within the musical film genre. Feuer states that '… campness in a sustained fashion in its play with sex roles and spectacular illusion, [are] two of the standard pleasures musicals offer."[80] As discussed at length above is the inherent notion of queerness in musical films, and its (queerness') ability to undermine the binaries of life: most notably, 'gay and straight' (but 'male and female' is also seen in abundance). As musicals all tend to defy binary distinction, I argue that the films discussed in this dissertation – although featuring heterosexual coupling – are essentially queer. In short, the musicals I analyse queer the pitch of the normative heterosexual couple and in so doing offers interesting insights into tensions around masculinity and sexuality at the time.

Much like Sontag and the many theorists since who have attempted to define the slippery idea of camp, Doty agrees that at best one may hope to descriptively encircle camp.[81] He outlines how camp is sometimes one of two things: a reading strategy ('in the eye of the beholder'), or an approach used in constructing texts or performances (the MGM Freed Unit, for example). Of course, sometimes, it can also be both of these things.[82] Doty eloquently lists what constitutes and maintains camp with this passage from Chapter Two in his book, *Flaming Classics*:

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[79] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, quoted in Matthew Tinkcom, Working Like a Homosexual: Camp Visual Codes and the Labour of Gay Subjects in the MGM Freed Unit. *Cinema Journal,* Volume 35, Issue 2 (1996) p.29
[80] Jane Feuer, Gay Readings. *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) p.141
[81] Alexander Doty, Chapter Two: "My Beautiful Wickedness". *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.82
[82] Ibid.

> Camp's central interests are taste/style/aesthetics, sexuality, and gender – or, rather, sexuality as related to gender role-playing (via style codes). Camp's mode is excess and exaggeration. Camp's tone is a mixture of irony, affection, seriousness, playfulness, and angry laughter. Camp's politics can be reactionary, liberal, or radical, depending on the example you are considering and your ideological agenda as a reader. But one thing about camp is certain – at least for me: Camp is queer. There is nothing straight about camp.[83]

Derived from synonyms 'strange' or 'peculiar', queer was initially a word that simply indicated a deviation from the norm.[84] About a century ago, the term was "turned into a pejorative to describe those with non-heterosexual desires and behaviors."[85] I contend that this is the meaning of 'queer' in Doty's citation. By claiming that "there is nothing straight about camp", Doty is asserting that camp is more than just homosexual [i.e. not straight], it defies the very existence of binary in the first place. Therefore, "camp is queer."[86]

For the purpose of this study, I will be using the following definition of camp moving forward. Camp is a sensibility preoccupied with artifice, style and exaggeration. Camp foregrounds the performativity of gender, and sexuality thus aligning it with queer theory. But camp is also ultimately serious, possessing a meaningfulness that is as paramount to camp as is its aesthetic frivolity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Peel away the tinsel and you will find the real tinsel underneath."
Jane Feuer in *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd Edition (1993)

This dissertation uses the work of Susan Sontag – most notably her 1964 essay on camp – as a starting point. But I largely move on from Sontag in favour of more contemporary thoughts on the subjects of camp and the queer discourse. These

[83] Ibid.
[84] Hari Ziyad, 3 Differences Between the Terms 'Gay' and 'Queer' – and Why It Matters. *Everydayfeminism.com* (2016)
[85] Ibid.
[86] Alexander Doty, Chapter Two: "My Beautiful Wickedness". *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.82

more contemporary voices include Jack Babuscio, David Bergman and Alexander Doty. In particular, I have made extensive use of Doty on the topic of queer studies, as well as his thoughts regarding the musical as film genre. Furthermore, on the study of musical as genre I have found the work of Jane Feuer and Rick Altman to be hugely beneficial. Steve Neale, Yvonne Tasker and Richard Dyer's work on the white heterosexual male body has become a fundamental influence on this project, particularly when describing the built, often semi-naked physiques of Tony Manero in *Fever* and Johnny Castle in *Dirty Dancing.*

My work differs from Dyer's and Tasker's, and to a certain extent Neale's, as to the way in which my focus lies on the displays of male bodies in *musicals* – a genre not touched upon by Dyer or Tasker and only tentatively so by Neale. Therefore, the overarching contribution of my thesis lies in the focussed attention that I pay specifically to the heterosexual male's dancing body and the discussion of queerness and camp in the musicals I analyse.

In order to examine films for a potential queer reading, a useful starting point for a literature review with the musical at its centre is to contextualise the genre in order to fully understand the foundations of the theoretical component of this study.

In the greater history of artistic expression, film is a fledging art form. Dismissed at first by intellectuals who saw film as a cheap opiate for the masses, movies were encouraged by a far more general public.[87] Due in part to a declining accessibility and fading feeling of relevance to traditional forms of art, this audience sought rather to marvel in something that was not so bound by the traditions or pretensions of a past.[88]

Enjoyed in contemporary times by audiences and film scholars alike, for most likely many of the same reasons according to Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell, "the musical is one of the most popular film genres" because of "the spectacle, the

[87] John Kobal, Introduction. *Gotta Sing Gotta Dance* (London: Hamlyn, 1970) p.7
[88] Ibid.

music, the enjoyable predictability of the outcome weighed against the pleasure of the varied details."[89] However, in terms of the musical and the study of musical film, according to Feuer, "musicals seem particularly resistant to analysis; peel away the tinsel and you will find the real tinsel underneath."[90] Although Feuer may have found the musical to be difficult to analyse, stating that most of them are 'dressed' in tinsel, only to find once 'undressed', or, analysed, musicals are still a mode of entertainment that foregrounds spectacle above anything else. But I contend musicals can be even more than that – sharing through camp an underlying sense of the serious. I define seriousness in this regard as a kind of meaningfulness. As mentioned briefly before, things that are silly have been connected with the feminine, whilst seriousness has been connected to masculinity because it features a stability that silliness does not offer. While camp does indeed revel in the feminine (frivolity/silliness) there is still a seriousness, or, meaningfulness underneath it all.

In Jane Feuer's second edition of her book *The Hollywood Musical,* she attempts to revisit the genre within a contemporary context by thinking about the musical as more than just "tinsel". Feuer writes how she experienced such pleasure from watching the films *Flashdance* (Lyne, 1983), *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino, 1987) and *Hairspray* (Waters, 1988). For this reason, she set out to theorise this pleasure. Feuer admits that the initial edition of her book omitted "any consideration of the sexual and gender politics of musicals beyond saying they reinforce heterosexuality (a truism if there ever was one)".[91] As a means to combat that, she claims that the second edition attempts to reconcile that omission with a "bid to include musicals in the emergent field of Gay Studies."[92] Such an inclusion – albeit "quite preliminary"[93] in Feuer's mind – helps us to "call into question many of our received beliefs about almost everything, not the least being the heterosexuality of musicals."[94] My study differs from Feuer's as it is not as preliminary as hers.

[89] Michael Dunne, Introduction. *American Film Musical Themes and Forms* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2004) p.1
[90] Jane Feuer, Preface to the First Edition. *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982) p.x
[91] Ibid. (p.xi)
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

Feuer does not give a full development into the queer readings of musicals whereas my study does follow in Feuer's direction but by contrast offers a greater focus on the queer elements of musicals.

I argue that although the musicals of the decades 1970s and 1980s do tend to foreground narrative heterosexual romance (within distinctly whitewashed narrative worlds); the musical films of this time period are also very camp and allow avenues for queer ways of seeing. What is specific about these films is twofold. For one, there is a sensuality of the dancing male body. Secondly, there exists a self-awareness and irony within the films from specifically the late 1970s and 1980s musical period. In response to these observations I will explore the 'queer' components of 1970s and 1980s musical dance films with a particular focus on the male body and how (the male body's) performativity complicates the basis of heterosexuality within the films.

This is a development on Feuer's study as it attempts to delve deeper into queer possibilities surrounding the musical film genre, but it also makes special concessions to focus squarely on the male body. As Neale states: heterosexual masculinity within mainstream cinema has been left largely without discussion or analyses.[95] Because "heterosexual masculinity has been identified as a structuring norm in relation both to images of women and gay men",[96] it makes an interesting point of departure when one begins to question its very insistence of normalcy.

Brett Farmer writes how "the gay male celebration of the Hollywood musical is one of the most widely noted aspects of gay spectatorial relations."[97] As Al LaValley puts it: "at the heart of gaycult, the aesthetically stylized genre of the musical reigns supreme."[98] Farmer adds how, "the term *musical* has long been used as a coded reference to homosexuality; to describe someone as "musical" or

[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Brett Farmer, 2004, Chapter 6: Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical in Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group) p.75
[98] Al LaValley, quoted in, Brett Farmer, 2004, Chapter 6: Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical in Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group) p.75

"into musicals" is to describe them as homosexual."[99] The symbolic associations between musicals and male homosexuality appear – even today – to still possess signifying resonances for gay subcultures.[100]

It is interesting to note here how gay men like musicals even though they are considered one of the most heterosexist of all the genres. But this may well be exactly *why* they like them, because musical films – the ones discussed in this project being no different – queer, and camp the pitch of the heteronormative couple to such an extent that gender, sexuality, and desire are deemed fluid entities in its wake.

But, also crucially, musicals have remained such a resonant form for gay male discourses and identifications,[101] due to musicals' inclination to enjoy "a widely recognised status as 'escapist entertainment'." [102] As Richard Dyer further explains, musicals are generally seen to offer:

> The image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized.[103]

Dirty Dancing and *Grease* draw on Dyer's thinking of a utopian version of the past by building a sense of nostalgia directly into their narratives. They do this by setting their narratives in the past: the 1960s and 1950s for *Dirty Dancing* and *Grease* alike. Although *Fever* is the one film of the sampled texts that does not utilise a sense of nostalgia and idealisation by looking back into the past, it does traverse the utopian impulse of musicals by celebrating disco as an escapist counterpoint to the grit of real life in 1970s New York City. What these films share in common is that all three of these musicals foreground dance as a further means to portray an escapist sensibility; igniting, through dance, an "image of 'something better'" as Dyer states.

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[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid. (p.75)
[102] Ibid.
[103] Richard Dyer, Entertainment & Utopia. *Only Entertainment*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1992) p.19

The (Dancing) Male Body & Spectacle

I would argue that what makes musical film such a fascinating topic of study is the duality of the genre. Butler suggests that in life a compulsive heterosexuality is perceived to be normative – but musicals twist this 'fact' on its ear. However, it does so in interesting - and perhaps even, at times, crafty - ways. As Butler says, it serves as no surprise that we live in a "a heterosexual economy" – one "that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness."[104] The musical films which are the focus of this study serve as an interesting springboard to interrogate Butler's statement.

As discussed earlier, the queer traces within the films outlined in this thesis adopt various camp guises. For example, irony, a cornerstone of camp, is generally something that the three films discussed in this dissertation all possess. In relation to white working class bodies that also delight in the activity of dance, Dyer's words provide some comic relief. He tells us, "Only a hard, visibly bounded body can resist being submerged into the horror of femininity and non-whiteness."[105] While I assume Dyer himself understands the comedy within the gravitas of what it is he is describing ("*submerged* into the *horror* of femininity"), there exists throughout these films a constant tension between the labouring dancing body and the potential feminisation – and queerness – of dance. Dyer's statement is therefore ironic in the context of the musicals discussed in this thesis. I contend that irony is alive and well because it has even managed to creep into the 'fortified' white male physique and open it up to potential queerness, even though the films discussed are overtly heterosexual in their narrative content.

Since according to Ramsey Burt, "the body is the primary means of expression in dance, and because gender is an attribute of the body, dance is a key area through which gendered identities are revealed."[106] As a signifying practice that mediates

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[104] Judith Butler, Part One Chapter 4: Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.126

[105] Richard Dyer, Chapter 4: The White Man's Muscles. *White* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1997) p.153

[106] Ramsey Burt, 1: The Trouble with the Male Dancer. *The Male Dancer,* 2nd Ed (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.12

hegemonic gender ideologies,[107] dance can be viewed as a queer discourse. When we consider how queer theory contends that we "perform gender and sexuality, according to normative scripts that we for the most part unconsciously internalise in the course of our socialisation and acculturation," [108] a link between the performativity of dance and the supposed performativity of gender and sexuality in the queer discourse align. Therefore, because dance is a performing art, it is a particularly useful area to consider the ways in which gender is indeed performed.[109]

Onto the subject of bodies, Richard Dyer contends that: "The built white body is not the body that white men are born with," but rather "the point after all is that it is built, a product of the application of thought and planning, an achievement."[110] The laboured white male bodies of Travolta and Swayze in *Fever, Grease* and *Dirty Dancing* are all kept in shape, built and chiselled by dance and through dance. In addition, they are constantly kept groomed and preened for the very central reason of being looked at and enjoyed. I suggest this inclusion has links to the time period in ways that signify an embattled masculinity that must make work of his body to remain relevant in a fast changing world.

On male bodies in action, Paul Willemen outlines how "the viewer's experience is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male 'exist' (that is walk, move, ride, fight) in or through cityscapes, landscapes or, more abstractly, history." [111] Not surprisingly, Willemen makes no mention of the *dancing* male body. However, dancing *does* constitute an action – quite a lively one at that! Although, with that being said, perhaps that lies at the basis of Willemen's omission. By his standards, the male body is active but not in the traditionally active manner of males in film. By making use of the word 'exist', Willemen portrays the male as simply just *is*, without him having to do too much to remain the historically conditioned gazer.

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[107] Ramsey Burt, 2: Looking at the Male. *The Male Dancer,* 2nd Ed (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.56
[108] Bob Nowlan, Chapter One. Queer Theory, Queer Cinema in Juett and Jones (eds), *Coming Out to the Mainstream* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010) p.7
[109] Ramsey Burt, 1: The Trouble with the Male Dancer. *The Male Dancer,* 2nd Ed (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.16
[110] Ibid. (p.165)
[111] Paul Willemen, quoted in Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6 (1983) p.8

But rather than being a body that exists for action, the male bodies discussed in this thesis are bodies that perform (dance) and therefore offer themselves for spectacle, rather than traditional action.

As I have noted in this section how dance has traditionally been associated with the feminine, I have also sketched the cultural associations often drawn between homosexuality and the traditionally feminine. Although the films outlined in this dissertation are overtly heterosexual in their narrative content, there is still a space for a queer reading based on the performativity of the male body as well as camp undertones seen within the film's aesthetics. I suggest that in essence dance, like the musical film, is a queer discourse. I contend this because of dance's ability to queer the binaries of gender and sexuality, through using the body as a tool for such a process. I have attempted in this contextualisation subheading to open up the conversation of dance, sexuality, gender, queerness and camp, and the interrelated relationship all these areas share with one another, and how the connections drawn here will further aid my arguments for a queer reading of these heterosexual texts in the chapters to follow.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach I will be using in this thesis is close textual analyses of film scenes, particularly those that foreground the male body as potential erotic object, or with a specific focus on dance. To refine my study, I intend to make use of a combination of semiotic and mise-en-scène textual analysis methods: looking closely at elements such as costume, blocking choices, colour schemes, and symbolism. However, the time period in which my entire study is based is of utmost importance, therefore, a distinct focus on contextual analysis will always be a major driving force of my research in this project.

I plan to ground my methodological approach in film studies, paying particular attention to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's system for analysing classic Hollywood film. According to the 1985 book titled *The Classic Hollywood Cinema*:

> … style, specifically classical Hollywood style, is analysed as a set of norms that the historian studies at three levels of generality: devices (matches on action, for instance), systems (how these devices articulate temporal, spatial, and narrational relations), and relations between systems (for example, whether spatial and temporal relations render intelligible or opaque narrative causality).[112]

An example of how I wish to put the approach as mentioned above to work in this thesis is as follows: by focusing closely on Catholic iconography (device) in *Saturday Night Fever*, I hope to uncover ways in which Catholicism (system) is used in interesting ways to dissemble a traditional heterosexual manhood in the character of Tony Manero (relations between systems).

In conjunction with formal scene analyses, I will be using queer theory, gender theory and genre theory to situate my findings. By using the avenues of gender and the body as a means for analysis I will be able to interrogate the masculinities seen on-screen in these films and discuss their relationship to the act of dance and how this may unsettle the films' narrative insistence on heterosexuality. Laura Mulvey's famous writings on the gaze also provide multiple examples of how formal film analysis can unveil relations of power and desire – my intention with this thesis is to investigate the instances in which these dynamics can also be subverted in enigmatic ways to suggest something very 'of the time'.

My research will show that, rather than being negated, the fabric of dominant masculinity that during this time period (1977–1987) was a fraying of what was once fortified, "regenerated and reasserted itself." [113] It achieved this in large part "primarily through the fraught revival of a violent and mythologized hypermasculinity"[114] as seen in the films discussed. However, by enacting in the

[112] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, Part One: The classical Hollywood style, 1917-60. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985) pg. 6 -7
[113] Harriet Stilley, From the Delivered to the Dispatched: Masculinity in Modern American Fiction (1969-1977) (Doctoral Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017) p.vii
[114] Ibid.

performance of dance, normative heteropatriarchal dominance is questioned once more. Thus, a delving into queer theory is helpful in further understanding the nuanced ways of the sampled filmic texts in this thesis.

STRUCTURE

I have arranged the dissertation to follow an arc that further aids the discussion at hand. Moving from a musical film with the least overtly queer aesthetic choices and narrative content (*Fever*), to a film that I will argue is a completely self-aware production of the camp sensibility (*Grease*), this dissertation tracks the camp sensibility within the sampled musical texts in a way that acknowledges that camp and queerness are varied, and anything but singular.

In this dissertation's first chapter I provide close textual analysis of dancing scenes in *Fever*. I explore the excessive performance of masculinity in the paradoxical character of Tony Manero. In addition, I look at Manero's socio-economic background and show how Manero subverts normative masculinity by rebelling against his class background. Lastly, I draw connections between Manero's religious experience of Catholicism where I attempt to illustrate the ways Catholic aestheticism has been used to celebrate camp, as well as show a yearning to revel in the feminine.

In my chapter on *Dirty Dancing* I explore the ways the male body has been placed in the centre as erotic object. This subversion of traditional surveillance on the body adds some interesting points to the discussion of emergent masculinities during this time period. By analysing Johnny Castle in *Dirty Dancing* as not only performing action, but by connoting a sense of to-be-looked-at-ness, his masculinity shows a subversion of the norm which is essentially patriarchal – placing the female in the centre as erotic object.

Finally, in the dissertation's chapter on *Grease* I look at the homosocial bonds, and excessive portrayals of heterosexuality and hypergendering that is so prevalent in the film, and in turn uncover its potential for queer possibilities. In short, this chapter asks the question: if heterosexuality is so normal, why the need to perform it in such excess?

* * *

Camp recognises "that conservatism and heteropatriarchal dominance aren't bastions of comfort and safety for all."[115] Yet, despite their camp excesses, the musical film is allowed a space in popular culture as a relatively safe form of pleasure. It is important to note however that although camp is always dressed in excess, there is embedded into the sensibility both seriousness *and* playfulness.[116] As Bergman says: "you're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance."[117] In many ways, the films discussed in this dissertation use camp as a Trojan Horse for their queer ideas. Queer impressions that may be at first perceived as hidden, but that are in fact never far from the discussion at hand. By "taking… queer pleasures in these 'mainstream' works", we begin "to constantly reinforce the idea that queer is everywhere,"[118] we just need to know where to look.

To draw on this introduction's opening lines: this project emerges from my own attempt to understand the evolving role that musical films have played in interrogating my own thoughts on the construction of gender. By glamorising, exaggerating and performing 'conventional' heterosexual gender cultures in such excess, the very naturalness of gender begins to break itself open, and beg to be interrogated. This project then is an attempt to question what is so often left unquestioned: white, male heterosexuality. In addition, this project tries to marry

[115] Michael T. Schuyler, Camp for Camp's Sake: Absolutely Fabulous, Self-Consciousness, and the Mae West Debate. *Journal of Film and Video,* Volume 56, Issue 4 (2004) p.18
[116] Alexander Doty, Chapter Two: "My Beautiful Wickedness". *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.82
[117] David Bergman, Introduction. *Camp Grounds* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) p.4
[118] Alexander Doty, Introduction. *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.14

an emerging subversive modern masculinity with the aesthetic celebration the perceived feminine evokes.

CHAPTER 2:
Tony Manero and the Paradoxes of Working Class Masculinity in *Saturday Night Fever*

Part of the enduring charm of *Saturday Night Fever* lies in the way it foregrounds its own inherent paradoxes. One such example of the film's contradictions is how, despite starting out as a very low budget film, *Fever* created a little-expected furore upon its release in 1977. The film is both a gritty humanistic "character piece"[119] and a study of a world filled with aesthetic flamboyance, of disco lights, mirrors balls, bell-bottoms and tightly fitted shirts. It is in this context of equal parts glitter and despair that *Fever* exists. Moreover, the film constantly foregrounds its own inbuilt contradictions: this is most evident in the way in which Tony Manero's character is constructed. In this chapter, I will make the argument of how Manero's character is constructed through a disconnection between being and seeming, and how this very disconnect weaves its way through the entire film through performances of excessive masculinity, religious iconography, and the potential for a queer reading, and hence a discussion with regards to camp. According to Carole-Anne Taylor, camp is not only feminist, but is also a discourse that evaluates how even macho masculinity can be read as camp and, therefore radical.[120]

I intend to explore this idea by looking at the camp aesthetics of the disco as well as those offered up by the Catholic imagination. This chapter seeks to marry an emergent modern masculinity with the aesthetic celebration the perceived feminine can stand to evoke. My findings will illustrate the ways in which Tony Manero's character has been crafted to infer a sense of paradox, which further feeds into this thesis' central interest of finding avenues for queer ways of seeing while still existing within a heteronormative filmic world.

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[119] Martha Shearer, Chapter 6 - A New Way of Living: Post-war Musicals and the New New York. *New York City and the Hollywood Musical: Dancing in the Streets.* (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2016) p.153
[120] Carole-Anne Tyler, quoted in David Bergman (ed) Introduction, *Camp Grounds* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) pp.9–10

Barry Miller (aka Bobby C in the film) says of *Fever*, "nobody sat around and planned to make some great pop culture, kitsch, Smithsonian time capsule of bell-bottoms, glitter balls and platform shoes" [121] at the time of creating the film. Instead, Miller adds, that *Fever* "is merely a story set in a working class discotheque that dealt with an identity crisis and a kind of profound question of society's rules and society's values."[122] In response to Miller's claim, this chapter explores key areas of friction in the world of the film. However, the disco balls and dance sequences are as crucial to the films exploration of identity as its more gritty scenes. The ways in which masculine paradox, class and sexual tension define the character of Tony Manero will be outlined. In particular I undertake a queer reading of Manero's performances of masculinity, on and off the dance floor and through exploring links between Manero's cultural Catholicism and the aesthetics of the disco arena, it will become clear how these associations frame his embattled masculinity.

Tony Manero is not a homosexual character, or, at the very least, his potential homosexuality is never advertised in *Fever*. However, the erotic display of Tony's body as well as his penchant for self-grooming in the film fit uneasily with both heterosexual and homosexual masculine models of the late 70s, according to Christodoulou. [123] Therefore, it is important to look at the past for answers regarding sexuality in line with the genre of musical film. In terms of musicals, this instance of an uncertain heterosexuality for male characters has always been an area of interest. In her book, *The Hollywood Musical*, Jane Feuer writes:

> During the heyday of Hollywood musicals, for example, the status of the male dancer as a heterosexual figure was always in question; in the case of Kelly and especially the non-macho Astaire, heterosexuality had to be asserted; it could not be assumed.[124]

[121] Barry Miller in *Hollywood Singing and Dancing: 1970s* [film] dir. Mark McLaughlin (USA: Koch Entertainment, 2008)
[122] Ibid.
[123] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.2
[124] Jane Feuer, Gay Readings. *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) p.141

In Tony Manero's world, similar assertions need to be made, and *are* in fact made. Manero and his posse lambast homosexuals for being stereotypically flamboyant in the street – clearly delineating themselves *apart* from this sub-group. Yet, the irony lies in how they conduct themselves in a fairly flamboyant manner: dressing in skin-tight clothing, producing an image of the on-show, sexualised male body; prepping and preening their precious hair in a display of feminisation;[125] and sashaying from pillar to post, both in and outside the 2001 Odyssey nightclub. Using Manero's character in *Fever,* the film is able to play into the traditional conventions of the heteronormative musical. But, the queer impulses of the film lie in its ability to constantly straddle the line between being and seeming. On musicals' oft insertion of 'gay sensibilities', Richard Dyer suggests "that it [the 'gay sensibility'] holds together intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity." [126] "This sensibility finds expression in the aesthetic of camp."[127] Particularly, it is the scenes within the hallowed walls of the discotheque that feed into a feeling of absurdity, non-realness and an intense provocation of smoke and mirrors, of everything not being as it seems.

In this chapter I will make the argument that the paradoxical nature of Tony Manero's character makes him ultimately difficult to place into binary codes and that this paradoxical and performative persona in turn opens him up to a queer reading. Christodoulou claims in his essay that Manero's ethnicity provides the answer to how he portrays himself in a highly stylised and flamboyant manner. Whilst I do agree to some extent with Christodoulou's sentiments, I believe part of *Fever's* sustained success in cult appreciation is because the film is nuanced and highly complex. Attempting to find just one reason as to why Manero is the way he is would be oversimplifying the film in its entirety. To this end, I contend that a complex film deserves an analysis and study that is just as nuanced and layered as the content and aestheticisms it portrays.

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[125] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.22
[126] Richard Dyer, quoted in Jane Feuer, Gay Readings. *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) pp.140–141
[127] Jane Feuer, Gay Readings. *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) p.141

Director of *Fever*, John Badham, proclaimed in a documentary on the musicals and dansicals that populated the 1970s filmic landscape, *Hollywood Singing and Dancing: 1970s*, that what drew him to the story of *Fever* was that it "read as a story about a boy in a city that he was too big for."[128] Badham – whose filmography consists mostly of television directorial pursuits – found *Fever*, written by Norman Wexler, to be "a wonderful character piece"[129] that he yearned to bring alive on-screen. The *Fever* narrative was based on a 1976 *New York Magazine* article titled: "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night" by Nik Cohn. Originally believed to be a piece of factual journalistic reporting, Cohn later revealed that the article was in fact a work of fiction and that he had in part drawn inspiration from a real-life visit to the 2001 Odyssey disco club in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn in 1976.[130] At the time of writing his piece of journalistic fiction, Cohn described disco as being "a new, largely ethnic, largely gay underground trend that had taken over parts of New York City."[131] It was armed with this *New York Magazine* article in hand, and a contemporary youth culture wild for the tenet of disco, that the makers of *Fever* created a frenzy with their stark and urban display of paradox in 1970s Brooklyn. While Cohn explicitly notes the gay dimensions of disco, these are not foregrounded as such in the film. A possible reason for this seemingly blatant omission in the film version of *Fever* could be Hollywood's infamously sluggish response to portraying sexualities on-screen that may appear to fit outside of the perceived norm of heterosexuality. The gay liberation movement was catapulted forward after the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York. After the riots, Hollywood began to see the homosexual demographic as a possible consumer group, but change in the form of producing homosexual-themed content was slow to materialise.

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[128] John Badham in *Hollywood Singing and Dancing: 1970s* [film] dir. Mark McLaughlin (USA: Koch Entertainment, 2008)
[129] Ibid.
[130] Nadia Khomami, Disco's Saturday Night Fiction, *Theguardian.com,* The Observer: Disco (2016)
[131] Ibid.

Zeitgeist: A 1970s New York

Expanding on Barry Miller's statement above, *Fever* deals with a zeitgeist of a particular time. Miller explains that Fever could have been an exercise in simply documenting the "pop culture" of the time, creating a "Smithsonian time capsule"[132] with all the trappings of the disco aesthetic. Rather, the creators of *Fever* opted to document the paradox so prevalent at the time: to authenticate on-screen both the glamour *and* the grim reality of 1970s New York. The significance of this in terms of reading *Fever* queerly is the duality always at play. The dichotomy and contrast of these two seemingly opposed ideas align with the refusal of neat delineations that queerness seeks to evoke.

Corman describes cult films' "ability to trigger a sense of nostalgia, a yearning for an idealised past"[133] as one of the phenomenon's most defining features. Unlike the other musicals/dansicals I make mention of in this dissertation that have also garnered their own cult enthusiasts, *Fever* steers clear of nostalgic, backward-looking representations, and rather leans very squarely into the reality of a gritty underbelly of New York at that particular moment in time. The film however has become a nostalgic object in subsequent years, and thus enjoys somewhat of a cult appreciation.

Nineteen-seventies New York, and more specifically Brooklyn, was a harsh metropolis, tarnished by poverty and crime. Such sentiment is brought alive on-screen most famously perhaps by Martin Scorsese's 1970s filmography. With films like *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), Scorsese too was interrogating this zeitgeist representing a similar kind of New York. What proves interesting is that contrast to Scorsese's 1970s New York films, *Fever* is showcasing the grim underbelly of the city, but it is also foregrounding dance, and more specifically, disco.

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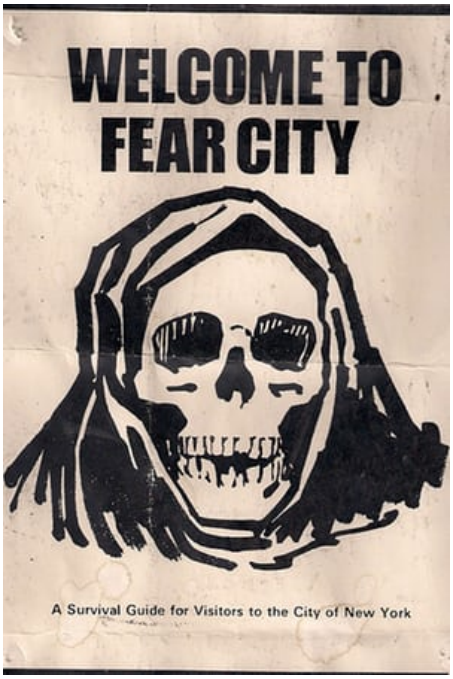
[132] Barry Miller in *Hollywood Singing and Dancing: 1970s* [film] dir. Mark McLaughlin (USA: Koch Entertainment, 2008)
[133] Roger Corman, Foreword. From Countercultural to Cult: an Introduction by Roger Corman in Mathijs and Mendik (eds), *The Cult Film Reader* (Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education) p.xvii

As a form of dancing that traces its origins back to gay and black clubs where long nights of nonstop motion counterpointed the long days of getting by,[134] disco has also been described as providing its participants a "mesmerising" and "repetitive beat" where dancers can "declare freedom and a cultural centrality."[135] Thus this notion of attaining 'a cultural centrality' on the dance floor evokes a sense of apolitical sentiment. The link between gay culture and disco is critical to grasp in the bid to understand the nuanced and overlapping messages of the film. The centrality of disco within the film's discourse begs questions like 'if disco is considered a gay discourse, why is *Fever* not regarded as a gay film?' and 'why is Manero overtly coded as heterosexual?' While these questions may appear to destabilise the very basis of my argument of exploring *Fever* as a queer text, I would contend that these questions ultimately legitimise the idea that *Fever* can and should be read queerly. By understanding that sexuality and the way gender is performed is not singular and straightforward, *Fever* unlocks itself to potential queerness. By playing in to paradox and contradiction, *Fever* ultimately marks itself as querying concepts of gender and sexuality through the performative action of dance.



Addendum A - The 1975 "Welcome to Fear City" pamphlets: handed out to travellers arriving at New York City airports to warn them of the potential danger and criminal activity of the city.

Nineteen-seventies New York's opaque and lawless reality could perhaps most plainly be described by the presence of curious leaflets circulating the city at the time. ""*Welcome to Fear City*" read the stark headline"[136] on pamphlets, which were subtitled "A Survival Guide for Visitors to the City of New York""[137] – handed out to travellers arriving at New York City airports in 1975 (see addendum A).

[134] Lynn Darling, The Prince of Disco, *The Washington Post* (5 August 1979)
[135] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.3
[136] Kevin Baker, 'Welcome to Fear City' – the inside story of New York's civil war, 40 years on, *The Guardian* (2015)
[137] Ibid.

Kevin Baker's 40-year anniversary piece in *The Guardian* elaborates on these bizarre pamphlets:

> The guidelines painted a nightmarish vision of New York; one that made it sound barely a cut above Beirut, which then had just been engulfed in Lebanon's civil war. Visitors were advised not to venture outside of midtown Manhattan, not to take the subways under any circumstances, and not to walk outside *anywhere* after six in the evening.[138]

Thus the tone for Badham's 1977 representation of Brooklyn in *Fever* is set. A place "riddled with crime, and on the brink of bankruptcy,"[139] New York in the 1970s was a very different place to what it is now. Whilst in *Fever*, the violently crime-ridden underbelly of 1970s New York with its rapes, burglaries, and robberies having "gone up an astonishing tenfold"[140] may not be foregrounded in it's narrative, what *is* indeed made manifest is the intense financial decay of the decade. Even Tony's own father laments his loss of employment:

> Twenty-five years in construction work, I always brought home a paycheck, what, six seven months I'm out of work? And all of a sudden what? You're talking back? Talking about getting a job and hitting me![141]

This, and the fact that Tony himself works a dead-end job in a small hardware store and is a young man who lives with his parents, illustrates the economic decline of the time as well as speaking to Manero's own ethnic community and the social class to which he belongs.

The 1975 "Welcome to Fear City" pamphlets: handed out to travellers arriving at New York City airports to warn them of the potential danger and criminal activity of the city.

This bleak context describing the economics, crime and politics so prevalent in the 1970s was also evident in the way musical films were created during this time period. Academy Award winning director Rob Marshall (*Chicago*, 2002) recollects

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138 Ibid.

139 Sarah Jacobs, These eerily empty street photos show how different New York City was in the crime-ridden 1970s, *Business Insider* (2017)

140 Kevin Baker, 'Welcome to Fear City' – the inside story of New York's civil war, 40 years on, *The Guardian* (2015)

141 *Saturday Night Fever* [film] dir. John Badham (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977)

how musicals evolved into something darker in the 1970s.[142] Musicals like *Cabaret* (Fosse, 1972), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Jewison, 1973) played the circuits of the 1970s – all these films (albeit vastly different from one another) embrace the bizarre, encourage the taboo and/or push an array of boundaries, as well as critically complicating the idea of modern masculinity. Anna Claydon writes how the 1960s challenged the manner in which people thought about sex and other elements, which had previously 'othered' margins of people.[143] By extension, the 1970s then became a time when what was considered 'normal' in the 1950s "no sex before marriage, dominant heterosexuality, female subservience and patriarchy at all levels of life"[144] at the very least began to be publicly questioned, and debated.[145]

Men in the 1970s were coming to terms with the concept that their place in society was uncertain, especially if they did not conform to social expectations of 'the masculine' and therefore, in turn, performed another mode of identity that proved more suited to them.[146] A range of social forces were at play regarding masculinity in the 1970s. These include post-Vietnam masculine identities, the coming-to-terms with the overwhelming feeling that soldiers were fighting in an unjust war, and post-Civil Rights Movement that especially could stand to mark white male identity as shifting and changing from unquestioned leader to equal footing with other races. As Peter Biskind writes it, in terms of film and the atmosphere in Hollywood at the time: the 1970s freed up a new generation of filmmakers, previously frozen in the ice of '50s conformity.[147]

The aforementioned films produced in the 1970s, including *Fever* – all interrogate the notion of a new masculine identity. In contrast to many of their predecessors, musical films made in a post-World War II environment "confirm an idea of musicals as escapist, declining to engage seriously with the big social, cultural and

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[142] *Hollywood Singing and Dancing: 1970s* [film] dir. Mark McLaughlin (USA: Koch Entertainment, 2008)
[143] Anna Claydon, *Masculinity and Deviance in British Cinema of the 1970s: Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2010) p.6
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid. (p.7)
[147] Peter Biskind, Introduction. *Easy Riders Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-And-Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1998) p.14

political changes of their time in favour of cheap entertainment." [148] Musicals/dansicals of the 1970s seem to perform the opposite – favouring *against* "cheap entertainment" and rather leaning in to a darker, more layered portrayal of events, as Rob Marshall recollects. Claydon concludes that, "the 'unholy' trio of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll"[149] so prevalent in musical films made in the 1970s, "remove sexuality and gender from social niceties"[150] enabling a dynamic debate around the areas of masculinity to be had. I contend that the same can be said for 'sex, drugs, and *disco'* when discussing masculinity in the realm of *Fever*.

STRUTTING TO STAY ALIVE:

The Disconnection Between Being & Seeming in Tony Manero's Working Class Persona and *Fever's* Camp Possibilities

A key factor to *Fever's* success in the 1970s, and its sustained cult affection over the years, is due to the fandom surrounding John Travolta. In Cohn's story, Vincent (Tony) was "the ultimate Face."[151] In her article for *The Guardian*, Nadia Khomami writes about Cohn's depiction of "the very best dancer in Bay Ridge",[152] Vincent. He "owned 14 floral shirts, five suits, eight pairs of shoes, three overcoats, and had appeared on *American Bandstand.*"[153] She notes how Cohn described Vincent and his posse's most likely trajectory: "goes through high school, obedient; graduates, looks for a job, saves and plans. Endures. And once a week, on Saturday night, it's one great moment of release, it explodes."[154] What is interesting to note here is the sexual innuendo in this final line. Described as releasing one "in an open-ended succession of repetitions",[155] disco is defined by Dyer as a "whole body eroticism" which ultimately expresses itself in a very phallocentric and overtly sexualised

[148] Martha Shearer, Chapter 6 - A New Way of Living: Post-war Musicals and the New New York. *New York City and the Hollywood Musical: Dancing in the Streets.* (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2016) p.153
[149] Anna Claydon, *Masculinity and Deviance in British Cinema of the 1970s: Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2010) p.23
[150] Ibid.
[151] Nik Cohn, Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night, *New York Magazine* (7 June 1976)
[152] Nadia Khomami, Disco's Saturday Night Fiction, *Theguardian.com,* The Observer: Disco (2016)
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Richard Dyer (1979), quoted in Nadia Khomami, Disco's Saturday Night Fiction, *Theguardian.com,* The Observer: Disco (2016)

manner.[156] The use of the word 'explode' in Khomami's final line cited above possesses an indelible sexual connotation. In fact, disco as a whole can be thought of as a publicly performed allegory for private sexual acts. Whilst this notion exists of disco being a public performance of private acts like sex, this could also speak to disco's emergence in gay underground subculture. Unable to be proudly and outwardly homosexual, gay men devised disco dancing as an underground backlash to their inability to be accepted in mainstream life.

Fever produces a character in Tony Manero who is essentially "the man". Outwardly Manero appears to represent an ultimate form of masculinity and heterosexual prowess. However, Manero's masculinity is styled to a point of excess, opening up hypermasculine performance to a queer reading. Manero's outfits, and the immense attention he pays to "dressing up" and "dressing the part", as well as the manner in which he moves (mostly on the dance floor), even his swagger to a certain extent, can be considered queer if we consider Doty's definition of the term in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies.* Doty notes that certain feminist critics and theorists have used the term 'queer' to describe any non-normative expressions of gender in film and popular culture production and representation.[157] However, Doty expands by noting: "'queer' can describe any work by straight-identifying film and popular culture theorists, critics, or producers that [are] concerned with non-normative straightness." [158] In its concern with a non-normative straightness, made evident in the paradoxical character of Tony Manero, *Fever* can be read as aligned with a queer sensibility because of its inclusion of featuring a male protagonist that does not fit comfortably within the mould of straight, white, working class male.

As mentioned in my dissertation introduction, according to Ramsey Burt, for much of the twentieth century dancing has been positioned within a predominately feminine realm.[159] There is a well-documented prejudice stating the supposed

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[156] Ibid.
[157] Alexander Doty, Chapter 15: Queer Theory in Hill and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.150
[158] Ibid.
[159]Ramsey Burt, The Trouble with the Male Dancer. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.11

connection with male dancers and homosexuality[160] considering that there has been a long-believed connection between the feminine and homosexuality in men. Given this prejudice, Manero's dancing male character in *Fever* is not relinquished from this stereotype of the gay dancing male. However, given the historical relationship homosexuality and dance share, I would contend that far from complicating the matter by stating how Manero enacts in a series of excessively heterosexual masculine ways, this very fact enhances this argument. As Burt asserts, "where a male dancer claims attention in a theatrical way, his active, dominating performance can have the effect of reinforcing norms of masculine behaviour",[161] rather than performing in any kind of feminised, or, emotive way. Instead of rejecting the ideas of feminist theory altogether, Burt's approach has been to modify them in order to revise feminist accounts of spectatorship in dance. In so doing, Burt has focussed on the way the spectacular aspects of men's dancing generally reinforce conservative norms of masculine behaviour.[162] However, this still does not 'free' Manero up to be unquestionably heterosexual. Because dance deals exclusively with the body, the hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality are all too often mediated, and renegotiated.

In addition to *Fever's* seeming fascination with paradox in terms of Manero's sexuality, there too exists an inconsistency in relation to class tensions in the film. The class tensions within Manero's own character are evident throughout the film. I will now explore the opening scene in detail, paying close attention to instances where class tensions and/or tensions/paradoxes at large are seen within the opening sequence. Of course, this dissertation's aim in its entirety is to look closely at the ways in which a potential queerness is at play within the sampled film texts. The gap between Manero's material class position and his performance of class creates a powerful paradox – a tension between being and seeming – which above all lends itself to a queer interpretation.

[160] Ibid.
[161] Ramsey Burt, 2: Looking at the Male. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.34
[162] Ibid. (p.54)

Analysis of The Opening Scene

From the outset, it is clear that *Fever* is a film about masculinity. The opening scene playfully introduces Manero through a series of foregrounding techniques that showcase the contradictions within his masculine identity performance. As the film's opening sequences unfold, at first devoid of music, the swish of a train invites the hit Bee Gees' song into play, as Travolta/Manero swaggers confidently down a Brooklyn street toward his place of work: a hardware store. In the first few seconds multiple juxtapositions are made apparent. Firstly, beginning a musical film – or, at the very least, a dance film – without any music whatsoever is an interesting directorial decision. Sweeping track and pan shots fill the screen initially, giving the viewer an expansive geographical layout of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge as it approaches Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Badham's insistence on context for the story of *Fever* is made paramount by these wide aerial shots. The imagery of the bridge also acts as a recurring allegory for transition (from teenager to adulthood) and class tensions throughout the film. Although the movements of the opening shots themselves possess a kinetic energy, the content being shot is immobile, rigid, and severe: the bridge complete with concrete and steel structure, high-rise buildings, the arteries of roads and streets seen from above, suburban buildings, *etcetera*. No music accompanies this imagery. As a fast-approaching train whizzes by, exiting just off the right of the screen, the Bee Gees anthem begins to play. A link is drawn here between the phallocentric image of the train and the commencement of the film's musical soundtrack. Thus the image of the train and the start of the film's infamous soundtrack creates an immediate connection between music, a libidinal youthful masculine energy, and the urban/industrial milieu of 1970s New York. As a film that deals with the *démodé* of disco in 1970s New York, the connection Dyer draws to the eroticism of disco – as differing from rock 'n' roll – is interesting to note in this context. He argues that disco possesses a "thrusting", "grinding", and "indelibly phallocentric" eroticism.[163] The link here between hearing the Bee Gees' disco hit 'Staying Alive' for the first time, and the image of the phallocentric train inviting the film to

[163] Richard Dyer (1979), quoted in Nadia Khomami, Disco's Saturday Night Fiction, *Theguardian.com,* The Observer: Disco (2016)

officially begin, is consistent with Dyer's descriptions of the libidinal disco attitude.

The shot of the train cuts away to a faceless Manero (only his legs and shoes are visible) on his way to work, stopping in front of shop windows to appreciate the contents behind the glass. First, a glossy 1970s dance shoe, held fittingly on a pedestal in the shop display of a footwear store. As Manero jiggles his body, he lifts up his own foot in front of the window. As he performs this action, a can of paint is seen hanging from his hand. The inclusion of the latter stands as a stark juxtaposition to his slender and swaggering appearance, and the polished façade of the storefront he passes by. I contend that the inclusion of the shoe versus the paint can's significance in the opening sequence can be understood in terms of Yvonne Tasker's concept of the "over-determined body". Tasker claims how, specifically in the 1980s, muscled men became more and more popular within film. As she suggests, this could be for a number of reasons, either, the muscled man could illustrate a "triumphal assertion of a traditional masculinity",[164] or conversely, the over-developed, over-worked and maintained male body could also be seen by some as "an hysterical image, a symptom of the male body (and masculine identity) in crisis."[165] What the latter foretells is possibly indicative of a new wave of feminism that came about in the 1970s, and men's once-more shifting space within society. As something that has historically been considered as an unproblematic and unquestioned norm,[166] masculinity within this potentially new world order (of an emerging Feminism) could in turn become saturated by hysteria. The image of Tony Manero's gaze toward the shoe in the shop window in these opening moments, as well as him holding onto a paint can suggests something about an embattled masculinity. It does so by the way in which it disturbs the status quo of understanding masculinity as an unproblematic and unquestioned norm. This masculinity on show is not only of a man, walking down a crowded street with a paint can in hand, it is also of a man doing these things whilst also stopping to gaze desirably at a shoe in a shop window and dancing

[164] Yvonne Tasker, Chapter 6: The Body in Crisis of the Body Triumphant? *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.109
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ramsey Burt, Introduction. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.6

while he does so. With regards to reading Manero's relationship toward class as potentially queer, there is a blatant contradiction that is seen through these images of the shoe, the shop window and the paint can. Whilst Manero is from a working class background and engages in low paid labour, the shoe he stops to gaze at represents luxury consumption. Yet, what the shoe also represents is Manero's performance of wealth that is beyond the character's actual means. It is through a series of performances - both on and off the dance floor of the 2001 Odyssey Club - that Tony Manero enacts his queerness, his refusal to slot easily into defined boxes.

In bright red neon signage typeface, the title of the film suggests itself, revealing itself word by word: *Saturday. Night. Fever.* The camera rises – departing his feet, to pan upward – to reveal Manero's face. Such a shot is reminiscent of a typical Film Noir camera setup when the femme fatale is introduced to the audience. As Mulvey explains, "both in *Only Angels Have Wings* (Hawks, 1939) and in *To Have and Have Not* (Hawks, 1944), the film opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film."[167] It is in this vein that the gaze in *Fever* is distorted, and made to mediate onto the (male) body of Tony Manero as he struts down the bustling Brooklyn street. To further Mulvey's point on the use of 'fetishistic scopophilia' in film, the Film Noir genre makes use of sexualising the female body in the production of a femme fatale by shooting the introduction of her body as "isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised."[168] By extension, "fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself."[169] In this moment Manero is introduced to the viewer not only as protagonist, but also the erotic object in the film – his body isolated (if not by means of having the camera focusing solely on him), glamorous, on display, and sexualised. Seductively, the camera progresses upward; the entire body visible to us in a matter of seconds. The camera pauses its movement on Manero's face, his eyes looking into the distance just past the camera.

[167] Laura Mulvey, 1975. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3 (1975) p.10
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.

Travolta 'peacocks' his way down the busy urban street, walking modishly to the beat of the accompanying non-diegetic soundtrack. These few opening moments with their pace of editing and non-narrative content, are akin to the music video made popular on MTV in the early 1980s. What this directorial choice does is merge with popular music of the time an intimate look at the male star body of Travolta, strutting as if in his very own music video. As we – the viewer – look at the body of Manero in this scene, he stops to gaze upon the body of a woman passing him by on the street. His sexually charged demeanour is made palpable as he literally stops in his tracks to ensure an unsanctioned view of the passer-by. Here the film openly announces Manero's heterosexuality and aligns it with his particular brand of machismo that possesses a quality that is not shy about its desires. The camera does not follow Manero's gaze, but instead pauses as Manero does to look at the woman as she walks away. This camera setup makes an interesting comment on Mulvey's theory of man as the bearer of the gaze. The camera is still contemplating Manero's own body, and does little to fully observe the woman walking past as Manero watches her walk away.

In true New Yorker style, Manero stops to buy two slices of takeaway pizza. The lyrics of the Bee Gees' hit ring true for Tony Manero's character: "Well you can tell by the way I walk, I'm a woman's man, no time to talk."[170] It is noteworthy how overtly heterosexual the lyrics to the Bee Gees' hit 'Stayin' Alive' are. With lines like "I'm a woman's man", the song 'Stayin' Alive' tells the narrative of an excessive heterosexuality. It is widely acknowledged by film critics and academics alike that Tony's proclivity for the phallocentric dance of disco in *Fever* is an overt performance of heterosexuality.[171]

Returning to the opening sequence: the camera follows the can of paint in Manero's hand for a few beats before becoming side-tracked, like Manero, by a blue shirt with long pointed collars displayed in another shop window. Manero is

[170] Barry Gibb, Maurice Gibb & Robin Gibb, *Stayin' Alive* [song] The Bee Gees (RSO, 1977)
[171] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.4

drawn in closer, and is compelled to enter the store. In a matter-of-fact way, Manero approaches the store clerk and offers to buy the "blue shirt in the window"[172] via "layaway."[173] Upon exiting the store - paint can still in hand - Manero tries to attract the attentions of another woman on the street. However unsuccessful, Manero is clearly undeterred. The camera treatment is different when introducing this woman than to the previous woman Tony had passed on the Brooklyn street. In this instance, the camera does take on Manero's POV, shooting in a handheld manner; the camera movements are shaky as they get right up into the woman's personal space. This use of POV is a quick digression from the normative *modus operandi* of contemplating Manero's body in a combination of full length and close-up shots as he struts down the busy street. The camera quickly returns to shooting Manero full body.

Onwards, Manero makes his way toward the hardware store where he works. Donning an ill-fitted shop apron over his impeccably fitted leather jacket, Manero swoops in to deliver the paint can to an elderly woman who complains that she has been waiting there for over a half hour. It becomes clear now, that the hardware store where Manero works was unable to fulfil this woman's request. Manero's boss sends him out on an errand to find the customer's paint – while out doing so however, Manero has been swanning on the streets, trying to pick up women with his charms, buying shirts on "layaway", gazing at shoes in window shop fronts, and stopping for a quick bite to eat on the move. These opening four minutes tell us a great deal about Manero: the cheeky, charming, boastful, arrogant Brooklyn youth. Importantly what these few opening moments tell us about Manero is that he is essentially stealing time away from work. By doing so, there is an intense tension evident between what he wants and his material circumstances: a disconnection between being and seeming. The buying, the grooming, the time wasting, are all small rebellions against being fixed within working class identity that Manero finds himself in.

[172] *Saturday Night Fever* [film] dir. John Badham (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977)
[173] North American: a system of paying a deposit to secure an item for later purchase. In South Africa: lay-buy.

I would argue that this display of rebellion toward his workplace and class standing is an extension of Manero's approach to masculinity, or, more accurately, his performance of a hypermasculinity. By constantly straddling the line between being and seeming whether that be in his performance of class which defies easy qualification, or his approach to self-care as seen in the grooming scene that I will examine in the ensuing subheading, Manero's brand of masculinity shows itself as rebellious to quantifiable delineation. By doing so then, Manero is able to mark unstable the notion of masculinity as an unquestioned norm. In this manner, Manero is then ultimately open to be read queerly.

HETEROSEXUAL, BUT NARCISSISTIC:

Analysis of the Grooming Scene

If Manero is the ultimate "man's man" (according to the maker's of the film and Nik Cohn's original journalistic piece), heterosexual in his sexuality (bordering on crassness), his chosen skin (clothing) tells another story altogether. Skin-tight trousers, muscles and package exposed and on show, Manero's body is often on full display. As Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay, 'Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', portends: Woman displayed as sexual object becomes the normative leit-motif of erotic spectacle[174]. One of the ways this is achieved is by freezing the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.[175] In this way, erotic, cinematic spectacle tends to work against narrative. What marks *Fever* an interesting discussion in terms of pleasure within narrative cinema, is that it is the male body that appears to command this slowing down for "moments of erotic contemplation."[176] In her essay Mulvey also draws the connections between narcissism and pleasurable looking/scopophilia.[177] These concepts of the male body, narcissism, erotic contemplation, and the slowing down of narrative to assess the erotic object is most apparent in the film's grooming scenes. Narcissism in Mulvey's formulation

[174] Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue (1975) pp.6-18
[175] Ibid. (p.9)
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid. (p.8)

is associated with action and not with visual spectacle. However, I wish to outline the ways in which the erotic spectacle of Manero is achieved through shooting style in the action of the grooming scene, as well as circle back to the central argument of this chapter: the paradoxical character of Tony Manero and his disconnect between being and seeming.

Neale makes the connection between masculinity and narcissism in ways that interestingly connect with the males of the filmic texts discussed in this dissertation. In speaking about the 1967 gangster film *Le Samuraï* (Melville) where Alain Delon plays a hit-man, Neale states how Costello's (Delon) "own narcissism is stressed in particular through his obsessive concern with his appearance." [178] This idea is applicable to Manero in *Fever*, but also has relevance for Travolta's character in *Grease*: Danny Zuko. Obsessed with grooming and preening, these men are the seemingly ultimate examples of masculine narcissism. Manero and his posse are constantly impeccably groomed. Getting ready for Saturday night is a ceremonial exercise: preparation is key. As the grooming scene commences, Manero combs his hair as a tight close-up shot reveals his steely blue eyes staring fixed into the mirror in front of him (see addendum B) as another Bee Gees hit is heard on the film's soundtrack (quite fittingly; 'Night Fever'). [179]

Addendum B - Tony Manero prepares himself for a night at the discotheque. He combs his hair while staring determinedly into the mirror in front of him. His actions are ritualistic and considered.

Manero stares directly into the lens of the camera – the camera acting as a proxy for an invisible mirror. In this manner, Manero stares directly at us – the viewer –

[178] Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6 (1983) p.6
[179] Barry Gibb, Maurice Gibb & Robin Gibb, *Night Fever* [song] The Bee Gees (RSO, 1977)

the image of himself to himself made only possible by reflecting our gaze. The notion of the mirror is salient as it serves as an emblem of the possible contemplation of the body. In fact, all three films in this dissertation mark the mirror as an important tool for reflecting not only in a physical sense, but also in a figurative sense.

Mulvey notes in her essay how Jacques Lacan has described the moment when a child recognises its own image in the mirror as crucial for the constitution of the ego.[180] She extrapolates that after this realisation of the image of oneself in the mirror, "his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body." Thus the image of one's body mediated through the reflection of a mirror serves as an important reminder of the constitution of the ego. But moreover, it serves as a reminder again of the line that Tony straddles between being and seeming. While a mirror can be used as a benchmark to judge how we look physically, it can also stand as a symbol for a deeper, more metaphorical sentiment. Therefore, the inclusion of the mirror as a twofold entity invites the idea to the fore that interrogates both the ways things are in a physical sense of being, but also how they can be understood in a more symbolic, figurative manner – of seeming.

As Manero readies himself for a night at the disco in his bedroom, he does so amidst posters of his heroes, Bruce Lee and Rocky Balboa to name a few. Most often scantily dressed and revealing ripped torsos of muscular limbs, these 1970s action idols are at first consideration relatively different to Manero. While the aforementioned actions heroes possess a male icon status by way of their ability to perform a specific action,[181] Manero is contrasted to that – especially in this scene. Involved in "the traditionally feminizing activities of disco dancing and self-grooming",[182] Manero stands at odds with his cohorts.

[180] Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3 (1975) p.8
[181] Martial Arts and boxing are the known 'actions' performed by Jackie Chan and Rocky Balboa, respectively.
[182] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.1

Yet, before the imagery on the bedroom walls stand to delineate anything about Manero's own sexuality, it is important to note the posters in detail. As Bruce Lee stands posed for a photograph, he manoeuvres two Martial Arts weapons in either hand; his body is impeccably lit to reveal all of his torso's hard-worked muscles. Similarly, the poster of Sylvester Stallone as Rocky as seen in Manero's bedroom illustrates a sweat-ridden Rocky, presumably fresh from a (boxing) fight. Given the fact that Manero in this scene is currently performing the traditionally feminised acts of grooming while a bevy of scantily clad men 'look onto' his activity, his heterosexuality may in turn be questioned. As Christodoulou states, part of counterbalancing this notion and therefore 'rescuing' someone from potential homosexuality is to include "a youthful and often violent brand of heterosexual machismo"[183] into the mix. The violent brand of heterosexual and male machismo the images of Lee and Rocky provide – midst action and sweat – is the necessary excuse to overlook potential homosexuality. Tasker synthesises Dyer's thoughts:

> Thus 'when not actually caught in an act, the male image still promises activity by the way the body is posed' since 'images of men must disavow … passivity if they are to be kept in line with dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity'.[184]

Neale's comments on the fight as a site of displaced eroticism within Hollywood's action genres, can clearly be seen in this context. Thus, it is perhaps inevitable that it is "the *action* cinema which provides a showcase for the display of the muscular male body"[185] without said body having itself opened up to the assumption of queerness.

Although the 'feminising' act of self-grooming may appear to stand in stark contrast to the action images of Lee and Rocky, there are some similarities to Manero. Simply put, it is the bodies of the three men 'sharing' the bedroom space in this scene: Lee, Rocky, and Manero. Male, muscular, well-toned and in shape,

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[183] Ibid. (p.2)
[184] Yvonne Tasker, Chapter 6: The Body in Crisis of the Body Triumphant? *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.118
[185] Ibid.

the three men share these qualities with one another. As the scene quickly cuts from the Bruce Lee poster to a shot now of Manero framed in a mirror of a feminised dressing table, Manero performs a Martial Arts move channelling Lee's own prowess. A near full-frontal view of Manero – his body - is seen. As Manero drops his hands with a resistance that displays his muscles, the camera quickly cuts to perform a smooth continual shot of Manero's hands, joined at his lower stomach now, shot from below in a display of power, and strength.

Acknowledging what Tony wears is just as integral to what he does not wear. In this scene, "it is what he does not wear that accentuates insinuations of closeted homosexuality."[186] Before Tony begins to dress himself up for the night ahead, he is in a state of *un*dress for most of the grooming scene, donning nothing but a pair of tight black bikini briefs, which sit low on his hips and contour his body.[187] As Christoloudou explains, "Tony's tight, low rising, black briefs sacrifice (masculine) practicality for (feminine) style."[188] Yet, more than that, the briefs draw attention to what they are supposed to conceal, the penis.[189] To contextualise this assertion, Dyer further adds that the symbolism of male sexuality is overwhelmingly centred on the genitals, especially the penis,[190] thus making this sartorial choice in *Fever* one that is specifically saying something about Tony's male sexuality. According to Christodoulou, what further sets Tony apart from the heterosexual norm of the 1970s are the colour and cut of his briefs. I believe that in this scene, it is fundamental to grasp the sustained relay of looks toward the male body – whether that be Manero himself, or the other men shown in the posters. By extension, the slow contemplation of the male body foregrounds the erotic and libidinal energy of Manero's character.

In terms of the posters, the presence of more skimpily clad *male* bodies than female is intriguing and offers another paradox to Manero's character: posters of men made *for* men provides a strange context for this representation of normative

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[186] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.11
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid. (p.12)
[189] Ibid.
[190] Richard Dyer, quoted in Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.11

masculinity and its assumption of heterosexuality. However, just when the narcissistic display of Tony's body as well as the inclusion of male muscle heroes of the 1970s threatens to challenge Manero's heterosexuality, the film cuts to a poster of Farah Fawcett, a seemingly standard male bedroom artefact of the time (see addendum C). The bodies adorning the walls (male and female), "looking" at Manero, with inclusion of Manero's own body make a pertinent point about the film's ensuing action. The body and its parts serve as an important storytelling agent in this narrative – from the dancing mangled bodies on the dance floor at the 2001 Odyssey nightclub, to the flailing body of Bobby C to his death, to the attempted rape of Stephanie by Tony, to the intertwined hands of the same two at the film's closing.

Addendum C - The iconic Farah Fawcett poster seemingly found in nearly every young male's bedroom of the time.

As the cuts between the disco dancers and grooming scene feature diegetic sounds of clapping inside the discotheque, the two distinct spaces of discotheque and bedroom all appear as one in Tony's mind. The poster of Farah Fawcett looks right into the camera, or at Manero/his penis. The shot directly before the zoom in shot of Fawcett's toothy smile is of Manero in his underwear, his crotch on full display. As Manero continues to ready himself for a night on the town, his movements are trance-like. He adorns himself with jewellery – he dons a crucifix in keeping with his Italian Catholic identity. The care he takes to wear these artefacts is considered and ritualistic. As mentioned, this kind of careful preening has traditionally been associated with women. However, barely clothed, the bulge in his crotch on full display, there is no denying Manero is a man in this scene. Even the choice of name for this character reinforces masculinity: *Man*ero. His chest is covered with hair, and shoulders broad. He opens his closet door, switches on the light inside the wardrobe and retrieves a shirt from a hanger - a deadpan daze veiling his eyes. He

zips up his salmon pink trousers while sashaying his hips: the clothes, the music, the moves, all tied together, one cannot exist without the other.

Tony zips up his trousers as the camera swings around to frame him in the dressing table's mirror, buttoning up his shirt and looking approvingly at his ensemble/body. As his father enters the room to call his son down for dinner, he too pauses a beat and takes in Manero's body: his outfit, his movement. Tony's father's reaction is subdued, although one of acceptance: it is clear in this moment that Manero's Saturday night endeavours are ritualistic, and something Tony's family perceives as essentially ordinary. Tony's father focuses his gaze toward his son in this scene but quickly refocuses his attention to sneak a look at the near-exposed breast of Farah Fawcett in her iconic red bathing suit snapshot. By mediating his gaze, the camera follows Tony's father's gaze onto the Farah Fawcett poster. With this choice of camerawork - essentially standing in for the father's gaze - there is no denying *his* heterosexuality in this moment as his scopophilic gaze centres on Fawcett's nipple. I found Christodoulou's analysis of this scene very helpful. He adds how "in a textbook-like example of the Mulveyian male gaze"[191] Farah Fawcett's body becomes objectified and fragmented under Tony's father's gaze[192] as shown through a POV style shot.

Albeit subtle, the sexuality of the film's characters is never left unknown, for example, Manero's father's quick glance at Fawcett's nipple. As his father tells him dinner is ready, Tony is reluctant: "I got my shirt on alright"[193], he tells his father. Once more, clothing and particularly the shirt is an item of importance, and of conversation. Tony Manero's chosen skin is of utmost prominence, both in this scene and throughout the film.

The scene fades to the shot of the dinner table. A prepared meal on a plate is shot as the camera pans up to show Tony seated at the dinner table. His carefully considered ensemble introduced in the scene just before this appears humorously hidden behind a white tablecloth/sheet, the effect looking like a sort of toga-

[191] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) (p.14)
[192] Ibid.
[193] *Saturday Night Fever* [film] dir. John Badham (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977)

inspired shield against mom's spaghetti and sauce. In this scene, the Manero family dynamic is set up: they are quintessentially devout Catholic Italian-Americans, so much so that Tony's older brother is even a priest. A portrait of him stands prideful upon a shelf. Tony notes how each time his mother even as much as mentions "Freddy Jr.'s" name she crosses herself in classic Catholic fashion. Contrast to this overt piety is Tony's swaying hips in the scene just prior to this one. Tony oozes sexuality with every move. Clad in skin-tight pants and dusty pink apparel, Tony appears so out of place in this dining room. As the Manero family dynamic further reveals itself, the viewer is lead to believe that the protagonist in our eye (Tony) is not the family favourite. Freddy Jr., the priest, holds this title. As Frank Manero, Sr. serves a second slap in Tony's direction, he makes the error of doing so to Tony's hair. Amusingly, and in an excellent performance on Travolta's part, Manero exclaims frustratingly: "Would ya just watch the hair? Ya know, I work on my hair a long time and you hit it. He hits my hair."[194] Again in a show of the disconnection between being and seeming, Tony's idea of "hard work" is spending hours grooming and preening his hair, and not, well, actually working.

As mentioned above, there is a disconnect and paradoxical quality of Manero's character that displays itself within tension to do with class. The fact that Manero pays immaculate attention to his outward appearance is no longer simply shown or hinted at, it is overtly proclaimed by the character himself. This same overt obsession with outward appearance – and most particularly using Tony's hair as a vehicle for discussion – is referenced later on in the film, inciting a similar (albeit slightly darker) sense of humour. When Freddy Jr. returns home as a disgraced priest who has left the church to his family's utter disgust and shame, he (Freddy Jr.) tells Tony what has transpired. Tony's response is so arbitrary it is comical. He responds: "Do you think I'm losing my hair?"

Further, I contend that *Fever* is in fact a cult film – anomalous, outsider, cultish for a certain audience. *Fever* ticks the boxes of some of Mathijs and Mendik's points on the anatomy of cult film, notably Genre, Intertextuality, and Loose Ends. To

[194] John Travolta as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* [film] dir. John Badham (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977)

expand, cult film's approach to genre is to "blur and push the generic conventions they are supposed to respect."[195] By "mixing genres"[196] *Fever* blurs the line between coming-of-age story, musical, teenpic, drama, and sometimes even comedy. In addition, *Fever* makes use of intertextuality most conspicuously in the way in which Manero incorrectly imitates Al Pacino after seeing his *Serpico* (Lumet, 1973) poster on the wall after a night at the discotheque when he suddenly recalls how a girl likened kissing him to kissing Al Pacino. Manero celebrates the compliment by enacting Pacino's bisexual character in *Dog Day Afternoon* (Lumet, 1975), instead of his (Pacino's) heterosexual police officer character in *Serpico*.[197] This particular intertextual reference also performs a confusion of sexuality that I have also argued for in this part of the chapter. Finally, as Mathijs and Mendik claim: "many cult films leave room for narrative and stylistic loose ends."[198] The ending of *Fever* is essentially a loose end. The viewer is not entirely certain whether Stephanie and Tony end the film as lovers, or merely friends. At the film's closing, Tony appears at Stephanie's apartment in Manhattan, the two reconcile their relationship whilst holding hands and agreeing to be friends. The ending is therefore open to multiple interpretations, thus is ultimately a loose end.

In summation, the typical Hollywood film struggles to garner a cult film status "because it is perceived by *everyone* in basically the same way."[199] Danny Peary describes how quintessential Hollywood films exist as the director's be-all and say-all message to his/her audience. Whereas, with cult films, their message is never singular: "cult films are born in controversy, in arguments over quality, themes, talent, and other matters."[200] As a result of this, *Fever* can be described as a cult film because it possesses so many variants of perception. For example, Christoloudou claims it is Manero's ethnicity that allows for his narcissism and

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[195] Mathijs & Mendik (eds), Editorial Introduction: What is Cult Film? *The Cult Film Reader* (Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University/McGraw-Hill Education, 2008) p.2
[196] Ibid.
[197] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.12
[198] Mathijs & Mendik (eds), Editorial Introduction: What is Cult Film? *The Cult Film Reader* (Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University/McGraw-Hill Education, 2008) p.3
[199] Danny Peary, *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird and the Wonderful* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1981)
[200] Ibid.

grooming practices to be perceived as ultimately (hetero)normative, whilst some critics/academics think Manero is a closeted homosexual character. Whatever the case, there is definitely no one way of viewing *Fever*. Whether one views it queerly, or through a lens of heteronormativity, there are multiple paradoxes apparent and thus an array of speculation will always surround *Fever* – an underlying disconnect between being and seeming.

HEAVENLY BODIES:
Catholic Aestheticism, Disco & An Embattled Masculinity

As mentioned previously, Tony Manero hails from the Italian-American neighbourhood of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Here, Tony is the "undisputed king."[201] In line with his Italian heritage, the Manero's take part in practising Catholicism. Besides the languid grooming scene where Tony is seen fixing a Catholic-crucifix relic around his neck, the ensuing dinner scene aids in demonstrating Manero's Catholic custom. Seated around the dinner table in a series of over-the-shoulders shots, Flo asks Tony if he could walk her to church later. However, the viewer is already aware that Tony plans on visiting a different temple that night. While getting dressed before dinner, quick cut shots reveal homage to the discotheque: moving bodies, hands clapping to a beat, timed spins and flowing fabric. A direct connection between the Catholic church and the disco is introduced in the grooming scene when as soon as Tony dons his crucifix, the camera cuts to an interior shot of the discotheque, a group of bodies performing the signature index finger point move, shot from a low angle.

In this chapter subheading I will make the argument for a connection between the Catholic aestheticism and its relationship to disco, and how this inclusion in *Fever* could in turn link to the notion of an embattled masculinity that I consider Manero

[201] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.6

to inhabit. I will do this by providing a close-textual analysis of the initial disco scene.

Analysis of the Disco Scene

The camera cuts from the interior dinner scene to an exterior shot of Tony waiting for his friends, shot from a slightly lower angle to denote a sense of foreboding dominance (Tony is the king of the disco, after all). Wearing a red leather jacket over his dramatically lapelled salmon pink shirt, Tony is dressed in a combination of hard and soft textures, masculine and feminine surfaces. As the car jerkily pulls up, his rag-tag bunch of buddies hurl 'endearing' curse words to him, and hang partially outside of the still-moving vehicle. Once Tony flings himself into the car, they perform a swift hand-brake turn, changing the car's direction completely, and speed off in the opposite direction in which they came, to the sound of other cars hooting profusely at this instance of reckless behaviour. This streak of recklessness continues as the character Gus of the friend group tells Tony what they have lined up for the ensuing evening: "Oh yeah, we got some ups, we got some downs, three ludes,[202] two Js, and a half a bottle of vodka."[203] As the car rounds the corner where the monolithic building that houses the 2001 Odyssey Club arises, disco music emanates from behind its high walls. As they make their final 'costume' adjustments the link between these men and the 'performance' they enact every Saturday night is firmly drawn. The blocking is even done in such a way to look as if the group are lining up in a formation, readying themselves for a performance, as they pause for just a beat outside the club's doors. In this regard, masculinity is literally made out to look like a performance, something that somebody readies himself or herself for.

Outside the two large entrance doors, 'A Fifth of Beethoven' by Walter Murphy – a disco spin on Ludwig van Beethoven's classical piece Fifth Symphony – comes into full audio as the posse enter the hallowed halls of the 2001 Odyssey. Tony in the

[202] Methaqualone/Quaalude became increasingly popular as a recreational drug and club drug in the late 1960s and 1970s, known variously as "ludes".
[203] Paul Ornstein as Gus in *Saturday Night Fever* [film] dir. John Badham (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977)

lead – as always – punctuating the rhythm of the music with his swagger, knees jolting up high as they make their way down into the depths of the club's chaos. As Manero walks down the steps to the beat, shot from below and centred to portray dominance, the camera dollies his movement into the club space. Tony is clearly a regular: he nods greetings to fellow club-goers as he passes by, handing out kisses to women and handshakes to men. Manero is taller than most people there – furthering his "undisputed king" of Bay Ridge status. By casting everyone else in the club as considerably shorter than Travolta, everyone else around Manero appear as mere minions. The camera cuts from a medium close up of Tony approaching the lighted floor to the people occupying the dance floor. As this is done, the gaze is mediated through Tony's eyes. The camera shakily takes in the dance floor as a POV shot, as the movement of the camera dollies and pans around the mingle of moving bodies.

They make their way through the dancing crowd and settle at an open table astride the dance-floor. Tony, disinterested in what his friends have to say, sucks on his cigarette and stares out, mesmerised, at the tangle of bodies in the dance floor pit. The camera mediates Tony's gaze away from his friends and the waitress requesting their drinks orders back toward the dance floor again - he just cannot seem to tear his eyes away from the dance floor. The sound of his friends ordering drinks is also drowned out as soon as Tony fixes his attention back to the dance floor. Because Tony is the mediator of the gaze and the protagonist, the viewer's attention goes wherever his does.

As the camera contemplates Manero's face he in turn contemplates the dance floor; the club as a congregation of bodies that might be described as akin to a Catholic mass. With no windows, this club acts as a confessional space, literally closed off to the outside world. However, the energy inside the club is far from depressing/grim. Instead, the high-octane energy of the youthfully libidinal bodies all moving as one in some instances is more aligned to a celebratory ceremony. With this imagery in mind, the club is transformed into a festive entity – the wildly flashing strobe lights of the club become synonymous with the image of a church's multi-coloured stained glass windows. Close up shots of scopophilic

body parts moving fervently with libidinal energy are reminiscent of the opening sequence of *Dirty Dancing.* 'Disco Inferno' begins to play and Manero's languid movements displaying his cool, calm and collected nature fall away to reveal a pumped up energy-infused proxy. The song's title, 'Disco Inferno', possesses a link to Dante's Inferno (aka hell). The discotheque is like a church in this scene, but it is also conversely the opposite. It is both celebration/ritual and inferno/hell with its proclivity toward the 'sinful' in life: drugs, alcohol, sex outside of marriage, *etcetera*.

For all intents and purposes, what exists here is all that exists: everyone is living for *this* precise moment. Actions such as having fun, enjoying music, dancing, drinking, drug-taking, kissing, *etcetera* all affirm their youth. The young mostly come here to dance, and in Tony's case, nothing much else. On this point Tony, annoyed, says to his friends in reply to them offering him some speed: "Can't you just get off on dancing?"[204] A connection is drawn between the club space and the basis of religion, namely that of Manero's own Catholicism. There are instances of losing oneself to an energy that is greater than yourself that is so in line with devout religious activity. The Catholic sensibility is evident throughout the filmic world of *Fever*: although one may inhabit a gritty world, there are also lighter and lofty things available (in this case, disco) that pave the way to a redemption of character.

Continuing with the analysis of the disco scene, the camera tracks Manero and Annette's arrival on the dance floor, the crowd making way for them. Manero, like a God, performs a move, and Annette copies. Alternatively, if Manero was in fact like his brother and therefore a priest and Annette as his subject, she unquestionably would follow his commands and do as he says. The camera rests on a strobe light overhead and pans down past a mirror ball – the decadent ornamentation of this discotheque 'church'. Framed off-centre to the right, the camera contemplates a dancing Manero and Annette. At times the camera movements appear handheld from a low angle creating a link between the

[204] John Travolta as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* [film] dir. John Badham (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977)

movement from the dancing and the movement of the camera itself. The use of handheld shots creates a more staccato and gritty effect, deeming it not so Hollywood-polished. The camera then cuts to Tony's friends still seated at the table flanking the dance floor. The camera movement is different when contemplating the seated friends: unflinching, and a lot more rigid. As the bodies move wildly on the dance floor, so does the camera.

As Manero and Annette perform a choreographed move that features a freeze-frame element, the camera stops moving also to contemplate this contrast amidst the hustle-bustle of the bodies all around them. The pair appear like statues, religious relics: still, serene, unmoving in an otherwise chaotic world. The camera shoots Manero looking down onto his 'subject', Annette. His facial expression soft with compassion, appreciation, is different to the words he delivered to her just moments before which were biting, mean, hard: "I'll dance with you, but it's not like you're my dream girl or nothin'."[205] Also important to note here is that there is a defiant refusal of romance - by delivering these scathing words to Annette just moments before in front of Manero's homosocial posse of friends, Manero is performing a role to (possibly) appease his friends. This overt display of machismo to the point of crudeness in front of a homosocial group of friends is something seen in Travolta's character in *Grease* at times toward his love interest in the film: Sandy.

There is also a similarity between excessive displays of Catholic aestheticism and the chosen sartorial choices of the disco-enjoyer. "Tony Manero's preference for bold, contrasting colours, frilly lapels, and oversized platform shoes"[206] are all excessive, over-the-top aesthetic choices not only for a straight man of the time, but in general.[207] Borrelli-Perrson describes the 2018 Met Gala theme, 'Heavenly Bodies & The Catholic Imagination' as "the intersection of faith and fashion, the sacred and profane, as it were".[208] In *Fever,* this 'intersection' is made apparent by the combination of piety and flamboyance. Piety in the way Manero dons his

[205] John Travolta as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* [film] dir. John Badham (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977)
[206] Stelios Christodoulou, 'A straight heterosexual film': Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Saturday Night Fever. *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network,* Volume 22, Issue 2 (2011) p.11
[207] Ibid.
[208] Laird Borrelli-Persson, Met Gala 2018 Theme: "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination", *Vogue.com* (2018)

crucifix at all times under his frilly-lapelled shirt that evokes a sense of flamboyance and excess. What the latter seems to suggest is a feminised way of dressing. Another interesting point on the connection between Catholic aestheticism and *Fever* is the former's tendency towards the worship of the divine feminine (i.e. Virgin Mary). In comparison to other versions of Christianity, Catholicism worships the feminine – in so doing, it becomes an aesthetically excessive version of Christianity, and truly a rather camp form of name brand Christianity.

Linda Williams describes the musical as a film genre that both portrays and affects the sensational body.[209] To further the connection between the disco and the Catholic imagination, religion, and more specifically Catholicism also portrays and affects the sensational body (of Christ). The image of Christ laid bare across the rungs of a crucifix display a sense of an embattled man. To explore this a step further, the image could also come to connote an embattled masculinity. As the film progresses it is clear to see that Manero is an embattled individual/man. It is also most evident that the contemplation of Travolta's body in *Fever* is to portray a sensational body. The sensationalised body in this context can be understood as a body that has been purposefully built. As Tasker cites, "bodybuilding has been associated with a narcissism considered culturally inappropriate for men, betraying a supposedly feminised concern with appearance." [210] Thus, an embattled masculinity emerges with Manero's sensational and 'heavenly'[211] body at the centre of the discussion. While although *Fever* is meant to be a heterosexual film, it still has the potential for a queer reading based on the performativity of the male, sensationalised body and the camp aesthetics of the film.

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[209] Linda Williams, Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. *Film Quarterly* Volume 44, Issue 4 (1991) p.4
[210] Yvonne Tasker, Chapter 6: The Body in Crisis of the Body Triumphant? *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.119
[211] 'Heavenly' used as a synonym for sensational, but also to refer to the connection of Manero's body to the Catholic imagination in *Fever*

In this chapter I have looked closely at the filmic text *Saturday Night Fever* and tried to uncover some of the ways Manero is set up to be a paradoxical character, further aligning him to be read potentially queerly.

Under the subheading 'Heavenly Bodies', I have shown how Catholic aestheticism has been used in *Fever* in a threefold manner. For one, Manero's Catholicism been used in *Fever* to fully nuance his cultural and religious background, but more than that, I argued how it has also been used as a springboard to draw further connections to the potentially embattled masculinity of Manero's character. For this line of thought, I likened the potentially embattled masculinity possessed by Manero to the embattled (image of) masculinity pertaining to Christ in Christianity. However, as mentioned above, the threefold approach comes in the form of understanding Catholicism's unique interest in worshipping the divine feminine (i.e. Virgin Mary). By intensifying the 'magical operation' that Catholicism imbues into its constituents so well, *Fever* is able to straddle the line between displays of hypermasculinity and the celebration of aesthetic excessiveness that seeks to revel in the feminine. By imbuing reality with a heightened sense of aesthetic 'bells and whistles', Catholicism can be read in terms of a camp sensibility.

To conclude, the paradoxical qualities of Manero's character and his disconnection between being and seeming make him open to a queer, and therefore camp interpretation. While there are some similarities between *Fever* and the next film I wish to analyse, *Dirty Dancing*, their main commonality lies in the way in which the male body has been used as erotic spectacle, through the mode of dance. While instances of hypermasculinity have also been used in the filmic tapestry of *Dirty Dancing*, it is arguably a much different approach that could if anything hint at the difference in production of the two films *Fever* and *Dirty Dancing*, released in 1977 and ten years later in 1987, respectively. In the ensuing chapter I wish to explore the themes of surveillance on the male dancing body of Patrick Swayze's Jonny Castle. I have used the term surveillance as a synonym of 'observation'. But,

critically, it is the close, examining, and obsessive qualities of the word surveillance that provide the kind of intimate observation I wish to grapple with.

CHAPTER 3:

The Inversion of the Gaze & The Doubling of the Working Class Male Body when Performing the Labour of Dance in *Dirty Dancing*

As the so-called 'Star Wars for girls'[212], there is no denying the long stretching scope that *Dirty Dancing* has on the world of musical film, and film in general since its cinematic debut in 1987. Produced on a low budget, *Dirty Dancing* became an overnight sensation and a box office hit.[213]

Written by a woman, Eleanor Bergstein, the film is in large part based on her own adolescence. As a youngster, Bergstein would also vacation in the luxurious resorts of the Catskill Mountains over long summers. A teenage Mambo queen, Bergstein competed in local "dirty dancing" competitions, and was also referred to affectionately as "Baby" growing up. Much like Baby in the film, Bergstein was also from a Jewish family and her father was a doctor. Perhaps one of the most redeeming qualities of *Dirty Dancing's* legendary status is that it feels so nostalgic, and authentic: this is surely based on the fact that Bergstein wasn't an established film/screenwriter at the time of writing the film, but rather someone who conjured a narrative from experiences that were reminiscent of her own childhood.

As Nicholas Brown simply proclaims in his review of the film: *Dirty Dancing* is "a movie about music and bodies."[214] Brown expands that although *Dirty Dancing* is a movie about being young and discovering dance and music, it is also fundamentally about youth and dance's necessary corollary: sex.[215] When describing the opening moments of the film set in 1963, Brown adds: "We are in a post-war white suburban

[212] Unknown Author, Women's Most-watched Films, *Sky Movies* (2007)
[213] Louis B. Hobson, Dirty Dancing: A classic story on stage. *Edmonton Sun* (2016)
[214] Nicholas Brown, The Spoiler Alert: Dirty Dancing, *Medium.com* (2016)
[215] Ibid.

Eden. And so, of course, we will need a snake. A sexy sexy snake. Enter Patrick Swayze."[216]

Taking Swayze as the "sexy sexy snake" in *Dirty Dancing* into account, I wish to explore themes of surveillance on the male body. As per the previous chapter, my choice to use the word 'surveillance' is noteworthy. 'Surveillance' is a term that carves out the close, intimate and meticulous observation of the male body in *Dirty Dancing.* I intend to provide instances where - as opposed to Laura Mulvey's widely adopted notion that the woman's body is traditionally used as the object of the viewer's gaze[217] – the male body is instead featured in the centre as erotic spectacle. While, for the most part, Mulvey's observations about the male gaze continue to be borne out in mainstream cinema, within the 1970s and 1980s; this film demonstrates that the male body can also be the object of erotic spectacle, even in an overtly heterosexual and mainstream Hollywood production.

As Feuer contends: the musical frequently makes concessions to use as its "true motif" the demonstration of marking the woman as the object of spectacle in the film.[218] However, *Dirty Dancing* discourages this 'true motif' as Feuer calls it, by placing the male in the centre as erotic spectacle for much of the film's duration. I would argue that although Frances "Baby" Houseman is the protagonist of the film, her body is ultimately a secondary spectacle to Johnny's. The primed stature of Johnny Castle's character is the erotic spectacle that captures the female's gaze throughout many of the film's scenes.

Expanding on Mulvey's argument in which she contends the male star is an object of the look, but he is denied the function of an erotic object.[219] Normatively, as Neale suggests, the viewer is "offered the spectacle of male bodies, but bodies unmarked as objects of erotic display."[220] This is clearly not the case with the sampled musical dance film texts in this dissertation – and I would argue, most

[216] Ibid.
[217] Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3 (1975)
[218] Jane Feuer, A Postscript for the Nineties *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) pp.130-131
[219] D N Rodowick, quoted in Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6 (1983) p.8
[220] Ibid. (p.14)

especially with Johnny Castle in *Dirty Dancing.* As these bodies are hardened, laboured, and worked, they exist as a spectacle and are there to be looked at and enjoyed. But even more crucially, it is the addition of the performative dimensions of dance that allow these male bodies to be marked as spectacle.

The most prevalent order in film is the voyeuristic male 'viewer' over the female 'object'. Therefore, patriarchy becomes the predominant standard in filmic representation. With that being said, when these "voyeuristic intentions"[221] are being utilised in a different way to the perceived norm, it further complicates the matter of the male body in action as the object of the gaze, with the idea of "a repressed homosexual voyeurism."[222] "A voyeurism 'not without its problems" writes Willemen, "The look at the male produces just as much anxiety as the look at the female."[223] Willemen explains that in our heterosexual and patriarchal society:

> The male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed.[224]

In the musical dance film this 'motivation' of action is in fact the act (and labour, especially in the case of Johnny Castle in *Dirty Dancing*) of dance. The act of dancing gives permission/motivation for action, which then provides a comfort for the heterosexual male spectator. A major convention underlying mainstream Hollywood film is that the spectator is white, heterosexual, and male.[225] Interesting to note here is the overt heterosexuality of dancing in couples which might provide the guise through which we are allowed to view a performing male body. The presence of a female dance partner and the iconography of romance allow for a performative masculinity which might not otherwise be permitted. The inclusion of action, albeit dance, still provides the male with an activity to perform, thus restoring the "historical conditioning"[226] that the male in film be in

[221] Patricia Quinn as Magenta in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [film] dir. Jim Sharman. UK: Michael White Productions, 1975)
[222] Ibid.
[223] Paul Willemen, quoted in Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6 (1983) p.8
[224] Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6 (1983) p.8
[225] Ramsey Burt, 2: Looking at the Male. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.32
[226] Ibid. (p.11)

action. However, the very nature of the action (being dance), promotes notions of femininity, and, therefore, queerness, potentially rendering the heterosexual male spectator uncomfortable once more. To further complicate matters, "any consequent eroticisation of the male dancing body" becomes "a source of homophobic panic for an (assumed) heterosexual male viewer."[227] In short, "for some male spectators, an involuntary identification with the male performer might have a worrying potential to arouse shame and embarrassment for this man whose body is offered as sexual spectacle."[228] Thus dance, and more specifically, men who dance, are always further complicating this 'queering' battle.

It is interesting to note how heterosexual men generally like to insinuate that this film is not for them, even though it foregrounds a heterosexual coupling. What this suggests is the 'queering battle' that dance as a performative mode expresses. It queers the pitch of the heteronormative coupling too much, causing straight male viewers of the film to hysterically proclaim their heterosexuality to deter being "submerged into the horror of femininity" as Dyer quips, or, worse yet, be affected by a potential queerness seeping in. As testament to this are a number of user reviews found online on IMDb. For example, this one by 'film-critic': "Even as a very masculine male I find this film very entertaining."[229] And from 'charest58': "Of course I don't admit any of this to my male friends. It's [*Dirty Dancing*] like a guilty pleasure."[230]

By using close textual analysis of the film in addition to making the case for the reversal of the male gaze in *Dirty Dancing*, I hope to also illustrate the ways in which Johnny Castle's character has been crafted to portray paradox, much like Tony Manero in *Fever*. But, contrasting to Manero in *Fever*, Johnny Castle's character is less overtly paradoxical, but instead features a doubling effect built into his character construction. By focusing on the working class dimensions of Johnny's character, I wish to uncover the ways in which there is a doubling of the working class male body when performing the labour of dance. This encapsulates

[227] Ramsey Burt, 2: Looking at the Male. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.43
[228] Ramsey Burt, 2: Looking at the Male. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.45
[229] Unknown Author, User Review: Dirty Dancing, *IMDb* (2004)
[230] Unknown Author, User Review: Dirty Dancing, *IMDb* (2004)

the central interest of this thesis in destabilising the insistence of heteronormativity as displayed on behalf of the narrative, and instead realises that avenues for queer ways of seeing are still relevant.

CONTEXTUALISING THE CONVERSATION

I wish to make some connections between this musical with its focus on the male body and relate this discussion to the context the film was made in. As a film made in the latter part of the 1980s, the film sits squarely inside of the Reagan era. "Rupert Wilkinson views the 1970s as a time of contradictory characterisations of masculinity that challenged traditional notions of power and domination." [231] Moving into the 1980s there is a notion of a confused, and using the same terminology I have used to describe Manero in *Fever*, an 'embattled masculinity'. In the 1980s, male characters on-screen in Hollywood films were still often conveyed as ambivalent and contradictory.[232]

As a staunch critic of former president Jimmy Carter,[233] Richard Nixon's opinion of his successor is as follows: "Under Carter, the nation was 'drifting', 'lost in uncertainty or paralyzed by propriety', 'waffling', 'wavering', 'floundering', 'uncertain', and, 'irresolute'." [234] Similarly, Robert Bly, leader of the "men's movement" [235] of the time offers the same kind of pessimism with regards to gender relations. In her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era,* Jefford notes:

[231] Susan Jeffords, Chapter 1: Life as a Man in the Reagan Revolution. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) pp.15–16
[232] Ibid. (p.12)
[233] Jimmy Carter was the 39th president of the United States of America: in office for one term from 1977 to 1981.
[234] Susan Jeffords, Chapter 1: Life as a Man in the Reagan Revolution. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) p.8
[235] Ibid.

> For Bly, 'the United States has undergone an unmistakable decline since 1950', one that he attributes to the increasing power of women and the parallel 'diminishment and belittlement of the father'.[236]

As Bly fought to promote a revival of personal and domestic manliness during the 1980s,[237] it would appear that President Reagan satisfactorily assumed the position of the powerful man's man while in office. According to Jefford, "Ronald Reagan was able to capture both of these roles, to portray himself as both a 'real man' and a 'real president', as both father and a king."[238] In essence, Reagan's ascent to the oval office became what Carter's presidency was not. Whilst the latter was largely described as being weak, controlled, and possessing distinctly feminine qualities (having enlisted a lot of advice from his wife, Rosalynn Carter for instance), Reagan's presidency was to be the complete opposite. Reagan was to rule not only with an iron fist, but a hard body (to borrow the title of the book the above quote is lifted from) with close attention being paid to come across as all things thought to be fundamentally masculine: decisiveness, aggression, toughness, strength, and a domineering attitude.[239] Excess of these qualities signify a modern masculinity under strain, working hard to retain its power in an ever-shifting world.

It is interesting to consider these words when viewing Swayze's portrayal of masculinity in *Dirty Dancing*. While Swayze does indeed rule with a hard body, the inclusion of dance, the camp aesthetics of the film together with the performativity of the male body all suggest a queer subtext underpinning 1980s machismo. Swayze's labouring and sexually performative body becomes a fascinating site for the working through of tensions around gender and power in this period.

Some pertinent questions are raised in *Dirty Dancing* with regards to the working class male body, and how said body moves and reacts in spaces of economic privilege. As Irin Carmon addresses this point, *Dirty Dancing* is "a great, brave movie for women" with "some subtle, retrospectively sharp-eyed critiques of class

[236] Ibid. (p.9)
[237] Ibid. (p.11)
[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid.

and gender."[240] Here Carmon links the importance of this film's address to women alongside its class critique. It is integral then to explore questions about masculinity and how it is inextricably tied to questions of class in *Dirty Dancing.* Feuer expands by noting how the fairy-tale syntax is present in the class differences between the couple in *Dirty Dancing* – she is a Jewish American Princess whilst he is a working-class hunk.[241] Therefore by uncovering the ways in which *Dirty Dancing* subverts normative modes of representations of gender and class, I wish to explore in this chapter the way the male body may be seen as potentially embattled, and perhaps by extension, even queer.

Timestamp: the 1960s in the 1980s

Wealthy purveyors of consumerism and excessively lavish enjoyment - otherwise termed as 'yuppies' – are in steady supply in films made in the 1980s as well as films made about this decade. Such titles include for example, *American Psycho* (2000); *Working Girl* (1988); *Blade Runner* (1982); *Pretty Woman* (1990), as well as television shows *Murphy Brown* (1988–1997); *Dynasty* (1981–1989) and *Dallas* (1978–1991). However, this type of stereotypical 1980s American individual seems to be rather out of place in the tapestry of the *Dirty Dancing* world. A nod to the 1960s in the film could be homage to a seemingly simpler time. In Baby's narration in the opening scenes, she mentions how their time at Kellerman's "was before President Kennedy was shot"[242] – further suggesting that this time at Kellerman's was idyllic and without chaos and drama that perhaps a later time in American life seemed to have more of. As opposed to the self-indulgent brand of wealth popularised in the 1980s (i.e. 'new money') *Dirty Dancing* seems to portray a different kind of wealth. Although the Houseman's appear to be an upper middle class family that can afford to vacation for two weeks at a comfortable summer resort, they are not excessively wealthy or even hedonistic when on vacation. Imaginably this is part of the appeal of the *Dirty Dancing* depiction of American upper middle class life: wholesome, humble, and *politely* wealthy. However, the

[240] Irin Carmon, Dirty Dancing is the Greatest Movie of All Time, *Jezebel* (2010)
[241] Jane Feuer, A Postscript for the Nineties *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) pp.130-131
[242] *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)

Houseman's 'old money' status becomes a complex allegory as the film unfolds. Their snobbery becomes more and more apparent as they are forced to interact with Johnny Castle – Baby's love interest in the film, essentially a blue-collar labourer (of dance).

Besides being set in the 1960s as a nostalgic tribute to Bergstein's own adolescence in the same decade, I believe it is done so to produce a camp effect. Sontag writes how "camp is a vision of the world in terms of style",[243] which illustrates that the periodization of film's like *Dirty Dancing* are also done for a purely aesthetic reason, and nostalgia plays a vital role in exciting the senses. Not only that, aesthetically period dramas often feel more rich and textured, most notably because they are unfamiliar and even exotic to a certain extent.

The intervention of the 1960s on a more American pastoral 1950s ideal is something *Dirty Dancing* shares with the overtly queer musical film *Hairspray* (Waters, 1988). The idea of a brand new decade, the 1960s, near devoid of out-dated social constructs and situated on the precipice of historical feats in fields as wide stretching as technology (space travel) and sociology (the onset of second wave feminism and the civil rights movement, which is something *Hairspray* touches on explicitly) is something these two films tend to orbit. *Hairspray* is ultimately more of an exercise in overt politics than *Dirty Dancing*, and although underlying racial tensions in 1960s Baltimore is masked in the seeming frivolity of song and dance, the film offers an explicit view onto 1960s sociology and politics. Waters' *Hairspray* is truly anything but apolitical, but in addition it is also a camp venture. To an extent, *Dirty Dancing* is also both these things: political *and* camp. As mentioned, Sontag describes camp as apolitical, disengaged, emphasising style over content.[244] Although *Hairspray* is an exercise in the extreme of aesthetic fetishism, it is by no means without quality of content. The overtly heterosexual musical/dance films of this dissertation straddle this line more carefully. They are cautious to remain more palatable (perhaps due to a demand to appeal to broader audiences, unlike a more indie/underground

[243] Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 1964) p.3
[244] Ibid. (p.2)

filmmaker like Waters). But critically, it is the very inclusion of dance as a performative practice that marks these films – *Dirty Dancing* being no different – as camp undertakings.

Further complicating matters in terms of the timestamp analysis of *Dirty Dancing,* is the addition of the 'muscle hero' figure of Johnny Castle. In many ways a sign of the times, Tasker notes how "the image of Sylvester Stallone as Vietnam veteran John Rambo, brandishing a rocket-launcher whilst parading his musculature, became an icon of American masculinity in the mid-1980s."[245] As the only film out of the three discussed at length in this dissertation that was released in the 1980s, *Dirty Dancing* owes a lot of its success to its ability to read into the tastes and predilections of its time of production. Interestingly, Tasker also cites how these male 'muscle heroes' of the 1980s could also be read "in terms of a backlash against the feminism of the 1970s",[246] ultimately making these men on-screen symbols of "a new conservatism in both national and sexual politics."[247] In so doing, *Dirty Dancing* bears true to Jefford's thoughts on the subject:

> The masculine characters that populated some of the decades' most popular Hollywood films offered narratives against which American men and women could test, revise, affirm, or negate images of their own conceptions of masculinity, which, because of a changing economy, altering gender relations, increasingly tense race relations … and a reconfigured work force, were themselves in flux during this period.[248]

What the above quote offers is an insight into the 1980s context in which the film was made. It also provides a context for reviewing the masculinities seen on-screen during the time, Swayze's Johnny Castle in *Dirty Dancing* being no different. But what does this 1980s predilection for hard, muscled male bodies on-screen say about the zeitgeist of the time in terms of a potentially embattled masculinity?

As mentioned above, lifted from Jefford's 1994 book titled *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era,* the very idea of a firm, resolute and hard body – in

[245] Yvonne Tasker, Introduction: Gender and the Action Cinema. *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.1
[246] Ibid.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Susan Jeffords, Chapter 1: Life as a Man in the Reagan Revolution. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) pp.11–12

both the literal and figurative sense – became an important aspect of depicting masculinities on-screen in the Reagan 1980s. As the 1970s drew to a close the decade was being described by many as involving a crisis of a nation - within the Reaganite 1980s this nation in crisis began to be seen as linked to a crisis of manhood.[249] While Johnny Castle, the male protagonist of *Dirty Dancing* does indeed possess a hard body, he is still unable to fully shirk the potential for a questioning look, and, by extension, is still rendered unable to be deemed un-queer. Given the conservatism of the Reagan administration and the general milieu of the day, this sentiment must - and indeed did fly under the radar. I would argue that by using the theories of body politics and the camp sensibility, *Dirty Dancing* is able to queer the pitch of its heterosexual relationships seen on-screen. It does so by placing the male in the centre of the filmic world, most often as erotic spectacle.

LET YOUR BODY DO THE TALKING:

The Built Body & the Camp Sensibility

As Tasker and Dyer have written extensively on the male 'bodybuilder' - coming to the fore in the mainstream in the 1980s, so too does Johnny Castle's character in *Dirty Dancing* represent somewhat of a 'bodybuilder/musculature hero'. Although not actually a bodybuilder per se, the labour of his work/craft (dance) allows him the opportunity to work laboriously on his body. As Tasker sketches, these "bodies are self-created works of art, constantly worked over and redefined."

Dance is used in *Dirty Dancing* as what Dunne describes as "a narrative agent",[250] aiding in the portrayal of a coming-of-age love story. Bodies play an integral role in utilising dance as a mode of narrative development and communication. As the body of the film's protagonist (Baby) moves from being a girl to becoming a

[249] Ibid. (p.12)
[250] Michael Dunne, Chapter 4: Dance as a Narrative Agent. *American Film Musical Themes and Forms* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2004) p.67-

woman, the act of dance as a narrative agent is applied effectively as a consequence of impending sexual initiation. In *Dirty Dancing*, the oft overtly sexualised act of youth dancing of the 1960s (indeed termed 'dirty dancing') is used as a conduit between childhood innocence, and adult experience. As a figure heavily imbued with social meanings,[251] the teen/teenager is effectively a *liminal personae*[252] – neither child nor adult. Therefore their interactions with the world are often heightened and exaggerated, whilst they traverse their adolescence with a sense of transgression.

As a vital component of dancing, the body is always fundamental to observe. In *Dirty Dancing*, the need to observe the body closely to uncover instances of camp, queer theory and a potentially embattled masculinity remains paramount. There is a sense that a 'bodily surveillance' is being enacted onto the bodies in the film. Naturally, there will always exist a level of surveillance, or observation onto bodies within film, as it is ultimately an audio-visual endeavour. However, the question of bodies and where the gaze lies becomes an area of interest in line with the overall theme of this thesis: possibilities for queer readings in overtly heterosexual filmic texts. In a close textual analysis of the 'sex scene' will provide insights into the ways in which Johnny has been overtly sexualised, as well as provide proof for the inversion of the traditional gaze.

Close Textual Analysis of the 'Sex' Scene

There is a tendency in this film, as with all of the texts analysed in this thesis, to connect the performative male body with instances of sexual and libidinal energy. I now make the case of how Swayze's character, Johnny, is made to be the erotic object in *Dirty Dancing* most notably with the shooting structure of the 'sex scene' I will now analyse. A core aim of this dissertation is to examine how both Travolta and Swayze have been projected as erotic objects in the films discussed in this study. To speak on this point of the sexuality of just one of the three films' male

[251] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 1. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) pp.9–10
[252] Ibid. (p.14)

stars is famed film critic Roger Ebert's 1987 review of *Dirty Dancing* where he writes how the hotel staff, including Johnny Castle (Patrick Swayze) engage in *orgiastic* dance sequences.[253]

In terms of Baby's body, dancing (and learning how to dance properly) has given Baby the confidence and autonomy of her own body, her own skin. At times, although confused by her body's efficacy and influence, the night that Johnny and Baby engage in sex for the first time is ultimately the major catalyst Baby's body undergoes in the film. The viewer only really sees Johnny and Baby kiss once, but the entire private dance scene in Johnny's cabin acts as an obvious precursor to sex. In fact, much like the opening scenes of the film and the staff dance floor scenes, the dancing *itself* is an act of overt sexuality, and a celebration of bodies and all that they can do.

As the scene directly before the 'sex' scene ends, a shot of water ripples in the Kellerman Resort lake fills the length and breadth of the entire screen. As a symbol denoting potential sexual energy with a 'still waters run deep' connotation that helps define Johnny's character, the water ripples serve as a premonition for the ensuing scene. The shot of the water then cuts to an interior *misé-en-scene* shot of Johnny's cabin. Filmed as a long shot, a topless Johnny leans over to his record player, placing the needle on the LP just as a diegetic knock at the cabin door is heard. He turns to answer the door, the camera panning with his movement as he does so. As he opens the door, Baby is shown on-screen, shot from a high angle to suggest submissiveness, naivety, innocence. However, once inside the cabin, the pair are shot on an equal plane to illustrate equality and a mutual respect between the two. Once again a visual contrast is evident in the way in which the characters of Johnny and Baby are dressed. Baby is dressed head-to-toe in a white ensemble, complete even with sparkling white tennis shoes! Johnny on the other hand is dressed in black trousers and matching shoes and as mentioned before, without any shirt. This visual contrast is done to overtly display the differences in class

[253] Ibid.

between these two characters. By dressing them in complete opposites (black vs. white) the notion of difference becomes all the more apparent.

Johnny removes some clothing from a wicker chair in his bedroom as Baby then takes a seat. Baby is shot, sitting down, from a high angle, whilst Johnny is shot to portray power/dominance from being shot at a low angle. As he is semi-naked throughout the scene, Johnny stands to be the more vulnerable of the two because of his lack of sartorial fortification. I would argue that shooting Johnny from a low angle to illustrate a level of dominance is to counteract the fact that his naked body may in fact be viewed as a vulnerable body.[254] However, we know that Johnny's body is a laboured effort and is in fact built. By having Johnny already be topless in this scene explains how the built "body functions as a sort of armour against the world."[255] He may be without clothing and therefore more exposed, but the fact that he possesses a built body provides some semblance of 'armour' to take into the world. To expand on this point, "bodybuilding is offered as a form of protection which speaks to insecurity."[256] The discourse of bodybuilding seeks to make the body signify a physical invulnerability, but the very fact of vulnerability still remains a key part of the bodybuilding narrative.[257] Johnny in fact embodies both of these attributes; containing within him a doubleness that speaks to strength (physically), but also vulnerability (emotionally). This emotional vulnerability begins to show as the scene unfolds.

When Baby and Johnny engage in conversation, the camera's contemplation of Baby does not stand in for Johnny as she is shot almost head on whilst sitting, looking up at Johnny, past the top of the frame. However, contrast to how Baby is shot, is Johnny who is shot from below. It appears as if the camera mediates Baby's own point of view. Johnny focuses his attention down toward the seated Baby as he delivers his lines. What this addition shows the viewer is that the gaze is being

[254] Richard Dyer, Chapter 4: The White Man's Muscles. *White* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1997) p.146
[255] Yvonne Tasker, Chapter 6: The Body in Crisis or the Body Triumphant? *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.123
[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid.

mediated toward Johnny as male erotic spectacle, through the eyes of Baby, a female.

For a short fragment of the scene, the two lovers are both seated. Once Johnny stands, the gaze more accurately contemplates his body once more through the eyes of Baby. To further the sexual dimensions of this scene and the erotic spectacle of the male body, Baby remains seated and shot head-on. In the right most section of the frame, a shadow of Johnny's hip is seen as Baby casts her eyes up toward his face. Once she delivers the line "I'm scared of walking out of here and never feeling for the rest of my life… The way I feel when I'm with you",[258] she directs her eye line down, pausing just for a beat on the perceived area of Johnny's crotch highlighted by the indistinguishable shadow cast on the right hand side of the filmic frame.

The dynamic of shooting structure and shot angles changes once more after Baby delivers her heartfelt speech. Johnny, now standing up once more, is shot from a low angle looking down onto a still-seated Baby. Ironically, when Baby delivers her most vulnerable words to date in the film she is shot from above connoting a timid sensibility, even in her time of newfound courage. This dynamism of shooting structure is seen even in the way in which Johnny's body is interrogated in this scene, as briefly mentioned before. Shot semi-naked, Johnny's body could stand to be the vulnerable body, according to Dyer. Although the way he is shot - often from below to insinuate strength and dominance – as well as him having anything but a vulnerable body in terms of contoured stature means that this dynamic doubling of normative shooting tropes is virtually unutilised. In addition, the concept of white male privilege aids in possibly discrediting the idea that Johnny's body could in fact be the vulnerable one between the two in the 'sex scene' currently being examined. As Dyer notes, "The muscle hero is an everyman: his tan bespeaks his right to intervene anywhere."[259] By this, I contend that Dyer makes the argument that the built *white* male body is at home in most places and

[258] Jennifer Grey as Frances "Baby" Houseman in *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)
[259] Richard Dyer, Chapter 4: The White Man's Muscles. *White* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1997) p.163

does not feel the uncomfortable wrench of vulnerability very easily (even when scantily clad).

Addendum D – Stills from the Dirty Dancing "sex"/love scene, illustrating close-up scopophilic shots

After admitting her feelings to Johnny, the two gaze at one another for a beat before Baby breaks the spell by looking away shyly – the mask of fresh nerve beginning to falter. The record player scratches, searching for another track to play as Solomon Burke's 'Cry to Me' begins to croon. As the lyrics ask "Don't You Feel Like Crying", Baby requests Johnny dance with her. Reluctant at first, Johnny relinquishes as Baby approaches him slowly. In her white getup, Baby's body is shot from slightly behind her – her face not visible as she slowly approaches him. Johnny, half-clad, stands like a statue, his built body – hard and contoured – resembles armour.[260] To further the notion of the coming-of-age narrative for Baby, she essentially makes the first move in 'seducing' Johnny (otherwise known as inviting him to dance).

Once the pair start dancing, the shots take on an erotic contemplation. Shots emphasizing visual pleasure begin to emerge: extreme close-ups of isolated body parts portray the urgency of intimacy (see addendum D). The contours of Johnny's built body become all the more apparent as Baby runs her hands over the peaks and valleys of Johnny's physical form. Baby leans back with neck muscles exposed, as Johnny pulls her closer toward him again. This push and pull action is repeated

[260] Ibid. (p.152)

throughout the scene. The use of scopophilic close-ups are also repeated as a precursor to the actual act of sex: Johnny's hands on Baby's back; Baby's leg, lifted up to Johnny's hip; Baby's hand on Johnny's backside. The way they dance is the way they make love. For example, Baby leaning far back, neck exposed is shown in the dance scene, but is then repeated in the actual sex scene – a near carbon copy (see addendum E). The 'actual' sex scene is a matter of a few seconds, what really is the 'main event' is the dance itself that stands as a precursor to burgeoning sexual experience – the dancing remains as the truly sexy part.[261]

Addendum D - A shot of Baby, leaning far back with neck exposed, is virtually copied within minutes of one another from the dance scene in Johnny's cabin proceeding the sex scene (left), to the actual sex scene which is only portrayed on screen for a few fleeting seconds (right).

I have provided proof to back up my claim that the male body in *Dirty Dancing* is coded for erotic spectacle in many ways. By looking intently at this scene that traces the sexual relationship of the film's protagonists I was able to track the way in which the camerawork has been crafted to place Baby as conditioned gazer onto the chiselled musculature of Johnny Castle. By doing so, the historical gaze is in fact reconditioned. Within this chapter segment a slightly different central question was posed, compared to that in the closing line of my introduction, namely; in what ways do musicals work to provide such intense enjoyment from celebrating the perceived feminine? In this chapter segment, I have altered this slightly by instead placing the female in the centre and given her agency to be the conditioned gazer, a position that historically has been denied to her.

Because of the class divide between the couple at the centre of the film, dance is needed and used in very different ways between Baby and Johnny. Johnny *must*

[261] Michael Dunne, Chapter 4: Dance as a Narrative Agent. *American Film Musical Themes and Forms* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2004) p.71

dance, to make money, whilst Baby is intrigued by dance as a form of teenage coming-of-age rebellion - a substitute or precursor for sexual experience. Baby's upper middle-class position allows a subjectivity and level of agency over Johnny's portrayal of a working class character notwithstanding that Baby is a female. Their class divide exists to some extent as an intervention of the normative male gaze trope. As Tasker asks in a chapter of her book *Spectacular Bodies* titled The Body in Crisis or the Body Triumphant:

> If, as feminist film theory has argued, classic Hollywood is dedicated to playing out of male Oedipal anxieties across the women's body, object of the 'male' gaze, what does it mean to place the male body at the centre?[262]

I have argued that *Dirty Dancing* does indeed place the male body at the centre. However, whilst Tasker speaks mainly about a centrally filmed active male body, the body she speaks of is active by means of the action film. Although this dissertation traces the musical film genre, Tasker's observations are still deeply relevant. Through the addition of an active male body and the generally understood queer act of dance, *Dirty Dancing* offers an interesting synergy between queer theory and normative masculinity. But, in many ways, this synergy exists more like paradox.

It is dangerous to rely on the assumed stability of a gender binary and perceived heterosexuality,[263] thus there exists a need to constantly reinforce the boundaries of heterosexuality against queerness in the male characters of musical films. In this regard, I refer to Benshoof and Griffin's definition of queerness as "descriptive of the textual (and extra-textual) spaces wherein normative heterosexuality is threatened, critiqued, camped up, or shown to be an unstable performative identity."[264] In providing the grounds for which the male body exists in the centre for erotic pleasure, I looked closely at the 'sex scene' in *Dirty Dancing*. However, in addition, I wish to further interrogate the inclusion of the class discussion alongside the conversation regarding the switching over of the gaze from male to

[262] Pam Cook (1982), quoted in Yvonne Tasker, Chapter 6: The Body in Crisis of the Body Triumphant? *Spectacular Bodies.* (London: Routledge, 1992) p.114
[263] Yvonne Tasker, Chapter 6: The Body in Crisis of the Body Triumphant? *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1992) p.115
[264] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 1. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.16

female, and well as this thesis' broader interest in camp theory. For this, a discussion on the elements of class in *Dirty Dancing* is so important to unpack.

CLASS IS IN SESSION:

The Doubling of the Working Class Male Body When Performing the Labour of Dance

The gaze throughout *Dirty Dancing* is mediated through Baby's eyes. This is understandable to large degree as Baby is the film's protagonist, although it is important to note that we cannot assume all protagonists of Hollywood films control the desiring gaze. Understandably then, the introductory scene of the character of Johnny Castle to both the viewer, and the protagonist, Baby, appears at the same time. In this introductory scene (for Johnny on-screen), Baby ventures away from the family cabin and 'explores' the resort grounds. Upon approaching the main dining hall, Baby begins to eavesdrop on a dialogue being had inside between Max (Kellerman's Resort owner) and his staff. As Baby approaches a door, slightly ajar, on the terrace of the dining hall, she peers in, essentially spying in on the action inside, exhibiting a voyeurism directed toward Johnny and the others in the dining hall. The manner in which Max reprimands his employees is lacking of respect and quite frankly, rather slimy. The routine of illustrating 'wealthy' bodies as unattractive and left wanting of integrity is something that occurs throughout *Dirty Dancing* – overtly introduced in this dining hall scene. Immediately a difference in bodily display is made apparent between the different classes present. While the 'wealthy' bodies – those of Max Kellerman and his Ivy League University-recruited wait staff – are generally more clothed, their physiques and bodies are therefore less on display.

Addendum E - Dressed in a form-fitting black and grey ensemble and donning sunglasses inside, Johnny's face is decidedly guarded, while his body is on full display – his muscles clearly visible through this shirt, his jacket removed, slung nonchalantly over his shoulder.

In contrast, Johnny enters the dining hall staff meeting late, with an air of perceptible arrogance. Dressed in a form-fitting black and grey ensemble and donning sunglasses inside (see addendum F), his face is decidedly guarded, while his body is on full display – his muscles clearly visible through his shirt, his jacket removed, slung nonchalantly over his shoulder. This is not a 'new' phenomenon of the white male body on such display. As mentioned previously, Tasker notes how images of the parading white male bodybuilder became synonymous with the filmic landscape of the 1980s.[265] But what is also interesting to note is how this sartorial quality echoes James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). With this intertextual reference, Johnny Castle's heartthrob status is likened to that of Dean's Jim Stark, a role that turned Dean from a "Hollywood heartthrob into a legend"[266]. Without being so bold as to claim that this clothing choice cements Swayze's male star/heartthrob status as it likens him to Dean, I would contend that the intertextual similarities bolster the cult leanings of the film and do reinforce notions that Swayze's star persona is very much linked to the sustained success of this film.

Adding detail to bodily display and the class divide, I have stated how Dyer writes about how the "naked body is a vulnerable body."[267] Of course, in the most fundamental sense a bare body possesses no protection from the elements, but this sentiment is also true when discussing the class divide and the sociality of

[265] Yvonne Tasker, Introduction: Gender and the Action Cinema. *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1992) p.1
[266] Ben Crandell, Rebel Without a Cause Returning to South Florida Theaters, *Sun-sentinel.com* (2018)
[267] Richard Dyer, Chapter 4: The White Man's Muscles. *White* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1997) p.146

life.[268] By this, he refers to the manner in which "clothes can be bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class."[269] To be without clothing (symbols of status and potential wealth) is to potentially lose prestige. Nakedness, according to Dyer, may also reveal inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals.[270] This is why the need for a built body provides a certain level of adequacy. Often resembling armour, the built body is hard and contoured[271], much like Johnny's in *Dirty Dancing.* Whilst Johnny is not filmed naked in this scene nor any scene in *Dirty Dancing* for that matter, the insistence of a hard, built and contoured body is asserted throughout. As Dyer states, while absolute nakedness may not be an apt description of Johnny Castle's character in *Dirty Dancing*, what is essential to Johnny's character is at times the lack of clothing, or, conversely, the fit of clothing that emphasises his musculature and provides a thin veil of concealment over the male body and hence leaves little to the imagination. What the latter suggests is a similarity to Manero's tight, form-fitting ensembles discussed in the previous chapter. Clothing that accentuates those areas on the male body that can be coded as biologically male: the bulging crotch, biceps on display, and a broadened chest. Emphasising these parts of the male physique reminds me of Doty's words when describing camp. He states: "Camp's mode is excess and exaggeration."[272] By exaggerating these body parts to portray masculinity, the very notion of white, heterosexual masculinity as undisputed norm begins to be called into question.

According to Dyer though, the built body is a wealthy body.[273] He explains it is so because the built body is well fed and enormous amounts of leisure time have been devoted to it.[274] However, this is not so for the working class built body of Swayze in *Dirty Dancing* (and to some extent, Manero's laboured body in *Saturday Night Fever*). I would contend that whilst Swayze's body is extremely well-toned, it is not a wealthy body. Although many hours of hard work have undeniably gone into sculpting his physique, Johnny Castle is a labourer – of dance. Once again, camp's

[268]Ibid.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Ibid. (p.152)
[272] Alexander Doty, Chapter Two: "My Beautiful Wickedness". *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.82
[273] Ibid. (p.155)
[274] Ibid.

tendency for doubleness is made apparent. The seemingly contradictory poles of labour and dance are made synonymous when speaking to the character of Johnny. By incorporating the muscular hero/bodybuilder into the camp repertoire indicates the extent to which this figure can be decoded in a range of ways, and is ultimately positioned between and across different understandings. [275] This 'doubleness' – borrowed from either the muscle hero's camp leanings or the camp sensibility itself – connotes the idea that the visual spectacle of the muscle hero (for example, Johnny's body) plays on the two contradictory impulses of *restraint* and *excess*.[276] By utilising these contradictory tendencies, the muscle hero male figures then begin to offer "a parodic performance of masculinity, which both enacts and calls into question the qualities they embody."[277] Once again, camp's doubleness is evident.

In the following scene after Baby's voyeuristic introduction to Johnny, the Houseman's and all guests at Kellerman's sit down for the first of many dinners at the resort. Dinner, followed by the opening of the dining hall dance floor, is a nightly staple at the Kellermans Resort. Whilst at dinner, the Houseman's are introduced by Max to his nephew as a potential love interest for Baby. The notion of "wealthy" bodies as being seen as "lesser" than the allure of the *working* body, and ultimately made out to be unattractive in the eyes of the film's protagonist, and so by extension to the viewer as well – is of significance. Neil, the owner's nephew, with his sizeable nose and googly eyes is immediately coded as somewhat typically less attractive.[278] Speaking very fast, and using a lot of facial expression in his mannerisms, Neil is coded to look socially inept and unsexy. Further, there appears to be a comment being made on Neil's Jewish identity. Technically, he is more appropriate for Baby, but is not as desirable to Baby as Johnny is. The notion of a pair of star-crossed-lovers is nothing new for the teenpic genre. However, more important than the outward appearance of Neil's character - which may not be typically attractive - is the content of his conversation. In his speech toward Baby he is incredibly patronising ("sometimes, in this world, you see things you

[275] Yvonne Tasker, Introduction: Gender and the Action Cinema. *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.109
[276] Ibid. (p.9)
[277] Ibid. (pp.110–111)
[278] Ibid.

don't want to see"[279] and "[…] he has two hotels"[280]) which ultimately makes him unattractive to Baby. In stark contrast, from the beginning, Johnny's approach to Baby is to use his male machismo and sexuality to empower a sexually un-awakened Baby, much unlike Neil whose flirtatious behaviours begins and ends with him essentially patronising his desired conquests.

In the dining hall dinner/dance scene, Neil invites Baby to dance. Always shot from the waist up, Neil and Baby make the act of dance an extremely articulated effort. As Neil counts his steps, it is clear to see that dance for this wealthy body is a social obligation – one synonymous with the act of dutiful courtship. At the same time, Max Kellerman takes to the stage to dance alongside the band's conductor. In a very slow, measured and controlled way Max's approach to dance is very 'prancy'. His movements seem controlled, measured with a haughty air about them. On closer inspection, it would appear that this small fragmentary scene features Max being feminised. Further, it could also be hinting at something a lot darker – a potential homophobia. By 'camping' up Max's dance performance, his actions spring to mind the derogatory term for a gay man, especially a flamboyant one: limp-wrist.[281]

This inclusion could symbolise what I touched upon in this chapter's introduction. Produced in the Reagan 1980s era, *Dirty Dancing* could in equal parts display a triumphant male body, or, "a male body in crisis", as Tasker calls it. If the latter is to be considered, it is the development of a healthy debate surrounding Women's Rights as well as Gay Rights in the 1970s/1980s that causes the heterosexual male body to be plunged into potential turmoil. No longer the unquestioned superior being, masculinity is being wrestled with in the context of this film's production of the 1980s. By feminising Max in this way, this scene makes reference to an embattled masculinity by camping the pitch of the Kellerman Resort's 'top man'. The character of Max is used periodically throughout the film to lament on the end

[279] Lonny Price as Neil Kellerman in *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)
[280] Ibid.
[281] Brian Palmer, What Do Limp Wrists Have To Do With Gay Men? *Slate.com* (2012)

of the 'good old days'. Therefore, Max's presence exists as a touch point with the past that mediates itself between established and modern masculinity.

To return to the dining hall scene: stationed above everyone else - on stage - Max is made to look above the rest of his resort guests on the main dance floor below him. Contrasted to Neil and Baby's awkward attempt at dancing, are the professionals – Penny and Johnny. As the pair enter the action on the main dance floor, they are shot full-length body in all their glory. It is in this moment that the class divide between the "entertainment staff" (working class labourers) and the upper echelon of the Kellerman Resort guests is made heir apparent. The people who perform dance as a form of labour and who are paid to dance do it with more flair and fervour than those who actually dance as a means of enjoyment (upper middle class).

As Penny and Johnny take to the floor, the opening notes of the song catch Neil's attention, excitedly proclaiming to Baby: "'The Mambo! It's 'The Mambo!'"[282] The inclusion of the Mambo as the first dance that Baby – and the viewer – sees Johnny perform is interesting to note. Deriving its name from Haiti, "the *mambo* is a voodoo priestess, who serves the villagers as counsellor, healer, exorcist, soothsayer, spiritual advisor, and organizer of public entertainment."[283] While 'Houngan' is the name used for a male priest, 'Mambo' is the term used for a female priest of the highest form of clergy in the voodoo religion.[284] It is the Mambo's responsibility to preserve the rituals and songs and maintain the relationship between the spirits and the community as a whole.[285] There is a similarity here between the relationship with female-oriented religion, camp aestheticism, and dance with the ways in which Catholic imagination comes to the fore in *Fever* as discussed in the previous chapter. This can be seen to a lesser degree *Dirty Dancing* than in *Fever*. However it is interesting to note that there is also an attempt to subtly hint at the divine feminine with this choice of using the Mambo

[282] Lonny Price as Neil Kellerman in *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)
[283] Unknown Author, Mambo, *Newworldencyclopedia.org* (2019)
[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid.

as an introductory dance performance. By extension, how this inclusion of divine femininity provides a backdrop for immense viewing pleasure.

As the camera contemplates Baby's face, growing more and more fascinated by the dancers (more specifically, Johnny) the camera tracks her as she looks at the pair with captivation. The camera shows her literally looking the pair up and down, taking in the entire length of their bodies. As Max makes his way through the crowd on the dining hall's dance floor, the camera mediates his gaze toward the dancing couple just yonder the frame. Facing toward him is Johnny. The inclusion of this shot and the gaze mediated through Max's eyes suggests the uncomfortable nature of seeing a male dancer perform in a sensualised manner. As Max manages to catch the eyesight of Johnny and Penny just as they perform their elegant Mambo lift, he signals for them to 'cut it'. The pair quickly disperses and take up hotel guests as their new dance partners to appease their boss, Max. A shot framing Baby and Neil as they return to their staccato rendition of the Mambo shows Baby still following the now dispersed Penny and Johnny on the dance floor. She simply cannot peel her eyes away.

The only way in which Baby can gain access to an exclusive Kellerman's staff-only party is by ushering in a large watermelon with resort worker Billy.[286] Worth noting here is how, despite Baby's initial unwelcome to the Kellerman staff party, it is much easier to gain class mobility down, than up. Upon eliciting an escort in Billy, it's as if Baby's good girl image is already beginning to shatter. Once atop the hill and safely inside the dimly lit interior, Billy and Baby make their way from the entrance to the nave of this peculiar 'cathedral', amongst the action and tangle of sensuous bodies they negotiate along the way. This scene with its use of close-up shots of body parts possessed by dance is reminiscent of the first discotheque sequences in *Fever.* The same kind of animal energy channelled into dance is evident in both films. The camera stands in for Baby as she moves through the tangle of 'dirty dancers'. As she moves through the space, the dancers acknowledge Baby, and therefore peer directly into the camera lens. Once again,

[286] Ibid.

Penny and Johnny make their 'grand entrance', this time more at home amongst their class peers – fellow Kellerman Resort staff members. Shot from below to indicate their dominance in this sphere, Penny and Johnny are mostly shot framed in the centre, surrounded by their dirty dancing associates.

Penny and Johnny dance together in the nave of the red-lit room, but perform solo moves as well. Concessions are made to particularly sexualise Johnny in this scene. As in the first scene where Baby sees Johnny post his formal performance on the main dance floor – now he performs a collection of moves, most notably the lean-back hip thrusting move that mimics sex. As Penny and Johnny are filmed from below, they whip their heads around to display the musculature of their necks. All while filmed with a red-tinted filter, the sexual energy in this scene is aesthetically suggestive. With a tuxedo shirt buttoned down to his navel, Johnny's character is further sexualised by enacting dirty dancing moves that literally denote sex (see addendum G). As Johnny makes his way over to Billy and Baby, he performs a grinding action to the female dancers he passes.

Baby delivers her first words to Johnny with the infamous "I carried a watermelon"[287] line, as he invites her to dance with him at the party. Once more, contrast is at play. On the main Kellerman's dance floor Baby's class standing allows her a certain level of agency over Johnny and the rest of the resort staff. Essentially their job is to serve her needs. Now, in *their* space, Baby is out of her depths. Her social/class

Addendum F - Johnny plunges Penny down while dancing – an action that denotes a highly sexualised libidinal energy.

[287] Jennifer Grey as Frances "Baby" Houseman in *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)

standing is no longer something that stands in her favour. Reluctantly, but intuitively curious, Baby joins Johnny on the dance floor. Her body is forcibly loosened by Johnny's gesture and instruction as she is introduced to the dance that all the "kids are doing it in their basements back home",[288] aka dirty dancing. When Billy jokingly extends an invite to Baby, "wanna try it?"[289] Baby shrugs the request off as soon as it is uttered, visibly shy and uncomfortable by the situation. However, when Johnny approaches her, she accepts his invitation unequivocally (although Johnny does not really 'ask' in the traditional sense: he does not wait for an answer). When Johnny and Baby dance together, the camera's attention is more languid, focusing for longer on the couple. With a mixture of long, medium and close-up shots, the camera works to show the differences in body temperaments between Johnny and Baby. It is evident that Baby is not only intrigued by the music and dancing atop the hill, but rather a combination of it all, with Johnny at the centre of her fascination. Swayze's intense machismo is at times the method that is used to loosen Baby's stiff, ultimate '*unsensualness*'. This is just the first of many encounters that Baby has with Johnny that slowly makes her evolve and transform into a more sexually awakened individual.

In some ways though, Baby *is* an enlightened young person. She wants to help people in "trouble" like Penny; join the Peace Corps; study economics in developing countries; and is brave enough to stand up to Robbie in the dining hall after she finds out he is the reason for Penny's pregnancy[290]. But she is unenlightened in a sexual way that pertains to her body and the seeming limitations she herself has set upon it. Baby is immediately transfixed when she sees Johnny and Penny dancing on the main floor in the dining hall. Turning to Neil and asking: "Who's that?"[291] Baby's outlook on the world around her is beginning to slowly shift. I suggest that just as much as she is transfixed by the sheer male machismo of Johnny, she is just as taken by the female confidence and elegance shown off by Penny while she is flung around the dance-floor that she so assuredly marks as her own. There is something about the *act* of dance here that stirs

[288] Neal Jones as Billy Kostecki in *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)
[289] Ibid.
[290] *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)
[291] Jennifer Grey as Frances "Baby" Houseman in *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)

something within Baby. It is not simply looking at two bodies – male and female – moving around a space with immense ease and presentation that intrigues Baby so much, but rather what dance as an act of defiance is offering her in this moment. As someone rather shy and inward in her approach to life, dance is seen as a way of escape. For those entrenched in a somewhat '*waspy*' lifestyle: perfect and contrived, dance functions as the ideal offset to such an existence. With its sense for juxtaposition, dance manifests itself in being a controlled/choreographed kind of freedom.

The film's interrogation and ultimate acceptance of its class tensions come to the fore in the closing moments of the film. Baby and Johnny ready themselves to perform on stage at the end of summer vacation show. The dance sequence begins with the deeply bass voice of Bill Medley as he sings the famous song's opening line: "Now I've, had, the time of my life."[292] As the song begins, Johnny and Baby perform their signature move introduced in the first 'sex scene' between the two: Baby's neck tilted far back, her thorax on full display. They begin their routine, performing for an audience, on stage, complete with lights. Behind them the backdrop for the stage features the repetitive image of vertical stripes. Reminiscent of prison bars, the freedom now evident in the bodily movement of Baby's previously stiff body is at stark contrast to the orderliness of the vertical bars behind her. Dancing *in front* of the backdrop makes the connection that this way of life, of upper class orderliness, following the rules, being imprisoned in one's own body is a thing of the past, a mere backdrop to what is now presently happening.

As the two dance with one another, they make their efforts seem especially effort*less.* The act of dance therefore becomes an extension of their feelings for one another. Shot from below in many instances, with their full bodies on display, the camera allows the couple the opportunity to display their strength, power and prowess (through dance). As Johnny leaps from the stage in slow motion, he whips his head looking back up at Baby still stationed on stage. Creating a bridge

[292] John DeNicola, Donald Markowitz and Franke Previte, *(I've Had) The Time of my Life* [song] Bill Medley & Jennifer Warnes (RCA Records, 1987)

between working class and upper class, Johnny's leap from the stage removes the 'us vs. them' stigma so prevalent in the atmosphere of the upper class holiday resort. Johnny makes the transition of turning the auditorium/dance hall floor into an extension of the stage, essentially democratizing the entire stage/floor space. Baby is brought down to the dining hall floor where they successfully perform the illusive 'lift'. Shortly after, their autocracy of the dance-floor/stage is shattered. A flurry of bodies now dance all together, having fun. The working class resort staff seize the seated upper class resort guests and invite them to dance, and vice versa. A mixture of dance styles is seen: dirty dancing *and* the 'family foxtrot', for example. Young and old people dance together, as well as people of all races. Max's sentiment really is true then: times are in fact changing. As the tempo of the song slows, close-up shots of Johnny and Baby's faces show the romance between the two. As Johnny lip-syncs the lyrics to Baby, he does so as if saying them directly to her. The scene begins to close as Johnny lifts Baby up as the camera pans further and further back to reveal the entire democratised dining hall dance scene. Visual symmetry is portrayed in the way the film ultimately ends. It does so in the same manner as which it started: black and white frenzied imagery of dirty dancing, close-up scopophilic shots of body parts, *et al.*

As the film ends with "the classic show syntax of the couple coming together in and through a musical performance"[293] – the closing scene is essentially a neat ending to a teenage coming-of-age story where "Baby's eventual mastery of dance techniques through Johnny's training becomes her ascension to sexualised womanhood, literally and figuratively."[294] However, more than that, the end of *Dirty Dancing* signifies a coming to peace with the class tensions so evident throughout the film. By attempting to democratise the dance-floor at Kellerman's in true folk fashion,[295] galvanising the "dying resort community into a singing and dancing mass",[296] Baby and Johnny's seemingly frivolous celebration of dance could stand as a symbol for the larger societal democratisation so prevalent in the 1960s. Further, this democratic dance celebration suggests an ability for

[293] Jane Feuer, A Postscript for the Nineties. *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) p.130-131
[294] Timothy Shary, Delinquent Youth. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema since 1980* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) p.111
[295] Jane Feuer, A Postscript for the Nineties. *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) p.130-131
[296] Ibid.

transgression that links it to queer discourse's own interest in the subversion of supposedly normative gender and sexuality roles.

* * *

I would suggest that part of *Dirty Dancing's* prolonged appeal is its celebratory and ritualistic viewing treatment that has – since its debut – been ultimately a camp experience. Besides the infamous one-liners ("Nobody puts Baby in a corner"[297] for one) that garner immediate memorable status: the costumes; dance moves; the legendary title sequence and characterisation tropes, I propose *Dirty Dancing* is camp because it seems to appeal to a "person outside the cultural mainstream."[298] As mentioned above, it does so immediately by way of its genre choice (that of musical/dansical) that appears to appeal to those distinctively uninterested in what is perceived as 'normal' or 'average'.

In addition, the film lends itself to camp in the way that it approaches bodies: most notably the *male* body. As Bergman describes, "camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalization of desire."[299] The use of bodies and dance as storytelling agents in *Dirty Dancing* is dissected in detail in the preceding paragraphs of this chapter, most notably its interesting approach to shifting the gaze on to a male body during the lion's share of the film's progression, which as Mulvey delineated in her theory as unusual for Hollywood film to do. By looking closely at the male body of Johnny Castle in the introductory Johnny scene as well as the 'sex scene', I have made an effort to expose the ways in which Johnny is offered as erotic spectacle. By doing so, it can be argued that *Dirty Dancing* has the possibility for a queer reading not least because it "throws into question the naturalization of desire."[300] It does this by marking the female as the conditioned gazer, and codes the male body as erotic

[297] Patrick Swayze as Johnny Castle in *Dirty Dancing* [film] dir. Emile Ardolino (USA: Vestron Pictures, 1987)
[298] David Bergman, Introduction. *Camp Grounds* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) p.5
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid.

spectacle. In essence then *Dirty Dancing* marks itself as apart from normative Hollywood productions, and therefore opens itself up to being read queerly even though its heteronormative dimensions are narratively blatant.

Casting Patrick Swayze in this role is an important detail to mention. Recalling the "sexy sexy snake" character of Johnny remains a significant addition to this coming-of-age story. What this casting decision also portends is part of what this thesis as a whole is interested in: the male stars of Swayze and Travolta in this dissertation's sampled texts. Moreover, how these masculinities have been utilised to interrogate on-screen something that has for so long been largely left unquestioned: the insistence of heterosexual masculinity as a supreme and normative ideal.

Lastly, there is a tendency for this film to play into the doubleness so paramount to the camp sensibility. This tendency is marked as a defining feature when attempting to seek out the queer dimensions of the film. I have discussed the ways in which Johnny Castle's performance of working class labourer adds a dimension to the film not unlike its counterparts in this dissertation: *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*. However, by constructing the character of Johnny as a labourer of *dance*, *Dirty Dancing* is able to queer the pitch of the heteronormative relationships it foregrounds on-screen.

CHAPTER 4:
Homosocial Bonds, Excessive Heterosexuality & the Potential for Queer Possibilities in *Grease*

On the surface, *Grease* appears to be a straightforward heterosexual film, yet with its milieu of teen liminal energy it is worth investigating it through a queer lens. The film has been hailed for its "youthful energy [and] sex appeal."[301] In this chapter, I will argue how *Grease* exaggerates heterosexual courting in the teenage years and how its audience derives so much joy from the film's portrayal of stereotypical forms of high school courting. By utilising an excessive heterosexuality, *Grease* straddles between 'normative' heterosexuality and camp queerness. This is most evident in the dance/singing sequences, which I will explore further in this chapter, focusing on the areas of youth/teenagers and the body. I will also make the argument for an emerging postfeminist discourse within *Grease*.

The cornerstone of *Grease*'s success has to be its vibrant musical component. Jeff Conaway, the actor who portrays Kenickie in the 1978 film says, "Grease couldn't have happened without rock 'n' roll."[302] Given its reliance on music the film bares an immediate similarity to the other films discussed in this dissertation: *Saturday Night Fever* and *Dirty Dancing*. As Dave Miranda has cited: "the potency with which music stimulates and modulates interpersonal relationships in social events (e.g. concerts, sporting events, parties, dates, dances, ceremonies, rallies, dinners) has led authors to refer to it as a 'social lubricant'."[303] With dances, pep rallies, parties and a myriad of other high school-aligned social events, the 'social lubricant' of music and the teen experience become intertwined. The regurgitation of music and lyrics from *Grease*'s famed soundtrack has been a party favourite for as long as the film's existence (much like the celebrated Bee Gees soundtrack of *Saturday*

[301] *Grease: 20th Anniversary Special Features* [DVD] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1998)
[302] Jeff Conaway in *Grease: 20th Anniversary Special Features* [DVD] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1998)
[303] Dave Miranda, The role of music in adolescent development: much more than the same old song, *Taylor & Francis Online* (2011)

Night Fever).[304] Used as a tool to inspire countless high school productions (even in this country), *Grease's* themes, dance sequences and songs have all become synonymous with the teenage experience.

In exploring the homosocial bonds within *Grease,* I use the terms 'excessive heterosexuality' and 'hypergendering' throughout. I derive my definitions of these terms from Brenda Weber in *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*. Weber explains that hypergendering is a process of displaying normative gender tropes in excess by overwriting and replacing the "false signifiers enunciated by the natural body."[305] By extension, the term 'excessive heterosexuality' refers to the exaggerated performance of heterosexuality, as deemed the normative choice for sexuality in society.

CONTEXTUALISING THE CONVERSATION

Randal Kleiser made his directing debut of a feature film with *Grease*, up until then he had mainly directed shorts and TV movies. Based on a Broadway musical of the same name, *Grease* was originally written for the stage in 1971 by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey.[306] Born in 1946, Kleiser would have been a young boy growing up in the 1950s[307] (the film's setting), therefore the directorial choices for the film's context do seem to possess a nostalgic element. Not completely factual, or even realistic: the film's aesthetic is pushed to its context's limits often navigating the path between a camp costume comedy and classic, raunchy teen pic. The world of *Grease*, with its 1950s ode to the seeming establishment of mainstream teenage rebellion, is captured with a mid-century flair for ice-cream pastel colours and high school shenanigans (both the innocent and the more sinister kind). The musical itself gets its name from the 1950s subculture of working class American

[304] Chris Titley, Review: Grease, *Yorkmix.com* (2019)
[305] Brenda Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham: Duke University Pres, 2009) p.4
[306] Various, Grease. *IMDb.com* (2019)
[307] Various, Randal Kleiser. *IMDb.com* (2019)

youngsters: "The fore-runners of the 'Rockers,' 'Greasers' or 'Ton-Up Boys' took to wearing American 'bad-boy' black leather jackets, T-shirts, jeans and motorcycle boots"[308] complete with greased up and quaffed hairdos much like James Dean and Marlon Brando in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The Wild One* (1953) respectively.

A teen-pic in essence, *Grease* makes use of a few core visual symbols of Greaser 1950s culture that serve as recurrent motifs throughout the film. For instance, and arguably the most important: cars. This connection runs deep with the film's title: "While the term Greaser came from their sleeked back hair style, it also harks back to their [teenager's] love for hot rod cars and mechanic knowledge."[309] Parents of adolescents in the 1950s, having survived the effects of World War II, felt an increased desire to let their children lead 'better' lives than they did. During the 1950s, adolescents, soon to be coined "teenagers", [310] saw a decrease in responsibilities and a rise in free time[311] to partake in "fun", social activities. Cars became an important part of this burgeoning teenage culture.[312] Allowing these liminal youths a level of freedom, cars signified independence to this fast-establishing demographic group[313] that had remained up until that point, largely disregarded in popular culture. In addition, cars, or, 'hot rods', appealed to this budding subgroup because they were considered dangerous. Due to a few fatal accidents during their rise of prominence, all hot rods and custom cars were then rendered a "menace to public safety".[314] I will expand on these ideas and themes of teenagers, cars and the male body further under the subheading titled: 'Boys & Their Toys – image, male bodies, and the bodies of their cars.' Firstly, I wish to further explore the zeitgeist surrounding *Grease's* production context (1970s), as well as its chosen setting (1950s) in order to provide some historical contextualisation before delving into closer textual analyses. The film's contextual

[308] David Haslett, Chapter Three: Post-War Culture, the Visual and Print Media, and the Evolution of an International 'Outlaw' Motorcycle Subculture. Riding at the Margins: International Media and the Construction of a Generic Outlaw Biker Identity in the South Island of New Zealand, circa 1950 – 1975 (MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 2007) pg. 39
[309] Ibid.
[310] Richard Powers, The Life of a 1950s Teenager, *Socialdance.stanford.edu*. (n.d)
[311] Unknown Author, Teenager Popular Culture – United States 1950s, *Sites.google.com Rwhcapstone* (2019)
[312] Ibid.
[313] Tony Alter, Birth of the American Teenager. *Teachrock.org* (2019)
[314] Richard Powers, The Life of a 1950s Teenager, *Socialdance.stanford.edu*. (n.d)

background will provide details that will support my central argument. The fact that the film was produced in the 1970s, but was set in the 1950s provide some interesting details worth uncovering in a bid to provide substantial evidence for the inclusion of subversive masculinities on-screen.

Zeitgeist: A 1950s Youth in Revolt

Grease differs to *Fever* in the sense that the film's context *does not* align with the timestamp production of the film *(Fever* was made in 1977, and is set in 1977). *Grease* was made in 1978, but it is set somewhere in 1950s Los Angeles. Although at first glance such a choice might be seen only as an ode to a bygone era and used in ways for aesthetic excitement only, I would argue that *Grease*'s setting in 1950s Los Angeles works well to reinforce the ideas of tensions that arise with teenage coupling/sexuality and rebellion due to the commonly accepted notion that the very term 'teenager' was born out of the 1950s.

The lyrical component to the song 'Grease' (the film's specially written title song, written by Barry Gibb of Bee Gees fame, and performed by 1960s musical legend Franki Valli) says it all: "Grease is the time, is the place, is the motion, Grease is the way we are feeling."[315] A zeitgeist for the time period at hand emerges with these words: a 1950s youth in revolt. Of course, this 1950s youth is reimagined from and within the 1970s, which again adds a tension – this time, between time and place. The tension that arises from telling a story about the 1950s within the confines of the 1970s corresponds to queer impulses and the teenage body because those discourses also encompasses tension, complication, and transgression. To further draw on the lyrics of the opening theme - besides the summoning of a zeitgeist embedded within the words - there is also a distinct connection being drawn with the impulse for motion, movement, and kinetic energy ("Grease […] is the motion"). It is never clear where Kenickie, Danny's sidekick, derives his nickname from, but the correlation between the words 'Kenickie' and 'kinetic' implore consideration! Nevertheless, coincidence or not,

[315] *Grease*, Barry Gibb & Franki Valli [lyrics] © (Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., 1978)

motion forms an important emphasis within *Grease*, and all other films discussed in this dissertation for that matter. Referring to a myriad of factors that work well within the story world of *Grease* (such as movement, moving forward, liberation, body, dancing), the words 'time', 'place', and 'motion' in the opening lyrics are words that mean more than just revealing to their audience an idea of the film's time and place. "Grease is the time, is the place, is the motion" is about affection in the traditional sense (a romance narrative between a teenage heterosexual couple), as well as the ability of the effectual body to portray such a story through the modes of song and, more pertinently, dance.

Much like *Fever's* context and style draws heavily from the music featured in it (1970s New York and the advent of disco), the aesthetic of *Grease* is profoundly informed by the sounds of early rock 'n' roll. Besides its musical component, this film has little need to be set in the 1950s as its themes of teenage rebellion and a burgeoning sexuality largely transgress the era to become universal in time and space. However, what aids in the film being set in the 1950s is the fact that these ideas of the teenage experience were born from that era – making them appear all the more exaggerated in their 'otherness' to the (at the time) current status quo. The teenage experience is a discourse so familiar in contemporary times, yet it was only in the 1950s that this 'new' demographic began to be considered and was widely accepted as a legitimate social group. The musical score's borrowing from the sounds of artists like Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley might be understood as underscoring the nostalgic leanings of the film, especially when considering how the film's production is situated twenty years after the Holly/Presley *démodé*. However, I would argue that setting the film in the 1950s aids to establish popular culture linkages to youth and youth cinema.

I suggest that *Grease's* title sequence provides ample opportunity for a sanctioned view of a 1950s zeitgeist and pays homage in many ways to portraying the timestamp through a lens particularly poised with irony and pastiche – cornerstones of the camp sensibility. Upon initial viewings of *Grease*, I was always confounded as to how exactly it 'fits' within the broader world of the film: a self-conscious project that acts as a bridge for a 1970s film set in the 1950s. The title

sequence is self-aware in the manner in which it foregrounds and exaggerates sexuality within the teenage years, by utilising the art of caricature. Described as a drawing or description of someone that exaggerates their appearance or behaviour in a humorous or critical way,[316] caricature, in short, amplifies the salient parts of a person. By amplifying the salient parts of the bodies within *Grease*, the film's title sequence acts as an effective precursor for the film's later action concerning the teenage body, most specifically that of the male characters, and its proclivity for hypergendering and excessive displays of heterosexuality. Hence the exaggerated libidinal elements in this title sequence suggests a queer impulse. By 'amplifying the salient parts of a person', caricature is of course excessive. But cartooning is not always queer. What further makes this title sequence queer, and by extension camp, brings to mind Nowlan's words on queer theory as outlined in this dissertation's introduction. By foregrounding "the constructedness and performativity of social identities, especially as articulated in terms of sexuality and gender",[317] this title sequence seeks to portray the construction of the film's characters by making them up in front of our very eyes. Further Nowlan tells us that by the frenetic manipulation of elements of *mise-en-scéne*, cinematography, editing, and sound, queer cinema queers by means of form, style, and content.[318] By being deliberately excessive and illustrating the constructedness of each of the characters in *Grease*, this title sequence marks itself as queer.

"OH DANNY, IS THIS THE END?"
"NO, SANDY. IT'S ONLY THE BEGINNING":
Analysis of the Film's Title Sequence

I argue in this chapter for the appearance of an excessive heterosexuality in *Grease*. Also featured in abundance is an adolescent fascination with sex: flirtation, dating, dancing, partner swapping, kissing in cars, *et al*. These latter ideas link

316 Unknown Author, Caricature, *Collinsdictionary.com* (2019)
317 Bob Nowlan, Chapter One. Queer Theory, Queer Cinema in Juett and Jones (eds), *Coming Out to the Mainstream* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010) p.17
318 Ibid. (p.18)

back to my argument about the queerness evident in these films. By foregrounding the libidinal elements of adolescence with such leniency, rigid impulses to sexuality become null and void. Therefore, it becomes easier to open up the text to be read potentially queerly.

Most of these images are already introduced in the opening scenes and title sequence of the film. In the opening scene, a heavily orchestral 'Love is a Very Splendored Thing' unlocks the action to the film.[319] Bringing the audience up to speed, as a quintessential summer romance sadly draws to a close when Sandy announces to Danny on the beach that she has to return to Australia soon, and they [the two lovers] may never see one another again.[320] A symbol for pent up sexual tension of adolescent proportions, tumultuous waves crash onto a shore as the two star-crossed lovers frolic playfully in the water. The famous opening line to the "real" musical journey of *Grease* is when Danny (Travolta) quips to a saddened Sandy that she needn't be forlorn because this is "… only the beginning."[321] The film then completely changes tone, the introductory guitar scale of the title song 'Grease' literally screams onto the screen. This stands in stark contrast to the flowingly epic musical arrangement of the film's opening beach sequence. This unexpected twist in musical tempo is favoured as this is ultimately a teen movie; and excitement is preferred over tradition. With this sudden change in tempo there is no denying this film is youthfully libidinal in its fast pace from the outset.

As the scene cuts from Danny and Sandy on the beach to the animated title sequence, a caricature image of a radio is the first cartoon to grace the screen. Pulsating with libidinal energy, the voice of radio presenter (to be introduced later in the film) Vince Fontaine is heard over the airwaves, talking in his signature facile speed he finishes by simply proclaiming the words: "music music music."[322] The image of the caricature radio fades out to reveal Danny, also pulsating (perhaps snoring?) under his bedspread, about to awaken. Danny is the first

[319] *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)
[320] Ibid.
[321] John Travolta as Danny Zuko in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)
[322] Ed Byrnes as Vince Fontaine in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)

character to be shown in the title sequence – before Olivia Newton-John, confirming John Travolta/Danny Zuko as being the ultimate pinup of the film.

As Danny's cartoon proxy emerges from his bed, his mop of hair covers his entire face, essentially concealing his whole identity. As he stands in front of this bathroom mirror, he squeezes a tube of hair grease; a dollop of the pomade constructs the word 'Grease', housed inside the silhouette of a gyrating 1950s topless car. A symbol of teenage transgression and sexuality – perhaps to be used interchangeably with the terminology teenage heart*throb* – the motion of pulsation is used generously throughout the title sequence. Once the 'Grease' title card is illustrated inside the dollop of hair grease, the splodge then drops on top of an extremely bed-headed man. Smoothing the grease over with a comb, the man is revealed to be Danny. Rather comically this character only becomes 'Danny' once he successfully manages to grease his hair. The combination of hair and grease exist as cornerstones in the construction of the male characters in this film – namely Danny.

As the camera zooms from atop his head/hair to reveal his entire face framed in the mirror, the viewer only sees Danny's face for the first time through this symbol of the contemplation of the body: the mirror. As Danny stands in front of the mirror, primping and grooming, the viewer is made aware of the adolescent obsession with self-preservation and presentation (this will prove an important element throughout the film's action). An aesthetic linkage to *Fever* is evident with Danny's mirrored introduction, and Travolta just happens to star in both films. Overall, mirrors serve as an important image in the opening animated satire. Each character/actor is introduced in varying mirrored surfaces – a comment about youth, and their inclinations toward vanity and self-consciousness. In addition, mirrors also speak to the introspection of growing up.

As a whole the film serves as a mirror to a youthful society, dealing with a lot of pressing issues one deals with during teenage years – sex, underage drinking, peer pressure, rebellion, *etcetera.* Mirrors are also all about the body – observing its movements and understanding oneself through the body. As a cornerstone of this

thesis, all three films discussed have made use of the mirror as a symbol of contemplation on the body, most notably as discussed in the *Fever* chapter. I suggest that far from being a coincidence that the mirror is a symbol featured alongside Travolta in both *Grease* and *Fever*, the inclusion of the mirror in both films says something about masculinity at the time and Travolta's role in representing this emergent masculinity. Understanding that mirrors allude to a sense of introspection and reflection is important when we consider how in the 1970s the conversation surrounding a men's liberation was beginning to come to the fore: how at the very least, subversions of normative sexualities and genders were beginning to be seen on-screen.

Addendum G - (Left) Sandy's "sexy" caricature, voluptuous with full breasts and sheer dressing gown versus the Sandy in "reality" (Right Side in the Right Side Picture): demure, conservative, and ultimately a "goody two-shoes".

Contrasted to Danny's caricature persona, is Sandy's. Here there are no hard lines with black leather and jet black, greased hairdos. Rather Sandy's caricature is soft, willowy and feminine. Birds with flowers in their mouths fly delicately as the editing features a fade in to reveal Sandy in bed, very tranquil and unmoving, compared to Danny's cartoon introduced directly before. Cinderella imagery is evident: birds help her dress in the morning, while the picture is made complete with other fairy-tale staples like a forest deer and rabbit, gathering at her feet. Along with the imagery reminiscent with that of Disney princesses, the image of (Sandy's) purity is being thrown in contrast to a rebellious 1950s teenage aesthetic from the outset of the film. As with most mainstream Hollywood cinema

the female is the object of desire, and the ultimate recipient of the viewer's gaze.[323] In these opening animated sequences, Sandy's simulated character in a suggestive transparent nightgown is made to appear far more voluptuous and sexually suggestive than what her character actually is in the reality of the film (see addendum H). Mulvey argues that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed"[324] their womanly appearance ever coded for "strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness."[325]

Sandy's cartoon sashays around her bedroom in a sheer dressing gown, her bodily proportions exaggerated for erotic effect - her body complete with voluptuous curves and full breasts. However, as mentioned above, given the fact that this is a cartoon/animated sequence; the hypersexuality of the 1950s teenager in cartoon form in this teen film is very much the object of comic parody here. I believe it is appropriate to mark Sandy as the object of desire in this particular scene. However, she is marked as erotic object by a particularly camped up and queer lens that is by extension allowing itself the delight in comedic effect. In any event, it would appear that the characters displayed by John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John in *Grease* are equally objectified in the opening sequence. Danny as the viewer's first pinup of the film, and Sandy portrayed in an especially sexualised manner.

More fast cutting of 1950s 'doo-wop' imagery makes way for the character of Rizzo's introduction. Her body is given a shape-shifting element, amorphous, stretching, and fluid, her neck is abnormally lengthened once she pulls a polo-neck jersey over her head. With her short-cropped hair, Rizzo is immediately marked as a more androgynous-looking young woman than her female counterpart, Sandy. As the film progresses, there is further scope for reading Rizzo as a queer character. An interesting inter-textual reference is presented in these opening title scenes: a poster of a dreamy James Dean watches over Rizzo's morning rituals.

[323] Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3 (1975)
[324] Ibid.
[325] Ibid.

The James Dean poster in Rizzo's animated bedroom serves as a reference to *Rebel Without a Cause* and helps further portray the film's setting and influences. This inclusion is much like *Fever's* connection to *Rebel Without a Cause*. The inclusion of Dean in this scene and broadly in the world of *Grease* is twofold, and this intense sense of doubling is something that often occurs when attempting to read a text with a queer slant.

As a queer icon, his own sexuality long-debated, James Dean's persona derives from the intensely heterosexual context of the 1950s. From within this context, a queer icon in Dean is produced that also is inextricably linked with the image of the car. Of course, what this image also does is act as a foreshadowing – Sandy is unaware of Danny's 'darker', more rebellious side (when they meet at the beach Danny is "kind and sweet"[326]), which falls more in line with a 1950s Greaser Dean character. It also foreshadows the duel Leo and Danny will undergo at Thunder Road, which in turn is very similar to the famous cliff top altercation in Dean's penultimate film, *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Kenickie is the fourth and final main character to be introduced in the title sequence. Like Danny, Kenickie is also 'face-less' to begin with, a mop of unruly hair covering his face. Once again, the identity of this male is only truly revealed when viewed looking back at us, the viewer, from the reflection of a mirror – this time it is the mirror inside Kenickie's 'Greased Lightnin'' hot rod. What I take from this inclusion is the close connection the males in Grease share with the symbol of the car. As an emblem that signifies normative ideals about masculinity (it is generally accepted that men like cars[327]), it also indicates the film's connection to class tensions. While all the main male characters in the film spend time working on their hot rods in their school's workshop, the idea of the labouring heterosexual male body is just beginning to become evident with the title sequence's introduction of Kenickie's character.

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[326] Ibid.

[327] "There's no denying that cars and trucks can hold a special place in a man's heart".
Unknown Author, Men Love for Cars: Desire to Control or Real Emotions, *Montway.com.* (2019)

To explore the possibilities of queer readings in overtly heterosexual film texts, I turn my attention now to the introductory live-action scene of Danny, post-title sequence. Introduced to the viewer in his 'kingdom' (Rydell High School), the camera hones in on Danny as he glances back, over-the-shoulder, cigarette hanging seductively from his full lips (see addendum I). He is the object of fascination in this scene. There are cinematic precedents for this kind of erotic objectification of the male lead. For example, John Paul Belmondo, the famed French actor, is introduced in Godard's *Breathless* (1960) as a young man in a suit, smoking a cigarette, with a hat pulled down over his eyes.[328] In turn his character is known to imitate Humphrey Bogart, another cigarette-smoking actor known for his gangster film portfolio.[329] As Lewis extrapolates, "the cigarette that dangles from the mouth or rests vitally between two fingers, emitting small eddies of smoke, is seductive and tantalizing."[330] Generally, Bogart's filmic characters stood as the quintessence of the urbane, worldly, indomitable male, and they frequently accentuated their style with cigarettes.[331] As the wordly and indomitable male of the Rydell High School-realm, Zuko too accentuates his style with cigarettes.

Addendum H - Danny glances back, over-the-shoulder, cigarette hanging seductively from his full lips - the look of which is reminiscent of John Paul Belmondo or Humphrey Bogart, both cigarette-smoking film stars made famous in the 1960s and 1940s respectively.

[328] Unknown Author, The Unlikely Femme Fatale: Breathless (1960), *Cinematicscribblings.wordpress.com* (2019)
[329] Ibid.

[330] Dan Lewis, 10 Actors Who Look Great with a Cigarette. *Therichest.com* (2014)

[331] Ibid.

As the rest of the greasy T-Birds congregate outside the school's main building around their proxy leader, Kenickie, they (the T-Birds) ask him about his summer escapades. When one of the T-Birds spots Danny over Kenickie's shoulder, the attention is quickly shifted as the camera zooms in rapidly, urgently searching for Danny. The urgency of the camera movement is charged with a libidinal energy, an erotic contemplation in line with the tropes of the teen film. Finally it focuses on the back of Danny as he turns around – just at the right moment – and smiles looking toward his T-Bird cohorts' just off-camera. Interestingly, the gaze toward Danny in this opening scene is mediated by the male characters. The complication that homosocialism brings to the liminal teenage years - where a perceived heterosexuality is in the process of being shaped, makes this instance the first of many that could open itself up to being read queerly.

The rest of the T-Birds approach Danny with excitement, clearly in awe of his presence. This is illustrated in the way in which the camera movement is performed. As the gaze toward Danny is mediated through the eyes of the T-Birds, the camera essentially 'stands in' for them as it urgently searches for him, rapidly zooming past passers-by as it shakily focuses on the object of their gaze: Danny. Due to the hasty camera movements penetrating for a clear view of Danny, the viewer's interest is also potentially piqued. Danny courts the gaze with his steel blue eyes, and perfectly quaffed hair. This very shot being used as the opening shot of *Grease's* theatrical trailer[332] tells the viewer that Zuko/Travolta's star status is central to the filmic world of *Grease* and that this particular tableau is important in supporting the notion that Danny is being illustrated to be seen as an erotic object.

Kenickie is initially set up as the 'king of cool', entering on the right edge of the screen in front of the approaching T-Bird posse. Kenickie engages in some sort of bullying behaviour - conceivably to instate his indomitable status - knocking an unidentified object from a passers-by's hands. As the T-Birds notice Kenickie's arrival up ahead of them, they stop dead in their tracks and look over toward him.

[332] *Grease* Theatrical Trailer, [video], dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)

The camera then cuts to the T-Birds running up to Kenickie's side, flanking him all around. All noticeably shorter than Kenickie, the T-Birds are made to look inferior as they literally look up at their fearless leader. As Kenickie pops his collar while answering the T-Birds' questions about his summer, his movements are fluid, yet contrived. This stands in contrast to the movements of the T-Birds who conduct their crusade with a rehearsed mirroring of Kenickie's aura of dominance. But soon Kenickie's position seems usurped by Danny's arousing introduction. As T-Bird Doody notices Danny behind Kenickie, he hollers out Danny's name making the other T-Birds lose interest in Kenickie and shift all their attention to Danny.

Once Danny joins the T-Birds, even Kenickie seems to be somewhat spellbound by Danny and everything he says and does. Kenickie asks Danny how his summer was. Kenickie is visibly intrigued as he waits for Danny's answer with perceptible eagerness. In terms of clothing, Kenickie is the most similar to Danny. They wear virtually the same outfit with a leather jacket over a tight t-shirt, tucked into a pair of bootlegged denims. The very nature of Danny and Kenickie's homosocial relationship is introduced in this scene.

I would argue that the live action introduction of these two characters is already seeking to interrogate questions of a burgeoning sexuality. From the outset it remains an important trope of the teen T-Birds' friendship group to constantly interrogate the sexual endeavours of their cohorts. As expected, there is an assumption always of *hetero*sexuality, due to society's tendency for "straight cultural assumptions."[333] However, the opposite, being homosexuality, is never far from the discussion at hand. Thus in order to shirk the idea that homosexuality could be a viable option for these characters wanting to be defined as heterosexual, a denial of homosexuality would need to be apparent. Hughes argues that "in films about teen boys' relationships, one of the ways that denial of homosexuality is enacted is through a heterosexualising triangulation."[334] The teen boys' attempts to achieve heterosexuality, is filtered or processed through

[333] Alexander Doty, Chapter Three: Queerness, Comedy, and The Women. *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) pp.82–83
[334] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 4: Boy Buddies. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.88

their own relationship.[335] In *Grease*, this triangle would be seen through Danny's romantic relationship with Sandy, and his close friendship with Kenickie. For this heterosexualising triangulation to work according to Hughes, there is a dominant protagonist (in this case, Danny) and another, echoistic protagonist (Kenickie). "This second protagonist is offered up as the 'clone', in both the sense of a clone as a straight-acting gay man, and in the sense that this protagonist strives to imitate the dominant one."[336] When all five T-Bird members huddle together, they are 'framed' by this triangulation process with Kenickie on the left, and Danny on the right. In this sense, Danny and Kenickie, mirror images of one another by way of sartorial choices and similar in way of stance, appear to talk to their 'subjects', the T-Birds (see addendum J). This instance of a heterosexualising triangle is useful in this chapter's greater argument for the presence of queerness even in overtly heterosexual film texts. I will expand on this process and its links to the teenage years further on.

Addendum I - An instance of a heterosexualising triangle within the T-Birds homosocial friend group. The characters of Danny (right), and Kenickie (left) wear very similar outfits whilst they speak candidly with their T-Bird 'subjects'.

As Danny's live action screen introduction draws to a close, the T-Birds and their leader respond to the school bell ringing and exit to the left off screen. The camera then focuses on two girls walking toward the school building behind the boys: Sandy, a melancholy girl, ("I'm no stranger to heartbreak"[337]) with her new friend, Frenchy (portrayed by actor Didi Conn). The girls in *Grease* have a completely

[335] Ibid.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Olivia Newton-John as Sandy Olssen in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)

different body language to their male counterparts. The females are also not highlighted by the camerawork and staging as the objects of sexual desire from the outset. Rather it is the males who are the preoccupation of the film's libidinal energy: boastfully strutting in their leather jackets, and close-fitting white t-shirts in the live-action introduction of Danny, Kenickie and T-Birds directly before.

The conversation between the two girls as they make their way toward the school possesses a completely different, decelerated tempo to that of the boisterous introduction of their male counterparts. What this difference shows is a desire to mark the gender identities in this scene as disparate to one another. This stands as an example of the musical genre using queer theory to conservatively mediate gender and sexuality, culminating in a performance of hypergendering. This difference in performance between gendered homosocial groups will be explored further under a subheading in this chapter that examines with close textual analysis, the 'Summer Nights' scene.

* * *

As with all the films discussed in this dissertation, bodies lie at the centre of analysis. The role of bodies and their proximity to dance in *Grease* is pertinent as it acts as a springboard for a coming-of-age narrative: Danny, confident in *his* body/sexuality, pulls Sandy who is shy in her body toward a degree of sexual bodily ownership at the close of the film. This is precisely the coming-of-age narrative seen too in *Dirty Dancing*. All adolescents, the characters in *Grease* are exploring their sexualities, pushing the boundaries, and their bodies to their limits in the process in high energy, high-octane activity (the televised school dance event and the Hand Jive number,[338] for example). In addition, although a universal human possession, the (dancing) body is marked in terms of received ideas about gender. As Butler states, "the gendered body acts its part in a culturally

[338] *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)

constructed corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives." [339] The *dancing* body by comparison is then no different. As a cultural practice, dance is typically choreographed according to accepted gender norms and assigned roles.

Although in many ways *Grease* is a progressive story, it does little to chip away at previous gendered stereotypes and tropes. *Grease* is rather an exercise that reinforces and hyperbolises gendered stereotypes and tropes, wrapping it all in the aesthetic flair of a camp celebration. Within its narrative journey, *Grease* makes many references to the differences between male and female: its use of hypergendering is most notably used in how certain events are remembered, and experienced. I will outline two main points that speak to the body, and look at the way said bodies – specifically the male body – perform through a queer and ultimately camp lens in *Grease*. I will undertake a close textual analysis of the 'Summer Nights' scene and its inclusion of homosocial and hypergendering codes. Secondly, I will be exploring an emergent masculinity in the film under the subheading: Boys and Their Toys – image, male bodies, and the bodies of their cars.

YOUNG LOVE IS A VERY QUEER THING:

A Close-textual Analysis of the 'Summer Nights' Scene

Benjamin describes youth as the celluloid embodiment of affliction, transgression, and ecstasy.[340] Similarly, Katherine Ross Hughes describes the term 'teen' as "a figure heavily imbued with social meanings."[341] As a nostalgic reminder of identity formation itself, the teenage years have come to be thought of by theorists as a rehearsal of socialisations that will in turn be carried on into adulthood. [342]

[339] Judith Butler, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, Volume 40, Issue 4 (Dec., 1988) pp.526
[340] Richard Benjamin, 2004. The Sense of an Ending: Youth Apocalypse Films. *Journal of Film and Video,* Volume 56, Issue 4 (2004) p.35
[341] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 1. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) pp.9–10
[342] Ibid.

Straddling between childhood and adulthood, the teen is therefore neither child nor adult and is thus moving through a liminal period, a no man's land. In Hughes' analysis, she sketches the definition of liminality in terms of the teen:

> Liminality is understood here as both a spatial and a temporal phenomenon, representing the time between childhood and adulthood, and also the physical threshold of a changing body.[343]

Due to the fact that teens find themselves in this period of essential liminality of identity formation, the question of sexuality arises. As teens are moving from childhood to adulthood, but can describe themselves as neither child nor adult, they too cannot describe their sexualities as either homo- or heterosexual. Because of this, "films about teens are particularly apt for producing queer possibilities because of the liminality of teens."[344] Hughes elaborates on this point of the teenager years being about queering/querying, by stating:

> This is specifically because, in hetero texts, heterosexuality is *in the process* of being established, and the same goes for gay and lesbian texts – the process of establishing identity and practice is literally played out on-screen. The process of becoming adult is made visible, and liminality is the subject and the structure of such films.[345]

According to heteronormative patriarchal culture, the teen years are a period where sexuality and one's own sexual identity should be successfully established. According to Peter Blos, an implicit developmental task of adolescence is a coming to terms with (or repression of) the homosexual component of one's burgeoning sexuality.[346] "In fact, we might say that the sexual identity formation is predicated on the completion of that process."[347] Of course, this can be said to mean either an inclination toward homo- or heterosexuality at the close of this process – but, as mentioned above, because of the heteronormative and fundamentally patriarchal society we live in, the latter is therefore a more 'likely' choice. Teens are therefore

[343] Ibid. (p.14)
[344] Ibid. (pp.12–13)
[345] Ibid.
[346] Ibid. (p.13)
[347] Ibid.

moving from pre- or a- sexuality, which is presumed to be pre-heterosexuality, toward adult heteronormative behaviours.[348]

This however, adds an interesting lens through which to view and analyse teenage film. Because sexuality is made fluid, slippery even, within the teenage years, these filmic texts are then particularly ripe for queer readings. If the word queer seeks to destabilise both hetero-normativity and homo-normativity,[349] its intrinsic ambiguity suits the liminality of teenage film. As a mode of criticism, queerness seeks to deconstruct established and normalised categories.[350] It is also an identity whose main aim is to move beyond such categories as a whole, working "to establish less fixed, less restrictive, less universalising identifactory practices."[351]

As mentioned briefly before, I am concerned with the homosocial bonds in *Grease*, with close attention being paid to the 'Summer Nights' scene. With regards to the word 'homosocial', I will be making use of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's descriptions of the term. Sedgwick points out that while "homosocial merely means same-sex sociality, it also has obvious links with a very similar homosexual, and is defined in relation to, and as differentiated from, the latter."[352] Thus, homosocial is then described as "a range of bonds between same-sex individuals."[353] Due to the very slippery nature and transgression of adolescence, and the process of deciphering sexuality through the liminal period of the teenage years - when speaking about homosocial bonds in teenagers, it is not a clear-cut discussion. Rather, the conversation at hand (regarding homosociality) presents itself as "a muddled mix of relationships, whose boundaries are not rigid as such psychoanalytic definitions assume."[354]

[348] Ibid. (p.14)
[349] Ibid. (p.15)
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ibid.
[352] Ibid. (p.11)
[353] Ibid.
[354] Ibid. (p.13)

Throughout the film's duration, *Grease* exaggerates heterosexual courting, deriving much of its narrative content from stereotypical high school courting tropes. For example, the dance event stands as a teenpic staple, and *Grease* is no different by including the addition of the prom event. This teenpic genre convention "allows for crushes and insecurities"[355] to come to the fore, as well as allowing a focus to be drawn on the social context among teenage characters.[356] The question of sexuality is never far off from the discussion at hand when investigating the discourse of the 'dance event', and the teenage experience more generally. Traditionally, most dances are designed for the heterosexual pair – couples dance *together* and fall in love, for example. It is with this perception in society of a generalised heteronormativity that the act of dance begins to confront notions of sexuality in the teen years. The act of dance can and has all too often been perceived as a queer entity most notably because of its connection to camp and performativity. This analytical chapter will sketch the way in which the homosocial bonds in *Grease* are pushed to their heterosexual limits – most specifically in the friendships seen on-screen between the male characters. In doing so the following question comes to light: if heterosexuality is so 'normal', why the need to perform this sexuality in such excess? The short answer is that camp is at play here. Gender and its supposed innate tropes are made fluid by the performance of dance and its linkages to the camp sensibility.

As a means of maintaining a perception of heterosexuality, these performances appear as both a fight against, and reinforcement of camp/queer sensibilities. The inclusion of performances of hypergendering and excessive masculinity appear ambiguously throughout the scene, yet, the act of dance is also included throughout. This very contrast between the perceived queer act of dance and an excessive show of masculinity and heterosexuality is the musical and camp's tendency for duality. Another area of analysis in relation to this question is to look deeply and critically at the 'teenage' body, and how its tendency towards

[355] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 6 – School Friends: Boys, Bodies, and Violence. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow) p.158
[356] Ibid.

transgression provides an answer to how profoundly unstable a perceived heterosexuality really is.

I begin the analysis of this scene as the camera cuts from an interior shot of the classrooms as Principal McGee presents a welcome back speech to the students over the intercom, to an exterior shot of the lunch tables. Jan tucks into her lunch, while just past her, nearly centre in the frame, a sunglass-donning Rizzo and 'sidekick' Marnie sing a part of a ditty while holding on to their own lunch trays. A medium-long shot of Rizzo, Marnie in tow, frames her effortless hipness as she takes a seat at the lunch table's head – without hesitation – and removes her Pink Ladies' jacket with one fell swoop, off from resting flippantly atop her shoulders. The camera's movement in this scene is vastly different to the live-action introductory sequences of Danny, outside the school's main building. While the camera in that scene is described as urgently singling out Danny in a crowd, the libidinous motion of that camera movement is severely lacking in this scene when interrogating the girls. Instead, the camera's movement here is notably placid, stagnant, and immobile.

Frenchy and Sandy enter the scene; tracing the exact pathway to the lunch table as Rizzo and Marnie, save for the dramatic element possessed by the latter. Centre framed in a medium-long shot, Sandy approaches the lunch table dressed in shades of pale yellows, a butterscotch cardigan drapes delicately over her shoulders. There is a visual symmetry evident here, in the form of the informally draped Pink Ladies jacket atop Rizzo's shoulders seen just moments before. Such inclusion of visual symmetry/similarity between these particular characters is at best to point out how inherently *different* they are. In Alexander Doty's analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953), he maintains a visual symmetry is evident throughout the film with the two female characters of Marilyn Monroe (Lorelei) and Jane Russell (Dorothy). As Gerald Mast claims, "the perfect compositional symmetry implies an absolute spiritual symmetry."[357] However, whilst the characters of Lorelei and Dorothy in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* are best

[357] Gerald Mast, quoted in Alexander Doty, Chapter Five: Everyone's Here for Love: Bisexuality and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. *Flaming Classics.* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.133

friends that recognise "an absolute spiritual symmetry" in one another, and, as Doty suggests, may even be bisexually involved with one another, their visual treatment in the film is about both symmetry and, in equal measure, contrast.

Doty notes how Jane Russell's character is the "butch to Monroe's femme."[358] Similarly I contend that Rizzo is the butch to Sandy's femme. As mentioned, the importance of symmetry in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is as integral as its use of contrast is. The characters of Rizzo and Sandy, although sartorially and behaviourally very different from one another, are also bonded and in sync by way of romantic film conventions of symmetry. These two characters are not shown in "perfect compositional symmetry", and therefore do not share in an "absolute *spiritual* symmetry". These characters are at odds with one another, and thus this fact is conceded by way of their dress, and framing. The rest of the Pink Ladies wear their signature pink jackets and are therefore undifferentiated from one another by way of dress. The Pink Ladies' members – save for Rizzo – stand as a unit, whilst Rizzo and Sandy are made to appear visually 'at odds' with one another.

Rizzo zestfully asks Sandy how things are 'down under'. The term 'down under' is of course twofold. For one, 'down under' refers to the nickname of Australia, Sandy's home country. Secondly, there is an obvious reference to sexuality in Rizzo's double entrendre. The camera cuts to Sandy as she answers Rizzo's potentially crude question with a well natured, unaware, "Oh, fine, thanks". The camera cuts away again to Rizzo, shot centred, flanked by Frenchy (left) and Marnie (right), as she responds by cheekily smirking in Sandy's direction. As the only character dressed in a completely black ensemble, Rizzo is made to stand out as the posse leader. All of the shots at the lunch table code her as the same: framed centre between Marnie and Frenchy, Rizzo is filmed to look dominant, her blocking too placing her at the table's head to show her authority within the Pink Ladies' ranks.

[358] Alexander Doty, Chapter Five. Everyone's Here for Love: Bisexuality and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.141

When peppy school cheerleader Patti Simcox enters the scene and takes a seat next to Sandy in the hopes of recruiting her for cheerlead try-outs, Frenchy asks the Pink Ladies to share their thoughts on their newest recruit. "What you think about Sandy?" Frenchy asks, directing the question to team leader Rizzo. The gaze is directed through their (Pink Ladies) eyes toward Sandy, off camera. The camera stands in (almost) for Sandy – girls looking at girl. Rizzo's response to Frenchy's question is with the words: "she's too pure to be pink."[359] In this sense, pink is the colour of strength, of rebellion, mischief and worldliness, not classic femininity, girlhood, softness, innocence and purity, the latter all used to exemplify Sandy's kind-hearted nature. Pink in this context, is also given the connotation of sexual initiation versus virginity. The libidinal nature of the teenage experience is used to define the colour pink in this scene. To express my thoughts on camp and its link to queer discourse, I have found the five-word line of dialogue, "too pure to be pink", to be most valuable in situating my own ideas on the subject. To be too pure to be pink implies that in order to be pink, one is ultimately impure. Camp and queerness are most definitely at play in this statement. Defying binary definition stands as a cornerstone of queer theory. By aligning oneself with a queer outlook, one is ultimately proclaiming themselves unwilling to fit into binary definition and is therefore not purely this, nor purely that, but rather an amalgamation of performativity. As the colour pink itself has been known to signify femininity, "too pure to be pink" also tells of the enjoyment the perceived feminine can stand to evoke.

I return now to the analysis of the 'Summer Nights' scene. The viewer's first glimpse of the boys at the same moment the girls are seated for lunch is a quick, inelegant cut from the seated girls to the boys which is shot from slightly below, spread out on the bleachers – in a combination of seated and standing positions. There is a contrast to the way in which the boys are framed compared to the girls. For one, the boys occupy a space that stands on the outskirts of the social 'break-time' realm (the bleachers). They do the same during the pep rally in the ensuing scene – the T-Birds stand on the fringe of the pep rally, isolated and set apart on

[359] Stockard Channing as Rizzo in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)

purpose. They hang out in the parking lot, scheming trouble. Not so closely cropped (as the girls are) in the 'Summer Nights' scene, the boys are framed with more freedom, more open space surrounds them. Space onscreen is often associated with action scenes and/or physical activity. As Tasker writes:

> Features such as the breath-taking nature of visual spectacle, or the feelings of exhilaration at the expansive landscapes in which the hero operates, are fundamental to the action cinema.[360]

As a general rule of cinema, space onscreen is associated with men because of its connection with potential action. Much of film relies on the historical conditioning that the male is connoted with action, and conversely, the female is connoted as being a passive object.[361] To speak to the latter, generally more closely cropped shots are used to construct emotional intimacy often associated with females in film. It is then no surprise that Kleiser has utilised wider shots to portray the men, whereas when shooting the women in conversation, the shots are generally tighter, focusing more on the women's facial expressions (i.e. emotions).

I return now to the introduction of the men in the 'Summer Nights' scene: in contemporary terms, Kenickie (and to large degree, Danny) 'manspread' across the rungs of the bleacher, sitting back and reclining with open legs. According to a 2017 *Independent* article, 'manspreading' is described as "representative of a misogynistic patriarchy."[362] The act of manspreading is defined as when a man takes up as much space as possible on public transport – essentially 'spreading' his legs open over more than one seat - in order to assert his authority.[363] Furthermore, manspreading has been described as an act that subsequently undermines a woman's right to space.[364] This addition of 'manspreading' as it is contemporarily termed is the first indication of an excessive performance of masculinity – and perceived heterosexuality – in the 'Summer Nights' scene on behalf of the T-Birds. The gaze is described in this scene as boys looking at boys.

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[360] Yvonne Tasker, Introduction: Gender and the Action Cinema. *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.6
[361] Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6 (1983) p.11
[362] Olivia Petter, Revealed: The Scientific Explanation Behind 'Manspreading", *Independent.co.uk* (2017)
[363] Ibid.
[364] Ibid.

Visual symmetry is portrayed in the manner in which Danny's character is shot in the 'Summer Nights' scene, similarly to that of Rizzo. Also illustrated as *his* (the T-Birds) posse leader, Danny is framed on the bleacher's top tier, standing above all of his T-Bird cohorts. The camera then enacts a crane pan, moving up the bleachers to focus on Danny's 'clone' protagonist, Kenickie, still manspreading on his rung of the bleacher, unmoved since the scene's inception. The blocking in this sequence is interesting to note: no more is Danny taking centre stage – in fact, Danny sits to the right of the screen, nearly all but disappearing from view altogether.

An over-the-shoulder shot of Kenickie glimpses him taking a drag of his cigarette just past Doody as the camera mediates his (Doody's) gaze toward Putzie, scheming trouble by attempting to look up under some girls' skirts. Doody then alerts the rest of the T-Birds to Putzie's would-be covert mission. The T-Birds adjust their line of focus toward Putzie and his unknowing female victims. As the girls take notice of Putzie's indiscretions, they retrieve their lunch trays and exit right off-screen. This triangle of gazing is central to the teenage libidinal experience[365] with Doody gazing at his friend Putzie, who in turn attempts to gaze up under some girls' skirts.

This assignment is broken however when the non-diegetic opening bass line of 'Summer Nights' begins to be heard. When the attention is turned to Danny, the T-Birds huddle around their fearless leader to hear all about his summer (read: sexual) escapades. The camera re-enacts its 'searching' movement again, as in the introductory scene of Danny outside the school building. This time however, the zooming movement is more languid, less urgent but still seeking Danny out amongst the 'crowd', focusing on him once he is framed in the centre. The T-Birds form a cluster around Danny, the camera shooting the tableau from a slightly lowered angle to again instil a sense of power and authority for the character of Danny.

[365] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 4. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.88

The boys huddle *loosely* around Danny, whilst the girls *tightly* frame Sandy to hear her version of events. This points to the differences in gendered experience. The boys' loose arrangement speaks to how men and their sexual escapades are met by others with far less animosity than females' experiences are. The loose arrangement of the boys as opposed to the tight framing seen with the girl's, points to the greater prohibitions on male physical and interpersonal intimacy. As a gender traditionally aligned with emotion and intimacy[366], women do not need to police their homosocial relationships in the same way as men need to/do.[367] J Bryan Lowder uses clothing as a useful distinguishing factor dividing the camps of men versus women:

> It's no accident that the art of dressing women is called 'draping' while the art of dressing men is 'tailoring' – the former lets you slip, flow, and crease; the latter stitches you in.[368]

Although this theory does not align with the loose, 'draping' arrangement of the *men* in the 'Summer Nights' scene as discussed above, this analogy does work to decode the manner in which male homosocial bonds are policed. Films about male best friends need to be able to take certain measures in order to simultaneously acknowledge and deny the possibilities of homoromance, homoerotics, or homosexuality. [369] Therefore, the policing of male friendships on-screen are essentially 'stitched in', rigid, and more hard-lined than those of the females. It becomes clear in the 'Summer Nights' scene that intimacy, or closeness between the boys in their *homo*social friendships can only occur when men are talking about their *hetero*sexual exploits.

Danny, now framed by his T-Bird consorts, sings the words "I met a girl, crazy for me."[370] As he stands, the camera shoots him from a low angle, titling up. This is done to intimate power – and in this case, sexual prowess. Again, an excessive

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[366] Linda Williams, Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. *Film Quarterly,* Volume 44, Issue 4 (1991) p.9
[367] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 4. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.86
[368] J Bryan Lowder, Postcards from Camp: Why is Camp so Obsessed with Women? *Slate.com* (2013)
[369] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 4. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.86
[370] John Travolta as Danny Zuko in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)

masculinity is seen in the way shooting/framing differs from the boys and the girls. The boys' shot on the bleachers, feature highly contrasting height levels as Danny, Kenickie and all the T-Birds occupy different rungs of the sport spectator bench. A hierarchy of men is visually displayed, with Danny occupying the bench's topmost tier. Dissimilarly, the girls are shot seated at the lunch table and filmed flatly, and head on. As the musical component of 'Summer Nights' heats up, Sandy stands up, although still behind the lunch table. I would argue this serves as a safety blanket for timid Sandy as well as a distant connection to the 1950s ideal of a woman's place being behind a kitchen/dining table discussing domesticity with friends of the same gender.

Whilst the girls are shot with images of the high school's building behind them, the boys are framed majestically against cerulean blue skies. The former implies the gendered (mis)conception that women are more domesticated, while the latter suggests a masculine freedom, manly excessiveness, wild abandon, and an expansive feeling that the world is often their (men's) oyster.

Worth mentioning too in the analysis of 'Summer Nights' is the contrast in body movement. The girls conduct themselves for the most part in a contained manner, paying more attention to facial expressions and micro movements, even so much as skipping from point A to B in a show of girly excitement. The guys however, thrust hips, and squat down low, standing in stark contrast to the way the girls conduct the retelling. In short, while the girls skip, the boys gyrate. In terms of deeming *Grease* camp, and ultimately queer despite its overt heterosexual love story, the very manner in which gender is approached produces reason for investigation.

As mentioned before, Lowder's analogy of the differences of dressing between genders (women draping and men tailoring) means that the 'Summer Nights' scene inverts this notion, effectively marking the scene – and *Grease* as a whole – queer in its ambiguous approach to gender and sexuality. In the 'Summer Nights' scene, the men *drape* their bodies across the rungs of the bleachers, whilst the women control their movements in a *tailored*, 'stitched in' manner. As previously

outlined, the notion that the teen years are especially rife for queer readings because they are "years of transition, of being 'betwixt and between' various states of being. This means that, potentially, teen identities and desires are amorphous, shifting, and uncertain."[371]

The notion of sexual difference – perceived or otherwise – is most evident in the vast difference between male and female recounting of a summer romance in the 'Summer Nights' sequence. As the teenage boys all huddle around Danny, eager to hear his retelling of his summer beach fling, he retells the summer romance (in song) by overly sexualising the entire encounter. Although this 'sexualising' is symptomatic of teenaged hypermasculinity, it also reinforces the idea of an intense excessive heterosexuality being played out on-screen. A heterosexuality that does not simply exist because of traditional perception, but rather a heterosexuality that is constantly policing itself in the midst of excess and a creeping in of potentially queer behaviours.

Danny gives his male 'audience' (the T-Birds) what they want – all the juicy details (although most to all of them are fabricated, or at the very least, grossly exaggerated). Sandy however retells it in a more subdued, romantic way - an arguably more traditionally feminine retelling of a summer fling. While Danny claims that he saved her (Sandy's) life after a near drowning, Sandy amusingly alleges, "He [Danny] showed up, splashing around."[372] In a similar vein, while Sandy asserts sweetly that the two young lovers "drank lemonade" – a classic trope of 'innocent' 1950s romance – Danny declares blatantly that the two "made out under the docks."[373] The two vastly contrasting images in the previous statement adequately illustrate the differences in normative male and female romantic teenage experience.

What also stands at play in this scene is the stereotypical 1950s concept that men are sexual beings, and women – the property of men – are satisfied when

[371] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 1. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.14
[372] Olivia Newton-John as Sandy Olssen in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)
[373] *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)

bestowed upon them are goods of 'meaning'. In a domestic sense, the latter would refer to washing machines and vacuum cleaners, whilst in a romantic sense it could pertain to engagement rings and expensive jewellery. Whilst in the 'Summer Nights' scene the T-Birds ask questions with sexual connotations ("did you get very far?" and "did she put up a fight?"), the Pink Ladies revert to asking questions with a more materialistic and vain leaning: "does he have a car?"; "was it love at first sight?" and "how much dough did he spend?". The latter also serves as part of *Grease's* effort to illustrate a 1950s American zeitgeist: the alignment of romantic discourse with post-war capitalism in American culture. It also seeks to illustrate the importance of material wealth to the courtship procedure. This inclusion also facilitates in portraying women's reliance on men for financial support, something that would have appropriately elicited the zeitgeist of the 1950s as, even today, this is an area of popular discourse that is fraught with tension.

However, a third gender performance is added to the display in the 'Summer Nights' scene. Rizzo – completely disinterested and disengaged from the flurry of pastel colours that whip past her as she reclines on a lunch-table bench – is illustrated in this scene as a would-be 'control' in a science experiment. Almost stoic in her complete disinterest, Rizzo straddles between the gender binary that presents itself in this scene. She looks like a teenage girl, but her short cropped hair and black ensemble (the only one in her female 'tribe' donning this non-colour) is visually more akin to her male counterparts, the T-Birds occupying the bleachers in the 'Summer Nights' sequence. I would argue that the inclusion of Rizzo's *ex*clusion from the high-octane energy of the sequence points again to the queer approach to sexuality in the teenage years. Much like camp renders desire and gender a fluid entity, so too does teenage desire.

As briefly mentioned before, Hughes further explains, "as characters are depicted actually becoming heterosexual, or occasionally homosexual, they are shown, spatially and temporally, in between the binaries nonsexual/sexual, hetero/homo, child/adult."[374] I contend this is the basis of Rizzo's character in this scene. While

[374] Ibid.

she does not fit into any of the binaries mentioned above, her character is essentially a *liminal personae*, periodically offering up quippy remarks to the ensuing giddy, girly action. She is at once female, wearing a calf-length tight pencil skirt accentuating her female curves. But also she is coded equally in a masculine way: wearing all black (like Danny), sporting a short, cropped haircut, and wearing masculine-shaped sunglasses that conceal her face when searching it for emotion (emotion = melodrama = girls/women[375]). There is also a connection being drawn here between Kenickie and Danny's caricature introductions – faces completely covered, concealed by unruly hairstyles - and Rizzo's hidden face behind large sunglasses.

Rizzo also possesses a certain swagger that makes her character very androgynous – particularly in contrast to the helplessly/hopelessly feminine character of Frenchy (a beauty school dropout to complete the gendered stereotype!). Rizzo further asserts her masculine energy in her homosocial group by way of remarks she throws out to the excitable girls, essentially throwing water on their flame. For example, at one point Rizzo remarks by saying Danny "sounds like a drag."[376] The use of the word "drag" is even interesting in this sense. As being described "as someone who dresses up in clothes of the opposite gender for fun or sexual pleasure",[377] the word 'drag' in this scene is open to 'doubleness', and thus aligned with a camp sensibility. Furthermore, as briefly sketched in the introduction, while hypergendering could be seen as a conservative way of mediating gender, on the contrary, drag can be viewed as mediating gender in a more liberal sense. Rizzo is, as mentioned, at times both male *and* female, but also, because she does not fully commit to either, she is neither of them. Rizzo is enacting her role queerly, non-conforming to binary standards, and by doing so is ultimately a camp figure because camp itself compels ambiguous reactions.[378]

[375] Linda Williams, Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. *Film Quarterly,* Volume 44, Issue 4 (1991) p.9
[376] Stockard Channing as Rizzo in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)
[377] Unknown Author, Drag, *Urbandictionary.com* (2008)
[378] Benton Jay Komins, 2001. Popular Culture, Kitsch as Camp, and Film. *Comparative Literature and Culture,* Volume 3, Issue 1 (2001) p.3

Further on the positioning of Rizzo's character: it becomes evident in the 'Summer Nights' scene that *Grease* is dealing with a 1970s commentary on an idea of 1950s gender relations. Post the advent of mainstream Feminism, the 'Summer Nights' scene calls into the discussion the common conception that when men sleep around, they are awarded a kind of Don Juan status, whilst, when women sleep around they are deemed "sluts", "whores", and other harshly critical terms.[379] This line of thought is made visible later on in the film when Rizzo, frightened of a potential pregnancy, sings her solo 'There are Worse Things I Could Do'. As a sexual character, Rizzo is lambasted for it. She happens to be ahead of her time. Talking about the impossibility of femininity: being a slut is no good, but being a prude is no better either. "To cry in front of you"[380] – is the worst thing she could do, according to her. Vulnerability is prohibited, although Rizzo's character deeply yearns for it. I derive from this that camp and queer theory are at work here to find a captive audience within the feminist discourse. As Doty states: "Queer theory shares with feminism an interest in non-normative expressions of gender."[381]

Returning to the 'Summer Nights' scene: before the song's tempo slows, Sandy is also shot, tightly surrounded by eagerly listening girls, from below to illustrate power (much like Danny is shot previously). As the song drastically slows down, the two protagonists break away from their captive audiences, for a moment to themselves. Danny and Sandy, walking up and away from their homosocial groupings, purposefully separate themselves from their 'audience'. Now, away from his audience (whom he so profoundly feels he needs to impress), Danny remembers the romance more realistically, rhetorically pressing the questions: "I wonder what she's doing now?" In an overturn of visual symmetry, *Danny* is now shot with a building behind him. As Sandy's face is superimposed to the left of the image of Danny on the bleacher's top rung, the camera begins to smoothly zoom out to reveal Danny's full body, right arm stretched up into the sky. Separated by the pole of the athletic field's floodlight, the two lovers request the viewer to look

[379] Panteá Farvid, Virginia Braun and Casey Rowney, 'No Girl Wants to be Called a Slut!': Women, Heterosexual Casual Sex and the Sexual Double Standard, *Journal of Gender Studies*, Volume 26, Issue 5 (2015) p.544
[380] Stockard Channing as Rizzo in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)
[381] Alexander Doty, Chapter 15: Queer Theory in Hill and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.148

at them from different perspectives. As the female in the tableau, Sandy invites the viewer to regard her face. Shot up close, the camera reveals her expressions, and by extension, her emotions. Such an inclusion is ultimately melodramatic – not surprising when thinking about the woman's film/drama. Williams describes the melodrama as being able to "encompass a broad range of films marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excess' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions."[382]

Whilst in contrast to that, Danny invites the viewer to not necessarily look at his face, or expressions, but rather, to look at his body. In full view, Danny's body is displayed, from top to toe. Hughes provides some insight into this inclusion of featuring Danny's full-length body on-screen. Though the teen films Hughes discusses are not focused on athletics per se, there is an emphasis on physical activity in each film,[383] most notably the physical activity of the male actors. What this addition does is present ample, and sanctioned, opportunity for the boys' bodies to be displayed at length.[384] I would assert that the very inclusion of the physicality of dancing within these films discussed in the dissertation provide the opportunity Hughes speaks about for the boys' bodies to be displayed at length. This sentiment is also precisely the reason I suggest there is a disparity in the manner in which the female character (Sandy) is shot to that of the male character (Danny) in the closing moments of the 'Summer Nights' sequence. What proves interesting however, is that although in this particular moment of the 'Summer Nights' rendition, the tempo has slowed so dramatically that there is no inclusion of the act of dancing occurring anymore. Instead, the viewer is looking at the full-length male body of Danny.

In this section, I have attempted to answer the question that asks: If heterosexuality is so 'normal', why the need to perform it in such excess? By drawing attention to the film's teenpic status, I have suggested the notion of a teenager's ability to straddle within the binaries of adult/child, nonsexual/sexual,

[382] Linda Williams, Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. *Film Quarterly,* Volume 44, Issue 4 (1991) p.3
[383] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 6 - School Friends: Boys, Bodies, and Violence. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.161
[384] Ibid.

and hetero/homo. But to answer the question posed above: why the need to perform heterosexuality in such excess, the answer remains varied. For one, "Sedgwick argues that there is an always present possibility of slippage between platonic and erotic homosocial desires." [385] Thus there must exist a need to constantly reinforce the notion of one's heterosexuality in order to avoid any of this 'slippage'. Further adding to the confusion of binary sexual politics in the realm of the teenpic, are the very genre conventions of the musical film.

I return to the fundamental basis of this thesis – to decipher queer readings from overtly heterosexual texts by exploring their camp sensibilities. The same employment (of camp) can be used in *Grease* to aid in the decoding of the murky sexual waters it finds itself in. Through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humour, and theatricality, camp allows its viewers to witness 'serious' issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, is one struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed.[386] Babuscio claims that the 'serious' is, in fact, a crucial hallmark to camp.[387] Musicals as a whole, although seemingly flamboyant and largely without seriousness, are a huge aficionado of the camp sensibility because of the 'doubling' of seriousness wrapped in flamboyancy. *Grease* and its 'Summer Nights' sequence with its sustained play on disparate forms of hypergendering feature this dynamic use of doubling.

BOYS & THEIR TOYS:

Image, Male Bodies, & the Bodies of their Cars

Much like the inclusion of teenage homosocial bonds and their performances of excessive heterosexuality discussed previously in this section, there also exists an intriguing connection of bodies within the world of *Grease*. The previous section

[385] Ibid. (p.160)
[386] Jack Babuscio, Camp and the Gay Sensibility in Bergman (ed), *Camp Grounds* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) p.28
[387] Ibid.

mapped out the excessive performances of heterosexuality in the 'Summer Nights' scene, by utilising close textual analysis. Similarly, this section will chart the performances of excessive masculinity that is presented in surplus by the T-Birds, and more specifically, Danny and his closest cohort: Kenickie. As a whole this thesis aims to explore the ways in which these overtly heterosexual musical films from the 1970s and 1980s still have the potential for queer readings based on the performativity of the male body specifically, as well as the camp aesthetics of the films – but *Grease* adds some interesting footnotes to the discussion at hand about the male body on-screen in musicals.

There is an undeniable connection in *Grease* between physical, human bodies and the bodies of cars. Cars and *their* bodies are made mention of periodically throughout the film's duration. There is specifically a salient link between the *men* in the film, and cars. The T-Birds are so synonymous with cars that they even work in a body shop/mechanics workshop as part of their high school curriculum. No more is this connection between the male body and the car more on display than in the 'Greased Lightnin'' sequence.

As the most overtly sexually provocative scene in the film, what stands at contrast to this exercise in unconcealed heterosexuality is that it all takes place within a masculine, homosocial space with absolutely no women in sight. Ironically, the only woman that *is* present in the 'Greased Lightnin'' scene – at least before the T-Birds perform the 'fantasy' segment of the musical number – is Mrs Murdock. Described as "Rydell's tomboyish shop teacher",[388] Mrs Murdock is another character within *Grease* who resists binary gender definition (much like Rizzo as touched upon previously). Mrs Murdock's casting as the rogue auto shop teacher is just another instance of *Grease's* tendency toward camp ways of seeing.

In 'driving home' the most sexually provocative themes of the film, the 'Greased Lightnin'' musical/dance number in turn becomes all about 'drive': driving cars, (teenage) sex drive, the two are interrelated and interconnected. The T-Birds love

[388] Unknown Author, Mrs. Murdock, Grease Wiki, Fandom, *Grease.fandom.com* (2019)

cars so much; they speak of them with nearly humanistic features. One such example: as tradition would have it, the car they speak about in the 'Greased Lightnin' scene is pronounced a "she". As Danny sings about how they can improve the car, he wears a skin-tight black ensemble, his biceps showing off – he swings his hips, and touches his crotch as he moves sensually from the front to the back of the car, all whilst manoeuvring his hands to portray the car's corporeal curves like those of a voluptuous woman.

As much as the 'Summer Nights' scene has been excessively heightened to portray the protagonists' heterosexuality, the 'Greased Lightnin'' scene has also been manipulated to be viewed through a scrim of intensity. However, the intensity the 'Greased Lightin' scene seeks to portray is of a sexual/sensual nature. Moving from a scene highlighting the excessive lengths teenage boys in the 1950s would go to perform heterosexuality ('Summer Nights'), the 'Greased Lightnin'' scene – and other sequences in the film with predominantly featuring the male, T-Bird characters – attempts to centre on the performativity of an extreme masculinity. One could argue that in essence the reasoning remains much the same: a heterosexual standard is being excessively described and reinforced. For example, Danny claims the car will be a "pussy wagon" and that "the chicks will cream for Greased Lightnin'."[389] However heterosexual the scene might appear, there is arguably an instinctive 'doubleness' evident within camp film, an ambiguity that – still not without seriousness – is often difficult to fit into binary standards of definition[390] as Bergman states. One such example of this 'doubleness' is the very word 'grease'. In this scene particularly, grease refers to both human and car: grease, as in oil or gel for those perfectly quaffed hairdos, as well as greased lightning as in a well-oiled machine (of a car). As always in *Grease*, it is about the entire aesthetic: they (the T-Birds, Danny at their helm) look good and so does their car. This is always of utmost importance. "I got this image, right?" proclaims Danny to Sandy, knowing what his friends and peers expect of him. It's all about aesthetic/image for the main male body in the film: Danny. Naturally, this

[389] John Travolta as Danny Zuko in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)
[390] David Bergman, Introduction. *Camp Grounds* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993)

obsession with visuality and appearance stride alongside the liminal teenage experience comfortably.

Onto the subject of comfort, or the lack thereof: the T-Birds do not present themselves as 'bastions of comfort'[391] for Danny at the best of times. He is uncomfortable in front of his friends when he is with Sandy – he is not authentic and cannot fully be himself because he is trying too hard to keep up a certain appearance. This fact has camp undertones, as Schuyler insists that camp undoubtedly recognises that heteropatriarchal dominance are not bastions of comfort and safety for all. Of course Danny considers himself to be heterosexual, the entire romantic narrative in the film revolving around him and Sandy, but this is essentially the transgression and subversion that camp provides its audiences, even while portraying 'normative' modes of narrative. To further expand on this point, the liminality of the teenage years and its affinity for the subversion of binary modes of sexuality as sketched in the opening paragraphs of this chapter also play to this idea of camp as a mode that seeks "to unmask and condemn patriarchal dominance as a means of empowering the othered."[392] Therefore, heterosexuality in *Grease* is both constructed *and* undermined, within the film. The very inclusion of such in *Grease* is the queer leanings of the musical genre as a whole, as well as the aesthetics of camp hard at work.

As Hughes points out:

> The phrase 'male homosociality' is used to describe practices of male bonding which are often defined in part by their homophobia, so that homosociality and desire appear to oppose or deny each other's co-presence.[393]

Such a differentiation is important within the filmic world of *Grease*. While the male characters sketched in this dissertation all consider themselves heterosexual, they often do so by denigrating the opposite (homosexuality). Such an exaggerated *performance* of sexuality begins to beg the question whether

[391] Michael T. Schuyler, Camp for Camp's Sake: Absolutely Fabulous, Self-Consciousness, and the Mae West Debate. *Journal of Film and Video*, Volume 56, Issue 4 (2004) p.18
[392] Ibid. (p.7)
[393] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 6 - School Friends: Boys, Bodies, and Violence. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000 – 2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.160

heterosexuality is so normative after all. The above sentiment by Hughes is particularly of use when studying the performances of Travolta's characters in the dissertation: Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* and Zuko in *Grease*. These two characters are painfully unwilling to appear anything less than 'macho male', and therefore perform their masculinity and heterosexuality in such excess that the entire identity appears completely constructed and thus open to queer interpretations. Much like camp is often a visual celebration in film of all things flamboyant, queer film is also ultimately a celebration of what is deemed non-normative and existing outside of the realms of normative sexual behaviour. It works to *express*, and not to *oppress*.[394] Ultimately, as Doty explains: the theories, criticism, film and popular culture texts produced within this definition of 'queer' would seek to examine, challenge, and confuse sexual and gender categories.[395]

To confuse the conversation of sexual and gender categories even more within *Grease*, the homosocial bond between Danny and Kenickie is pertinent. As mentioned previously, Hughes maintains that there is a queer approach to sexuality in the teenage years due to the liminality of the adolescent experience. In addition, to speak on the gender disparity of the homosociality of adolescence, Hughes asserts that girls' close friendships are largely indistinguishable from homoromance; therefore the boundary between friendship and romance does not have to be policed in the same way as boys' relationships.[396]

There is a marked difference between girl and boy homosocial relationships in *Grease*. While the girls congregate for sleepovers, giggling over crushes and giving each other 'makeovers' in the comfort of their own homes, the boys in *Grease* are never given the same treatment. Conversely, the boys are always seen socialising outside the domestic realm, in public, astride cars, *et al.* More specifically, on the subject of friendship and the expression of platonic love, the boys are never allowed the freedom to hug one another – I refer specifically to Danny and

[394] Alexander Doty, Chapter 15: Queer Theory in Hill and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.150
[395] Ibid.
[396] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 4. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.86

Kenickie in this sense. Clearly best friends, the two find themselves in an embrace before the Thunder Road showdown when Kenickie asks Danny to be his "second at Thunder Road."[397] They quickly disperse, uncomfortable, as they realise the other T-Birds are looking at them. They are not allowed to be too tender, too vulnerable.

The repressed emotions of men, and the taboos surrounding male-to-male hugs and embraces, are a cornerstone of traditional cinema.[398] Ironically, as soon as the embrace is quickly scrapped, the two boys reach rapidly for their respective combs and begin tidying their hairdos in an almost maniacal fashion. The staccato one-eighty of this scene from tender platonic moment, to hurried primping, is humorous in its interpretation of potential queer nuances. Therefore, not only is the inclusion of this failed male homosocial show of platonic love a cornerstone of traditional cinema, due to society's conditioned assumption of heterosexuality in all peoples, but also it stands as a striking example as a moment of potential undoing, of potential queerness, a 'slippage' of presumed heterosexuality.

In a scene just after the 'Greased Lightnin'' sequence, Danny sees Sandy at lunch at the diner with the school jock. Upon seeing Sandy with another man, Danny decides he should become like the school jock in order to win back Sandy's desires after shrugging her off in front of the T-Birds and Pink Ladies after the school pep rally. He visits the gym/sports club, where the coach tells the debonair greaser he needs to change. When Danny chuckles and adds, "well that's why I'm here: to change", the coach inserts how he was just referring to Danny's outward clothing (black leather jacket, Ray Ban wayfarers and dark jeans, a cigarette always protruding from his lips). In a track-running scene that follows, Danny attempts to show off in front of Sandy, standing on the track bleachers with her dim-witted jock beau. As Danny pushes his body to the limit, jumping hurdles in a display of masculinity and sexual 'peacocking', he trips and falls badly, dust piling up around him. Sandy runs over immediately to help him up – the act seemingly reconciles their passive aggression toward one another.

[397] Jeff Conaway as Kenickie in *Grease* [film] dir. Randal Kleiser (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1978)
[398] Linda Williams, Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. *Film Quarterly,* Volume 44, Issue 4 (1991) p.9

Changing bodies, changing clothes, changing personas all form part of the liminal high school/teenage experience. Hughes speaks about teenage desires being amorphous, shifting, and uncertain,[399] but so too are their (teenage) physical identities. A dramatic physical and sartorial change is something even Sandy famously undergoes toward the end of the film too, lamenting her old self in 'Goodbye to Sandra-Dee' and entering the next scene as the new (and supposedly improved) Sandy in skin-tight head-to-toe black spandex, providing visual symmetry with a gender-switch version of Danny's signature ensemble. What these inclusions show is the constructedness of the gender and sexual identities within the film.

Reminiscent of the film's title sequence where this notion of construction first comes to the fore, there are multiple moments within *Grease* that speak to the queer understanding that gender identities are not innate nor biological, but are in fact produced, and constructed. Therefore, when Danny proclaims to Coach Calhoun that he needs 'to change'; the doubleness of the camp sensibility is made evident. Of course, the coach is simply referring to Danny's outward appearance when he asks him to change, whilst Danny takes the coach's statement as meaning he needs to transform his entire identity. Whatever the true meaning, queer theory and the camp sensibility are very much at play here. What these inclusions tell us is that there is always scope to regard gender and sexuality as mere constructions that are anything but rigid. Sandy's closing transformation can also be viewed with this lens that points out how important the construction of gender and sexuality is within the queer discourse. By reading *Grease* queerly we can begin to understand that the comment being made is on the contsructedness of gender and sexuality in both these instances. And no more is this process more heightened and exaggerated than in the liminal years of adolescence when identity construction is pushed to its limits.

[399] Katherine Hughes, Chapter 1. Queer Possibilities in Teen Friendships in Film, 2000–2009 (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p.14

* * *

In this chapter I've looked carefully at *Grease* and attempted to show the ways in which this text could be read queerly. I have managed to mark out a space that acknowledges the liminality of the teenage years and how this transformative period in everyone's lives' further aids in bringing questions about identity formation and construction into the limelight.

First, I traced *Grease's* title sequence with close textual analysis. I highlighted the ways in which the construction of character was very much at the centre. What this inclusion further tells us is that there is an alignment with a queer way of seeing. What the title sequence also establishes is the importance that bodies play within the filmic world of *Grease*. By dissecting the lyrics of the opening song, 'Grease is the Word', I was also able to expose how the body, its movement and kinetic energy is at the core of *Grease* and its approach to the teenage experience. This discovery made it easy to draw connections to the identity formation process of adolescence and queer theory's insistence that gender and sexuality are indeed constructed forms.

Secondly, I looked closely at the 'Summer Nights' scene and revealed ways in which an excessive performance of homosocial bonding also aligned itself with queer theory. Hughes' work on the liminality of the teenage years also provided some helpful insight into answering the central question this chapter poses. What her work in summation states is that the teenage years are a time when reading characters as queer is especially appropriate because these are characters that find themselves 'betwixt and between' the binaries of childhood and adulthood. Because they do not fit comfortably at either pole, it is further permissible to consider their sexualities as 'in the process' of being established. Therefore they are unable to mark themselves as hetero- or homo-sexual as suitable modes of sexual preference.

Lastly, in a section titled 'Boys & their Toys' I looked at the instances that spoke of image and male bodies. I used the bodies of their [the male's] cars as a starting point to interrogate the way in which the males use their bodies in *Grease*, most notably in homosocial environments. To probe this idea I embarked on a close-textual analysis of the 'Greased Lightnin' scene as this sequence appealed to me to illustrate both this thesis' central interest in working class male bodies, as well as analyse Danny in an environment surrounded by only men. I found again that once placed alongside his homosocial friendship group, Danny enacted his masculinity and heterosexuality in an excessive campaign. What this disproportionate display of heterosexuality shows us is queer theory's interest in destabilising the assertion of "heterosexuality as celebratory ideal."[400]

Schuyler suggests that queers like sports and action films – they drink beer and fix cars.[401] However, Schuyler adds, the mass media would have us all believe that these are all primarily – maybe even exclusively – "the interests, actions, and talents of the hetero male majority."[402] At first glance, this very sentiment could do to fit well within the realm of what *Grease* offers on-screen. As the men in the film – supposedly all heterosexual – work on cars, and presumably drink beer in excess all appear to be heterosexual in a world that is dominated by the notion of heteronormative ideals, the question still remains: why the need to perform said heterosexuality in such excess, if it is indeed the normative mode of sexual expression? I suggest the musical as a whole makes its case in cinema as being unable to be any one binary sexual definition. In this sense, musicals are a queer cinema discourse. But more than that, musicals – and *Grease* in particular – are inherently camp in their inability to be truly conservative. In its inability to be conformist, camp begins to weave itself into cinema – much like in *Grease* – to begin to speak out "against oppression and repression, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality, and calls for change (or, at least, acknowledges the possibility of change) in that regard."[403] By framing this all against the liminality

[400] Brett Farmer, Chapter 6: Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical in Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p.77
[401] Michael T. Schuyler, Camp for Camp's Sake: Absolutely Fabulous, Self-Consciousness, and the Mae West Debate. *Journal of Film and Video,* Volume 56, Issue 4 (2004) p.7
[402] Ibid.
[403] Ibid. (p.17)

of the teenage years that themselves repel true binary delineations, *Grease* begins to ask much more pressing and significant questions that its flair for aesthetic and all-round flamboyant treatment of song and dance might at first suggest.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION:

"Too Pure to be Pink"

Musical film, by and large, operates within a predominately heterosexual narrative space. [404] Heterosexuality is seen in abundance in the courting relationships of many musical films of the latter part of the last century. The sampled texts from 1970s and 1980s musical films, which I have closely analysed in this thesis, prove no different in that they all foreground heterosexual romance. However, by looking at the male body in these films I have argued for the ways in which the male, dancing body works against these films' assertion of a heterosexual narrative. I have shown how these films can be read as queer by the way they highlight the performativity of the male body, and through their camp aestheticism which complicates normative ideas about desire, sexuality and gender.

Above all, my analyses have shown how paradox and juxtaposition are essential features of the gender politics within late 1970s and 1980s musicals/dansicals. This can be seen in Tony Manero's character in *Fever*, his performance of both being *and* seeming. The two 'personalities' he possesses are often at odds with one another. Or, we can see evidence of gender politics in Danny Zuko's play on hypermasculinity within his homosocial group. Zuko allows other men to be close to him only via an exploitative celebration of their heterosexual conquests. These are just some of the contrasting ideas that are often at play in these musicals. I have argued that this paradoxical nature so evident within musicals is what makes these films all open to queer readings, even if they are not advertised as such. By claiming the films analysed are all only heterosexual because this is what is

[404] Brett Farmer, Chapter 6: Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical in Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p.77

explicitly offered in their narrative conclusions is to miss completely the covert ways in which queerness can operate, and often, *must* operate.

In its entirety, this thesis has explored various avenues of research and analysis in the areas of the male body, camp and by extension camp's capacity to highlight the disconnections between both being *and* seeming. In addition, I have drawn the film's deictic contexts into the discussion at hand – constantly referring back to the films' political, historical and social frameworks in order to situate my findings. Here I organise my findings in terms of these primary aims.

THE MALE BODY & "MEN WHO DANCE"

The male body has been the primary area of study for this thesis. Due in part to the widely repeated prejudice that dance is something that is not associated with "normal males",[405] I was intrigued to delve deeper and uncover some of the reasons why this may be. The short answer is that dance is a slippery animal that plays as an intermediary when interrogating gender and sexuality. By using the body as its only tool, dance explores the performativity of the body in a twofold manner: by physically performing, but also by understanding that gender and sexuality are all performances in and of themselves. The latter forms the very basis of queer discourse.

As a film genre that waxes and wanes over time, the musicals of the late 1970s and 1980s discussed in this thesis were chosen due to their sustained cult status'. By choosing to focus on two of these musicals' 'heartthrobs', Swayze and Travolta, I managed to narrow my study down to two figures of masculinity that stand for the time period of the 1970s and 1980s, just as how Astaire and Kelly might have stood to represent their respective timestamps in the 1940s and 1950s. I also chose to focus on the men in these musicals because I concur with Neale's

[405] Michael Gard, Chapter One: A Story. *Men Who Dance* (New York: Lang, 2006) p.2

sentiment of how images of women have been given a lot of attention in recent times.[406] My particular area of interest lay in the idea that although I would be focusing my attention on the images of the avowedly heterosexual male body in the films discussed, it is still possible to uncover queer impulses emerging from this body.

Throughout the thesis I have discussed the significance of dance, not only as a cornerstone of the musical film genre, but also in terms of the ways in which the male body enacts within a world ruled by dance. Furthermore, how that relationship may indeed question said male's supposed inherent heterosexuality. In my chapter on *Grease*, I started by considering how excessive the performance of heterosexuality is in this text. I consider how the heightened and hyperbolic performance of heterosexual coupling makes romance appear like a performance, thus, the film's camp excess prompts us to wonder whether it is so 'normal' and 'natural' after all. We begin to understand that a queer reading may in fact be plausible.

In this regard I applied the work of Yvonne Tasker. According to Tasker, terms like 'performance' and 'masquerade' have been crucial to feminist writings on the cinema and gendered identity.[407] As such, she expands on her point that the muscular hero is in fact a male figure that offers a parodic performance of 'masculinity', thus calling into question the very qualities they seek to embody.[408] In addition, guided by Katherine Hughes' work on queer possibilities in teen friendships I was able to explore queer leanings in the homosocial teen friendships seen in abundance in *Grease*. By focusing on the excessive performances of heterosexuality and masculinity within the 'safe' confines of homosociality, I aimed to expose the ways in which heterosexual performance, when pushed to its extreme limits, can be queer. Seeing that camp and queerness enjoy a long and deep alignment with one another, their approach to gender, sexuality and desire and the performativity of it all tend to merge in certain

[406] Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6 (1983) p.2
[407] Yvonne Tasker, Chapter 6: The Body in Crisis or the Body Triumphant? *Spectacular Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1993) pp.110–111
[408] Ibid.

aspects. I have argued in this dissertation that camp is responsible for performing the contradictions in gender, sexuality, and desire. The excessive performance of heterosexuality within texts like *Grease*, rather than denying queer potential, opens a camp space which reveals the queer elements of desire.

CAMP & THE DISCONNECTION BETWEEN BEING & SEEMING

My chapter on *Saturday Night Fever* explored the ways in which Tony Manero's character possesses a paradoxical quality that actually supports a queer reading of both Manero and the film as a whole. By uncovering the ways in which Manero's character holds within him a disconnection between 'being and seeming', I outlined the ways in which his working class identity does not match with his extra-mural activities so rampant with the flamboyant world of disco. By sketching Manero's practices of ritualistic grooming and preening in close textual analysis I was also able to draw a connection between Manero's overt heterosexuality on one hand, and his extreme narcissism on the other: the latter being a quality more often associated with femininity.[409]

I have discussed how Catholic aestheticism has been used to carve out a space for the celebration of the camp sensibility in the filmic world of *Fever*. I likened the potentially embattled masculinity possessed by Manero to the embattled image of masculinity pertaining to Christ in Christianity. However, as argued, the film uses Manero's Catholicism as a means to further interrogate gender. As a form of Christianity that takes intense pleasure in celebrating the divine feminine (i.e. the Virgin Mary), Catholicism is at once infatuated with the embattled image of Christ (man), *and* the holy vision of the feminine (woman). By revelling in the aesthetically excessive version of Christianity that is Catholicism, Manero in *Fever* is given 'permission' by ethnicity to straddle the line between displays of

[409] Ibid. (p.119)

hypermasculinity and aggression, and the celebration of visual excessiveness that seeks to revel in the feminine.

My choice to study a sweep of similar, but different musical films in this dissertation has allowed me to explore queerness, and camp in a multifaceted way. I would argue that a hallmark of queerness, and by extension the camp sensibility, is a refusal to allow gender to be read as elementary or essential. It is with this line of thinking that *Fever* marks itself as queer, or, at the very least, potentially queer because although it may not be in my personal opinion as overtly queer as, for example, *Grease*, the fact still remains that by playing up the performance of a hypermasculine protagonist in the midst of an extremely paradoxical environment, the basis of Manero's heterosexuality is made a site of some contemplation. And therefore, once a fair amount of contemplative effort has been spent on such films, and "they have gathered about it a number of non-straight cultural readings"[410] the film in question can in turn be deemed queer.

The second film I analysed at length was this thesis' only 1980s musical film. There is a marked difference between the filmic landscape of *Dirty Dancing* and the two other films. Namely, it is the worked body of the male protagonist: Johnny Castle. Far more chiselled and obviously worked than his counterparts in both *Grease* and *Fever*, Castle's working class male body is a true reflection of 1980s yuppiedom America, and is less marked by the confusions and contestations of 1970s masculinity. Johnny has been overtly sexualised in a bid to destabilise our notions about normative masculinity. However, this is not to say that substantial evidence was not brought forward in the chapter on *Dirty Dancing* that speaks to the disconnection between being and seeming. The worked working class male body while performing the feminised act of dance demonstrates these camp and queer undertones.

In addition, I made the case that what ultimately marks *Dirty Dancing* as a camp exploration of normative sexuality and gender roles is its reversal of the

[410] Alexander Doty, Chapter 15: Queer Theory in Hill and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.150

traditional male-on-female gaze trope. By placing the female as gazer over the sexualised body of the male, *Dirty Dancing* is able to queer the pitch of its heterosexual relationships seen on-screen. In addition, it gives the female an agency to be the gazer over the sexualised male body, thus attempting to make concessions for a lifetime of being the object of the male gaze. Therefore, I concluded that what *Dirty Dancing* achieved is in line with queer theory's shared interest with feminism in the expressions of non-normative gender tropes.[411]

As the last film I analysed, *Grease* takes its campness a step further than the other two aforementioned films. As I mentioned at the outset, *Grease* is a self-reflexive film that takes on the 1950s within the 1970s, foregrounding sexuality with its pulsating opening animations and an omnipresent teenage preoccupation with sex.

THE 'WORKED' WORKING CLASS MALE BODY

Another commonality shared by all three films is their foregrounding of the worked male body, but also a *working class* male body that uses as its 'labour' the performance of dance. Therefore, instead of being marked as bodies that display only action, the sexualised male bodies discussed are those that perform as well as offer themselves up as erotic spectacle. Thus class has become an important area of analysis in this thesis.

In the narrative world of *Dirty Dancing*, the film's male protagonist Johnny Castle utilises dance very differently to his male counterparts in both *Fever* and *Grease*. Due to Johnny's working class persona, dance is used as a labour for Johnny to make a living. Because class is such a significant subject within the world of *Dirty Dancing*, I discussed the class divides evident in the film and how the male performative body reacts to such differences. In so doing, I also made stipulations to regard the context of the era in which *Dirty Dancing* was produced to portray:

[411] Ibid. (p.148)

early 1960s America. My chapter explored the context of the film's setting in order to read the film as a comment on social change, since the Democratic[412] 1960s in which the film is set was the decade that saw multiple seismic shifts in society and politics such as the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Rights, and space travel, *etcetera*. However, the road toward a more liberal and accepting society of varied races, gender, and class divisions were fraught with tension, hence the inclusion of such in the filmic world of *Dirty Dancing.*

However, what *Dirty Dancing* does that differs in large part to the male characters in *Fever* and *Grease* is give the male protagonist a *reason* to dance. This reason, as mentioned above, is labour/economics: it is Johnny's job to dance. While this may provide some 'comfort' to the heterosexual male viewer –who many times demands reason for men in film to perform action as per Tasker's assertion – the labour he performs is the historically-regarded feminine activity of dance. Whilst the feminine has always been closely linked to the gay male, the idea of the dancing straight male hosts a variety of problems within heteronormative culture.

Naturally it is important to note here that homosexuality and queerness are not interchangeable terms, although, as Doty has noted, they do tend to merge in everyday life. Rather, queer theory opts to explore non-normative expressions of gender, as well as involve discourse surrounding "a concern with non-straight expressions of sexuality and gender."[413] More exactly, Johnny's dancing male body in *Dirty Dancing* may provide him with a reason to dance; however the very basis of this practice – being dance – means that by doing so he "mediates hegemonic gender ideologies."[414] With these four words dance possesses an immediate affinity with the queer discourse because it interrogates the same questions. The worked male body in these films in addition to dance and the queer discourse, all possess an unwillingness to accept that normative 'hegemonic gender ideologies' are concrete. Instead, these elements combine to mediate gender identities in a

[412] I use the term 'Democratic' here to denote a Democratic Party administration. John F. Kennedy (Dem.) served as president from 1961 until his assassination in 1963 whereby Lyndon B. Johnson (Dem.) succeeded him, serving as commander-in-chief of the United States from 1963 through to 1969.
[413] Alexander Doty, Chapter 15: Queer Theory in Hill and Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.148
[414] Ramsey Burt, 2: Looking at the Male. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.56

bid to multiply pleasures and comment on how gender and sexuality are all performances anyway. The doubling of the working class male body when it is also a dancing body provides us with some interesting complications around physicality and power relations, destabilising all of which we thought concrete.

The world surrounding Tony Manero in *Fever* is heavily imbued with meaning in relation to his class. In the chapter on *Fever*, I sketched the ways in which masculine paradox, class and sexual tension define the character of Tony Manero. In contrast to Johnny Castle in *Dirty Dancing*, Manero possesses no 'excuse' to perform dance. For Manero, the act of dance is purely hedonistic: he dances to free himself from the shackles of working class life in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. As mentioned in the film's chapter, Khomami writes in *The Guardian* about the plight of Manero and those like Manero: He "goes through high school, obedient; graduates, looks for a job, saves and plans. Endures. And once a week, on Saturday night, its one great moment of release, it explodes."[415]

Further differentiated from both Johnny Castle and Tony Manero is the male character of Danny Zuko in *Grease*. From a working class background himself, Zuko and cohorts frequent a high school workshop where they labour over their adored hot-rods and presumably learn the trade to one day become a mechanic. But Zuko's class is handled differently to Castle's: like Manero, Zuko has no 'excuse' in the form of a labour to perform the feminising act of dance, nor does he perform solely for his own hedonistic enjoyment like Manero. Instead, Zuko's performance of dance in *Grease* is given a dose of quintessential Hollywood musical panache. In Dyer's words, "Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to set against the realities of day-to-day existence."[416] In his article on the subject of entertainment and its inherent escapist qualities, Dyer uses the musical as a focal point to convey this message about entertainment's use of utopian wish fulfilment.

[415] Nadia Khomami, Disco's Saturday Night Fiction, *Theguardian.com,* The Observer: Disco (2016)
[416] Richard Dyer, Entertainment & Utopia. *Only Entertainment*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1992) p.19

The musical genre uses feeling as its primary convention along with the inclusion of performance (song and dance).[417] The use of performance allows space for the intensification of feeling: songs and musical numbers heighten the sense of emotion felt during that scene and thus intensify the feeling of the moment.[418] In so doing, as Celestino Deleyto's work on the romantic comedy genre states: a structure in the shape of a "special space" that exists outside of history is constructed.[419] John Travolta's Danny Zuko exists in a musical that foregrounds dance, but it is also a romantic movie that uses humour in varying ways to bolster its romantic, teenage narrative. In this regard, *Grease* possesses the presence of this magic space – one that "protects [the lovers] from the dangers and the threats of the social space."[420] Utilising Dyer's theory on utopia and entertainment by harnessing the power of song and dance to portray intense feeling, all the musicals discussed in this thesis operate in a space of utopian fantasyland. They work to dispel a sense of reality – a reality that is restricted by acts of normative heteropatriarchy. Instead, these films forge a new discourse that revels in being without limits. A discourse that can ultimately be deemed as queer.

* * *

Within this dissertation I have also outlined how the musical film genre generally enjoys a feminised audience. Normatively, where the viewer of musical film is in fact male, the demographic is generally agreed to consist of a gay male spectatorship.[421] As Feuer suggests, "musicals express a gay sensibility, especially in their embodiment of camp"[422] which provides cognition for a male homosexual audience. Whilst many academics agree that both female and gay male audiences largely enjoy the musical genre, heterosexual men are virtually excluded from the genre's list of possible aficionados. There is an intense irony here because all of

[417] Jerome Cargill, Dyer's 'Entertainment and Utopia'. *Chicargill.wordpress.com,* (2016)
[418] Ibid.
[419] Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009)
[420] Ibid. (p.75)
[421] Jane Feuer, Gay Readings, *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) p.140
[422] Ibid.

the sampled musical texts in this dissertation feature a heterosexual male as the film's protagonist. But, as Doty contends, this notion of irony and perhaps even a kind of cosmic joke aimed at heterosexual males is not alien to the camp sensibility: within its tone, camp becomes a "mixture of irony, affection, seriousness, playfulness, and angry laughter."[423]

One of the main limitations of this study is that the choice of sampled film texts enjoy a largely cult/cultural standing within society, and are so much a part of our everyday discourse. Therefore, divorcing these films from their obvious narrative plots that feature the heterosexual couple as "celebratory ideal"[424] is somewhat initially challenging. Furthermore, my choices have not taken into account audience surveys, *etcetera*. In addition, I could have sampled other film texts as I believe there are a wide array of films from this period just as rich with imagery of a potentially embattled masculinity as well as the performativity of the male body as the ones I did choose. I would have enjoyed delving deeper into the star status constructions of both Swayze and Travolta. Perhaps as a means to further this study, this is an area I would eagerly look into more closely.

Rizzo, the androgynous and queer (as argued for in the preceding chapter) character in *Grease* delivers the line "too pure to be pink" in the film, in response to a question posed to her. To be "too pure to be pink" one is at once too invested in heteropatriarchal ideas of gender and sexuality, yet also the dichotomy of this statement in *Grease* offers the viewer the very essence of the musical's relationship with camp. By playing up and querying gender and desire in musical films, we begin to understand that all of these stereotypical ideas about normative gender behaviours are all performative anyway.

The performers (namely the men) of the three musical films discussed are invested in heteropatriarchal displays of their masculinities. But, by understanding the nuanced ways of camp and the performativity of the body, they

[423] Alexander Doty, Chapter Two: "My Beautiful Wickedness", *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.82
[424] Brett Farmer, Chapter 6: Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical in Benshoff and Griffin (eds), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010) p.77

use hypermasculinity to further play into and make fun of their masculinity as it is generally understood by a normative, conditioned society. These films are then a serious display of both making fun of and out of the male body to at first illustrate how heteropatriarchy is so inborn in our society, and also to free ourselves up to queer ways of seeing.

My analyses of these musical dance films have demonstrated the inherent 'doubleness' found within texts that congregate around queer theory and the camp sensibility through the act of dance. In *Saturday Night Fever* it is Tony Manero's paradoxical nature as well as the various camp aesthetics utilised in the film that complicates his assertion of heterosexuality. In *Dirty Dancing* this 'doubleness' is seen in the manner in which Johnny Castle's hard, laboured white class male body uses the perceived feminised dance as his labour *tour de force*. Lastly, in *Grease*, it is Danny Zuko's teenaged performance of excessive heterosexuality within his homosocial bonding group that links to the liminality of the teenage years and how in this regard Zuko is both adult and child, yet neither one of those things. All of these elements combine to form the pillar of this thesis, which seeks to destabilise the narrative insistences of heterosexuality as normative ideal.

I have focused on the body because of dance's primary interest in the body's approach to movement. When wanting to find avenues for potential queer propensities of these films, it was helpful to consider Ramsey Burt. As Burt asserts: "Because dance is a performing art, it is a particularly useful area in which to consider the ways in which gender is performed."[425] By utilising these words I began to draw helpful connections between the act and performativity of dance, and the queer discourse. At first I was interested in looking closely at the female bodies in these films to uncover the ways in which gendered performances were carried out on-screen. Rather, I decided to focus specifically on the *male* body. The reason being is that the study and analysis of male bodies within film in general as

[425] Ramsey Burt, 1: The Trouble with the Male Dancer. *The Male Dancer*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2007) p.16

well as in the musical genre has largely been left untapped as Neale has pointed out.[426]

Furthermore, the focus on the male body brought fascinating research to the fore when I started to consider the contexts that these sampled texts were made in. On this point, as postfeminist discourses became more and more *démodé* in the late 1970s and 1980s, there too existed a counter conversation on the status of manhood during this time. What this exploration into the contexts of these films showed me were the fascinating ways in which traditional masculinity was tested during this time as man's stature at the top of the totem pole was fundamentally challenged. The tectonic shift within gender politics of the 1970s and 1980s is evident in the three sampled texts of this thesis. To draw on one of the chapter titles of Yvonne Tasker's book, *Spectacular Bodies*, the men during this time performed both 'The Body in Crisis' *and* 'The Body Triumphant'. Their bodily performances feature this inherent doubleness that recognises that their male bodies are in fact both of these things.

I hope that this dissertation has tracked appropriately the queer leanings of these films, whilst still stopping along the way to bear appreciation and to see the beauty in these musical films that has unfortunately so often been dismissed as "silly" or "frivolous"[427], and without any meaningful content. I believe those instances often left unsaid – the aesthetics of a film, the inclusion of a performance art such as dance, for example – can tell us so much without uttering a single word.

[426] Steve Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle. *Screen*, Volume 24, Issue 6, Nov–Dec (1983) p.2
[427] McVitte, Chapter Six. Sending Camp to Kids: When John Waters and Paul Reubens Brought Queer Politics to the Underage Set, in Juett and Jones (eds), *Coming Out to the Mainstream* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010)

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