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Tragedy, Ecstasy, Doom: Modernist Moods of "West Side Story"

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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TRAGEDY, ECSTASY, DOOM:
MODERNIST MOODS OF “WEST SIDE STORY”

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Andrew Michael Falcao

Graduate Program in Global Film Cultures

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis looks to reposition *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins/Robert Wise, 1961) as an example of (neo-)modernist art. Placing the film within its context of Hollywood musicals, I see *West Side Story* as a particularly rich locus in which to study the genre's modernist impulses. Using the theories of Miriam Hansen's vernacular modernism and John Orr's neo-modernism primarily, I examine the film's formal aspects, especially that of colour. Seeing the cinematic screen as analogous to a painter's canvas, I draw comparisons with modern art of the period, particularly the Abstract Expressionists of the New York School. The film's precarious blending of expressionism and realism is an interesting one, and I tease out the ramifications of this binary throughout. Orr describes neo-modernist film as having two structures of feeling --the cool apocalypse and tragicomedy-- and I argue that *West Side Story* contains elements of both, nearing a vernacular neo-modern sublime in the process.

Keywords:

West Side Story, Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise, Modernism, Modernity, Abstract Expressionism, Neo-modernism, Neo-modernity, Musical Film, Musicals

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Introduction

A Certain Aura

West Side Story has always had a certain 'aura' surrounding it in my mind: an untouchable plateau, unlike any of the other musicals that I found myself watching repeatedly. Perhaps it was my mother or grandmother who first described the film to me as "truly great", showering it with praise. This sense has never left me even now, after having seen the film countless dozens of times, seen live productions of the Broadway version, and listened to both the Original Broadway soundtrack and the 1961 film soundtrack repeatedly on my parents' stereo system, my personal CD player in high school, and now most recently, on my iPod while walking to campus. To say that *West Side Story* is a significant part of my life would be an understatement -- but the question that has been pestering me for years is *why West Side Story* holds such a mysterious position in my psyche. It is not simply Leonard Bernstein's music, that intoxicating mix of jazz, standard musical theatre, latin and dissonance, or Sondheim's crisp, emotive lyrics. No, the aura of *West Side Story* for me has always lay in Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' 1961 film version, with its palpable mist of blood red, decaying apartments and melancholy coolness. Perhaps this speaks to my own biases towards the visual realm, but whenever I hear a song from the musical, no matter which production it comes from, the images from the film intrude into my mind's eye.

As my burgeoning interest in art history came to fruition during my undergraduate, and I discovered the works of the American Abstract Expressionists, I soon made an instinctual connection between their canvases of intense colour and emotive form and the aesthetics of the 1961 film version; lacking the critical language to unpack this 'gut feeling' of mine, it dwelled

within me for years, supplemented by an ever-increasing passion for the theories of modernity and the history of Western modernist art. The work of the Abstract Expressionists would become personal favourites of mine, with a Mark Rothko reproduction proudly hanging in my apartment and my own experiments with acrylic paint always veering towards the same non-representational, colour-saturated visions of what some scholars call the ‘colour field’ artists associated with Abstract Expressionism.

During the first phase of this project, I felt the strong need to convince my panel of graduate faculty of what had always seemed so painfully obvious to me, the aesthetic similarities between *West Side Story*’s mise-en-scène and the Abstract Expressionists. A simple visual presentation of contrasting screen shots of the famous overture sequence, Bernardo slamming his clenched fist on a scarlet wall, Maria twirling into a prismatic Technicolor blur with paintings by Rothko, Barnett Newman and Hans Hoffmann, to my delight, seemed to convince the panel of my project’s merits and the formal parallels between them. One came to me afterwards and declared that they needed to re-watch the film, with this new framework in mind.

But the apex of this connection between *West Side Story* and my love for Abstract Expressionism occurred in the summer of 2011, when I had already begun this thesis: walking through the Art Gallery of Ontario’s “Ab Ex” exhibit, listening to the soundtrack of *West Side Story* on my trusty iPod, and becoming completely entranced by how striking the combination truly was. I could feel the choreography of “Cool” as I gazed at the dancing lines of pigments on a Jackson Pollock; my heart was filled with both the glowing hope of transcendence and the gut-wrenching weight of existential panic as I sat in the dimly lit Rothko room, staring into an indigo oblivion while Tony and Maria sang of “a place for us” -- somehow, someday, somewhere.

And so my humble goal for this thesis is to place the film in a new context, shining light on its modernist elements and repositioning it as an important moment in the American post-War cultural landscape.

Placing the Film in Context -- Modernism and the Musical

The choice of studying a Hollywood film which I believe has a dense array of modernist aesthetics, while simultaneously remaining a perennial favourite amongst audiences and critics as a sort of era-defining --and for some, genre-defining-- musical, seems a rich locus to unpack the collisions between high and low art, mass and elite, and the multitude of binaries that constitute post-War modernity. Limiting myself to this single film is for purposes of focus and length, but I will be freely bringing in a variety of other texts and artworks which I feel will help highlight my underlying thesis: that modernist art sees one of its most defining and vernacular forms in the American musical, and that *West Side Story* represents a highlight for the genre.

Of course, it is important to recognize the multiplicity of definitions and forms that the terms 'modernism' and 'modernity' evoke.¹ It is this very heterogeneity that I find to be one of the primary identifiers of the modern, as we grapple with a fragmented social reality that is ever-changing at an incredible rate: a theme that is prevalent in *West Side Story*. Much like my own project, Ira Wells in her study of modernist undertones in Cole Porter and Frank Sinatra's pop hit "I've Got You Under My Skin" notes 'modernism's' precarious working terminology, but sees this not as a hindrance to her analysis: "On the contrary, it is modernism's very capaciousness, its stubborn resistance to definitional stability and certitude, that make[s] it a productive context for thinking through the internally contending ideas and impulses at work in Porter's songs." [976,

¹ To name but a few: literary high modernism including stream-of-consciousness, musical modernism including 12-tone technique and atonalism, the Russian and French avant-gardes, architectural modernism including the International style; hypermodernity, transmodernity, "liquid" modernity, and controversially, postmodernity

Ira Wells] Likewise, modernism's wide-ranging responses to the forces of modernity allows it to appear in a variety of forms, and not simply in those that are self-conscious attempts at creating 'valuable' cultural artefacts. For this thesis, I will be working primarily with the following forms of modernity/modernism: Miriam Hansen's notion of vernacular modernism; the shift in Western modernist art from Paris to New York; and John Orr's notion of what he calls the neo-modern. Each of these will be discussed at length in future chapters, and I will explain in due course the sense in which the musical is open to modernist impulses.

The Hollywood musical has a long-standing tradition of incorporating modernist art and practices throughout its history. Described by my professor Tobias Nagl as 'the most self-reflexive and modern of Hollywood genres', the musical features countless examples of self-reflexive narratives and an excessive aesthetic of decorative art. In particular, I am attempting to place *West Side Story* within the context of Abstract Expressionism or the so-called New York school of painters; I believe that the film can be read as perhaps a vernacular rendering of their same goals and concerns, placed within that most modernist and vernacular of Hollywood genres, the musical film.

West Side Story, as a narrative, is a self-conscious attempt to be a 'modern' adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The modernizing of and use of distanced myth, the placing of universal conflicts and passions in the modern metropolis, the translation of modern art, music and youth culture: these are all what allows me to reposition *West Side Story* as a distinctly 'modern' film -- and declare it *modernist*. Modernism has a habit of engaging with myth, ranging from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to Jean Cocteau's oeuvre. This project is thus an attempt to pick apart exactly what we mean when we say 'modern', and to show that what is evoked with this

concept has remained remarkably consistent throughout its many periods and forms throughout the modern period (i.e. 20th century), whether it is Weimar Berlin, post-War New York or a contemporary falafel stand in the Middle East².

In extension to and in connection with this concept of adaptation, it is important that we recognize, of course, that the film is itself an adaptation from a stage play, and significant differences between the two will be addressed. That being said, Jerome Robbins' input into the film forges a strong artistic connection between the two versions, yet with Robbins exploring the possibilities of a new medium, one that had had a great impact on the conception of *West Side Story* in the first place. But we must not write off, as so many critics have done, the contribution of Robert Wise; in particular, his preoccupation with *mise-en-scène* and the power of editing, as seen throughout his lengthy career, allows the film to establish itself as a separate, significant work -- and perhaps one that has had an even bigger impact on American culture than the original Broadway production itself. An interest in *mise-en-scène* involves one with the visual by staging and putting graphics to a text; particularly with the use of colour, this connects this project with 20th century art in a potentially strong manner.

Oppositions/Dialectics

As my approach is focusing on theories of mid-century modernism and modernity, it seems prudent that *West Side Story* is a film that is so rich in dialectical motifs, because of modernism's own preoccupations with oppositions. These binaries or oppositions will be significant threads running throughout my thesis: the vernacular vs. the elite; the mass vs. the individual; the *auteur* vs. the *metteur-en-scène*; the modern vs. the mythical; the (neo)Realist vs.

² The Academy Award winning short film *West Bank Story* (Ari Sandel, 2005)

the Expressionist; the representational vs. the non-representational; the internal vs. the external; American vs. non-American; love vs. hate; peace vs. conflict; hot vs. cold. These, of course, are mostly theoretical or abstract concepts, but the aesthetic oppositions of up and down, left and right, diagonal and horizontal, individual form versus repetition, are also significant formal oppositions that the modernist palette of *West Side Story* uses. In modernist thought, we often see one pole being privileged, whether it is explicit or not: the mass-vernacular, for example, is seen as being inferior to its dialectical pole of the individual-elite. Indeed, this particular binary is perhaps why the artistic products of mass entertainment have received relatively little attention from academics and why generic works have little prestige among the public at large -- and the binary of comedy and tragedy, with tragedy being privileged, explains why the Hollywood musical in particular has seen even less attention than other equally commercial genres such as film noir, melodrama and horror within film studies.

In relation to these binaries, Misha Berson comments: “The contradictions and suggested shortcomings of *West Side Story* are, to this critic, an intrinsic part of its mystique. The tension between romanticism and realism keeps the musical vibrating between the rough / and the tender, the melodramatic and sardonic, the documentary and the mythic, the make-believe of danced rumbles and the reality of mindless bloodshed. And dismissing *West Side Story* as simply sentimental and simplistic, naive or dated, is missing something essential: Like most other enduring works of musical theatre, *West Side Story* never intended to be a graphic sociological docudrama. It is an act of imagination. From that first finger snap, to its last dying moments, *West Side Story* (like its inspiration, *Romeo and Juliet*) envelops us in a mythic world of its own design.” (Berson, 9-10)

The fact that Berson speaks of this aura of myth harkens to the same concerns of the Abstract Expressionists of the period: the creation of canvases that envelop the viewer, simultaneously allowing them to excavate the deepest recesses of the psyche in forms that are tragically simple -- an ‘act of imagination’. And by “mythic”, we could refer to a desire to make statements about the fundamentals of existence in the aftermath of the crises of religion, whose framework for meaning is questioned by both modernism and modernity. Mark Rothko explains: “The picture deals not with a particular anecdote, but rather with the spirit of myth, which is generic to all myths at all times.”³

Why *West Side Story*?

West Side Story, as has been mentioned, seems to me to be a particularly rich locus to study vernacular modernism. But why have I chosen this particular film to begin my project of re-assessing the post-War Hollywood musical within the framework of the modern? To begin, I see the film as a foundation of a new style of musical that would explode in the 1960s, influencing a new generation of music media.

It is curious that the film is both a popular and critical success, imagined as a ‘modern classic’, yet has met with a surprising lack of critical discourse. Currently published studies of *West Side Story* seem to disproportionately focus on the original stage production and its many revivals, giving much of the praise to Jerome Robbins⁴; furthermore, I would like to suggest that the film has much more to unpack in a critical manner than simply its representations of race and gang violence in mid-century America. Of course, that is not to say that this is an unworthy area

³ <https://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/myths2.shtm>

⁴ Berson in particular devotes much of her book “Something's Coming, Something Good: West Side Story and the American Imagination” to analyzing and praising the work of Jerome Robbins, while saving few words for Robert Wise, none of them particularly positive. The book “Our Story - Jets and Sharks - Then and Now”, a collection of tales from cast members of *West Side Story* is also full of recollections of Robbins, and very few of Wise.

of study -- I am simply suggesting that there is much more to discuss about *West Side Story* than the battle between Jets and Sharks. Instead, I would like to place some of my focus on the film's dense aesthetic strategies, differentiating it from the stage version as well as earlier Hollywood musical films. Part of my project is to also elaborate on Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' respective achievements (including re-appraising Wise's contributions to the production) and to understand *why* the film has been proclaimed by so many to be a 'masterpiece'.

These questions that I am grappling with may seem, simply, too large to satisfactorily explore within the scope of a master's thesis. I am thus using *West Side Story* as a focusing point for these theoretical and historical discussions. The film is an effective locus for a number of reasons: it is a massive box office success and an iconic Hollywood film, excellent for discussions on vernacular/populist interpretations of modernism; its design and art direction elements are intense and dominate the film, and have been widely recognized (yet curiously under-analyzed); Bernstein's music is an amalgamation of pop jazz, mambo, street slang, atonalities and classicism; it is a self-conscious update of a classic text; it is centred around urban conflict; Jerome Robbins was connected to both Broadway and experimental ballet and dance; Robert Wise was allied to Hollywood cinema and his curious connection to that ultimate example of vernacular modernism, Orson Welles, as well as Wise's career-long focus on art direction; a tempting connection of Abstract Expressionism, jazz music and the Cold War is embodied within the film. Above all, these elements suggest that the film is an apt example to test out the claim that the Hollywood musical is 'the most modernist form' of popular filmmaking there is.

This project is divided into three chapters. The first is dedicated to an analysis of Miriam Hansen's 'vernacular modernism' and how it relates to *West Side Story*.

The second chapter focuses on the film's visual structures and mise-en-scène, relating *West Side Story* to the Abstract Expressionist painters of New York. In particular, the Overture sequence is analyzed as the film's most overt connection to the Abstract Expressionists. The cinematic screen is likened to a canvas, as a medium that captures light, colour and form. The chapter also investigates the film's use of red, filters and wide-screen photography.

The third chapter takes a more theoretical bent and investigates John Orr's concept of the 'neo-modern', as well as looking at theories of transcendence, longing and the sublime as they manifest themselves in *West Side Story*. Also explored are theories of neo-realism, modality and modernity.

Chapter One: *West Side Story* as Vernacular Modernism

Introduction

My goal for this chapter is to begin to prove that *West Side Story* has modernist elements in its aesthetic and narrative practices. I shall begin with a discussion on the concept of *vernacular modernism*, a concept brought forward by scholar Miriam Hansen. It is a notion that has significant implications in modernist studies, but it is also one that has had support for quite some time: Huyssen in 1986's *After the Great Divide* says that “[m]ass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project” (Simon, 348). Looking at modernist art of the 20th century, we see that the mass, the democratic and the popular have always been part of artistic practice, especially in cinema, and *West Side Story* as a particularly populist example of Hollywood filmmaking reveals itself as an interesting point of reference.

Vernacular Modernism

Miriam Hansen's vernacular modernism is a concept that seeks to expand just what we consider to be part of the modernist canon, beyond the realm of so-called “high art” and into a wide range of cinema. While her project and mine differ in their specific goals, I nevertheless find the phrase “vernacular modernism” to be particularly productive in its implications.

For Hansen, “modernism encompasses a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of / modernization and the experience of modernity, including a paradigmatic transformation of the conditions under which art is produced, transmitted, and consumed. In other words, just as modernist aesthetics are not reducible to the category of style, they tend to blur the boundaries of the institution of art in its traditional, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century incarnation that turns on the ideal of aesthetic

autonomy and the distinction of ‘high’ vs. ‘low’, of autonomous art vs. popular and mass culture.” (Hansen, 59-60) Taking a Benjaminian approach in which the artistic practices of modernism react to the forces of modernity, she takes “the study of modernist aesthetics to encompass cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity, such as the mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography, radio and cinema.” (Hansen, 60) She refers to this kind of modernism as *vernacular*, “because the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity and translatability.” (Hansen, 60) Modernism and modernity thus are expanded beyond the confines of ‘high art’, and it is possible to apply modernist thought to vernacular modes of art, the popular, the mass-produced and mass-consumed: a film just like *West Side Story*.

Hansen is far from alone in this line of reasoning. That omnipresent scribe of mid-century modernism, Clement Greenberg, may not seem to be the first to come to mind to defend popular culture, but when he said that “Modernism includes more than just art and literature. By now it includes almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture”, it could be applied, unexpectedly, to a wider range of cultural forms. (Frascina, 5) Sascha Bru and Laurence van Nuijs, in their introduction to “Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture” note that the everyday and the populist are integral parts of modern art (7); they also state that “Benjamin’s work on modern art’s loss of ‘aura’ illustrates that all the negative overtones Greenberg attached to popular culture could also be turned positive.” (6/7)

Cultural critic giant Fredric Jameson wrote in that ““We must rethink the opposition high culture/mass culture in such a way that the emphasis on evaluation to which it has traditionally given rise . . . is replaced by a genuinely historical and dialectical approach to these phenomena [...] Such an approach demands that we read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena, as twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under late capitalism’ (133–34).” (Keller Simon, 347) Finally, “[i]n [Nathanael] West’s hands, high culture and low, avant-garde and kitsch, became hopelessly intertwined, making their vexed relation a much more complicated phenomenon than many of his contemporaries or critics imagined” (22).” (Simon, 350) *West Side Story*’s Jerome Robbins has been acclaimed as having the ability to mix high art and low art, as described by Sondheim: “He [Robbins] had style and substance, but he also knew how to turn it into entertainment, to bridge the gap to the audience. He had a way of dealing with the high and the low and a way of combining them.” (Berson, 62)

Hansen’s investigation into what she calls vernacular modernism is focused “on mid-twentieth century modernity [...] --the modernity of mass production, mass consumption, and mass annihilation-- and the contemporaneity of a particular kind of cinema, mainstream Hollywood, with what has variously been labelled ‘high’ or ‘hegemonic modernism’.” (Hansen, 59). Her approach is unlike that of a great number of modernist scholars, who choose to investigate how the avant-garde has appropriated or borrowed from mainstream “low” culture (such as Thomas Crow in “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts”⁵) and while attempting to deconstruct their relationship, fall back into the elitist trap of upholding high art’s

⁵ Frascina, Francis. ed. *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.

‘authenticity’ and deriding the popular. Instead, we are invited to look at these relics of ‘low art’ and see how they reflect or share the same qualities as their ‘high’ brethren.

As such, Hansen suggests that we do take into consideration the mass-produced and the everyday as cultural relics of modernism and modernity, be it fashion, radio or cinema. Hansen links her notion of vernacular modernism with ‘circulation’ (Hansen, 60). By this definition, Hollywood cinema is a perfect fit to unpack the far-reaching effects of this form of modernism, in spite of the Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger vision⁶ of a “classical” Hollywood, and the perspective of classical Hollywood as “a mode of representation that masks the process and fact of production, turns discourse into diegesis, history into story and myth; as an apparatus that sutures the subject in an illusory coherence and identity and as a system of stylistic strategies that weld pleasure and meaning to reproduce dominant social and sexual hierarchies.” (Hansen, 63) Yet, as Hansen argues, “Hollywood at its most presumably most classical figured as the very symbol of contemporaneity, the present, modern times” (Hansen, 65). She does not seek to “contest the achievement of Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s work”, but does raise questions as to how “a cultural formation that was, after all, perceived as the incarnation of *the modern*” could be also considered ‘classical’. (Hansen, 64)

But these questions of the semantics of classicism and modernity are not my project; instead, I seek to use Hansen’s phrase ‘vernacular modernism’ and its terminology as a jumping-off point to begin to make sense of the connection between the American musical film and its vernacular representations of modernist thought, as well as its intermedial relations with modernist art.

⁶ Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

If we investigate the history of the Hollywood musical, we find that this vernacular interpretation of modernist art in the form of *mise-en-scène* is a long-standing tradition, with roots from the very beginning of the genre. Beginning with the Art Deco musicals of the late 1920s and the 1930s, through Busby Berkeley's geometric choreography, the early Hollywood musical laid bare its relationship with contemporary art of the time. After this period, the influence becomes obscured, but examples still abound: the references to Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting in *An American in Paris* (1951, Vincente Minnelli); the direct quoting of Mondrian's plasticist compositions in *A Star is Born* (1954, George Cukor) as Judy Garland's rising star tale is told; *Gigi's* (1958, Vincente Minnelli) references to the art of *La Belle Epoque* and even fauvist painting. While these examples only scratch the surface, the influence of modernist art is extensive and perhaps even obvious; that so few scholars have made note of this is a significant gap in film academia, and requires a great deal more scholarly investigation for its significance to be established.

Modernity and the Revision of Myth: A Partial Precursor of West Side Story

West Side Story is, of course, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; *West Side Story* is thus a revision, a modern re-imagining of a mythic story. This is something that is seen throughout modernist practice, as previously mentioned, from Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950) to Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) to the mythical qualities of the Abstract Expressionist painters. Meyer Schapiro notes that "[w]hile mainstream commentators usually reduce the work of the Abstract Expressionists to platitudes about 'personal expression' and 'pure form' or to clichés about 'escapism', neither of these easy assessments helps us to understand the structural logic of 'myth-making' and also the general ideological values produced by it. Far from being an intended flight

from reality, the myth-making of the Abstract Expressionists was instead conceived as a visual declaration of critical distance from a contemporary U.S. society that was deemed quite inadequate. Thus, the reclamation of so-called 'timeless' values, such as a sense of the sublime, functioned as a part of an ideological strategy (whether successful or not) to advance beyond an alienating present." (Schapiro, 8) We can see mid-century American modernism, particularly Abstract Expressionism, as almost a 'last gasp' of Romantic individualism on one hand, but on the other, their works as using age-old myths, languages, writing, pop culture, 'magnifying' or 'extrapolating' their individuality to some sort of universality. (Schapiro, 41)

Richard Keller Simon's study "Modernism and Mass Culture" features a lengthy analysis of the 1938 film *The Goldwyn Follies* and its use of *Romeo and Juliet*; it is a study that will have an extra significance when placed alongside my study of *West Side Story*.

One of the most improbable adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* ever recorded on film occurs in the middle of *The Goldwyn Follies*, Samuel Goldwyn's 1938 movie musical about the problems of making movie-musicals. A collaboration between Ben Hecht, George and Ira Gershwin, Lillian Hellman, and George Balanchine... [...] She is a simple, spontaneous, and pure young girl from small-town America who is more than willing to tell him [Merlin, a big-time Hollywood producer] what is wrong with his movies. He quickly brings her to Hollywood as his personal advisor, nicknames her "Miss Humanity," and warns her against having anything to do with actors, "beautiful, charming people but dangerous to talk to off stage." Hiding her under a blanket at the studio to keep her presence a secret, he asks her to watch / a rehearsal of a dance number based on the *Romeo and Juliet* story. "Romeo loves Juliet, but his family likes jazz dancing, and her family likes ballet dancing," he explains, in a line that must have made Shakespearean purists in the audience cringe in horror, but might also have inspired a young Leonard Bernstein with the idea he would later turn into *West Side Story* (1957). (Simon, 343-344)

In fact, George Balanchine, the choreographer of *The Goldwyn Follies* and its *Romeo and Juliet* dance sequence, was the mentor of none other than Jerome Robbins. Is this where Robbins first conceived of the *Romeo* project, before bringing the idea to Bernstein and Laurents? The similarities between this number and what would later become *West Side Story* are vast, and it seems likely. We should also take note of Robbins' 1949 production of *Guests* for the New York City Ballet: "an abstract ballet [...] about forbidden love between members of two antagonistic social groups." (Berson, 21)

Simon continues:

'All I know is what I like,' Miss Humanity tells Merlin. 'So much the better,' he reassures her. "There are two hundred million people who only know what they like and they're all sitting up here with their mouths open and their eyes shining. If you like it, you nod your head and that will be two hundred million people nodding." A generation before American literary critics became enamored of reader-response criticism, Goldwyn, Hecht, and Hellman were leading the way in this remarkable movie, which is not simply about Hollywood's use of Shakespeare, but also about Hollywood's sensitivity to the needs of the people.

As the ballet starts we see a street scene with a Hotel Montague on one side of the stage, a Hotel Capulet on the other, and clotheslines of women's underwear strung between them. The camera moves in for a number of close-ups of sexy women looking out of windows on both sides of the street. Then as the laundry is suddenly pulled aside, two groups of women appear onstage, a unit of jazz dancers wearing red, white, and blue tops and shorts, and a unit of ballet dancers in classical white ballet dresses. The two groups dance back and forth, chasing each other off the stage a number of times, and although both sides have equal dance time, there is no doubt that our loyalties are meant to lie with our red, white, and blue costumed contemporaries. It is the lively jazz of 1938 that wins the day against the effete classics. After a stylized sword fight between these two dance teams, the two fathers appear on opposing balconies, the Capulet father playing a gentle harp, the Montague father a passionate saxophone. Once again there is no doubt where our loyalties are meant to rest. The two lovers finally

appear and dance alone in a much more sophisticated ballet style that is now slow and much more serious. And then they die, in the languorous style of their ballet.

Merlin turns to Miss Humanity and asks if she has forgotten to nod. "It's wonderful, but do they die like that?" she responds. When he assures her that "it has always ended that way," she admits, "I didn't know Romeo and Juliet died. I'm awfully sorry." Merlin asks, "What would you want them to do?" and she explains, "I'd want them to get up and their parents to come in to forgive them and be married afterwards and be happy." Merlin exclaims in surprise: "It's amazing. No one has ever thought of / that finish for Romeo and Juliet. Well why not? If two hundred million people want Romeo and Juliet to live I won't be stubborn." He orders the actors to do her ending. "I want the hearts of the world beating with love and triumph." And we see the new ending immediately on stage, exactly as she has asked for it, in a stupendous victory of Miss Humanity over Mr. Shakespeare. (Simon, 343-345)

This number seeks to marry the high and low, with ballet and jazz becoming an integrated form of dance. This seems aptly cinematic, as the cinema seems to readily blend high and low to create new filmic moments. As Angela Dalle Vacche states, "by blurring the distinction between high art and popular culture, the cinema has always had a tendency to challenge not just painting in isolation but rather the whole system of the arts, thus disclosing the possibility of new configurations, hierarchies, alliances, and hostilities." (Dalle Vacche, 3)

This number also recalls Feuer's noting of the "opera vs swing" narrative in Hollywood musicals, where a dynamic is set up between the forces of elite classicism and the populist rhythms of swing and jazz: an analogy of high art versus popular art. (Feuer, 54) But the problem is that Feuer associates 'high art' with *classical* high art, not modernist: so where does modernist art fit in this spectrum? While certainly far from populism, the forces of modernism are still set with and quite comfortable with the vernacular; perhaps this is why Hollywood feels privileged to quote and borrow from modernist art practices in its filmmaking.

Modernist Musicals

The research questions I intend to answer include: what makes the musical modernist? Why is the musical such an apt opportunity for filmmakers to explore modernist aesthetics, particularly the use of colour? Why is *West Side Story*'s use of colour so memorable and effective? Exactly *what* effect does this colour saturated aesthetic do? How does *West Side Story* reflect the same conceptual workings of Abstract Expressionism?

The musical can perhaps be seen as the most self-reflexive of Hollywood genres. It is aware of its role as illusion, and has no need to pretend that it is not --it would be futile for the musical to pretend that it approximates reality-- but it does so in such a manner that audiences 'play along'. This is particularly important in *integrated musicals*, where the song and dance numbers are seamlessly integrated into the narrative: characters burst into song, much of the music remains non-diegetic, and the dances are in sync and flawlessly executed. (In contrast to non-integrated musicals, in which there is a diegetic separation between the musical numbers and the narrative: many of the early backstage "let's put on a show" Broadway musicals are of this style, where there is an announcement that a number is going to start and the number is filmed as if it were a stage production.)

It is this bursting into song that creates a distancing effect in the audience, or as Robert Wise describes, a potential "twinge of embarrassment". (Leemann, 165) This is something that Wise struggled with when directing his musicals:

Putting a stage musical on the screen represents challenges. When you're in the live theatre, you have the proscenium arch up there, you're once-removed from reality. The screen is a very real medium and doesn't take kindly to stylization. One of the things we struggled with the most in *West Side Story* was how to take all the highly stylized aspects of it and deal with them effectively in

the reality of the screen. On the stage, you can have characters break out of a dialogue scene and go right into song and dance and you don't feel a twinge of embarrassment, but you can feel that on the screen. On the stage, the turf that the kids fight over were stylized sets. There was no way I could realistically open the film without opening it in the real New York streets. You can get away with sets at sunset or night, but when the sun is pouring down, you need the real thing. (Leemann, 165-166)

The film's balance between realism and stylized artifice --or even the anti-naturalism of the musical form-- is a precarious one. On one hand, we have a production design that is attempting to mimic naturalistically the New York city streets, but on the other hand, we have actors bursting out into song and dance, filmed with a stylized edge: canted angles, filters, rapid editing.

So what makes the musical "modernist"? When I speak of the musical as a modernist form, I am referring to some of the following generic markers: the musical is inherently self-reflexive with its playing of diegetic space; it is mechanical-industrial; and tends towards 'democratic', populist expression as utopian entertainment for the masses. On the self-reflexive nature of the films, the narrative structure counts on the audience knowing that the plot would be interrupted with extra-narrative musical numbers, with the actors bursting into song and a non-diegetic orchestra playing the supporting score. The audience needs to place themselves in a distanced position, removing themselves from the reality effects of cinema, in order to accept the generic song and dance numbers as they parade across the screen: the musical is thus essentially an ironic form. This irony also helps distinguish it as a modernist form, as well, given the degree to which the 'double-voiced' quality of irony is implicitly self-reflexive.

Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger describe modernist cinema as one of the types of general modes of film practice (along with classical Hollywood narrative, avant-grade and art

cinema), “one in which spatial and temporal systems come forward and share with narrative the role of structuring the film. That is, narration is no longer the most important aspect of plot; other structures can compete for our attention.” (Bordwell/Thompson/Staiger, 381) The musical, through placing music and dance at the forefront, plays with space and time. The spectacle of many musicals of colour, shape and form is also extra-narrative, recalling Thompson’s concept of cinematic excess⁷.

The musical’s focus on ‘modern’ dance and music was a core part of the early stages of the genre, with some plots focusing on an older producer’s antagonism towards the ‘noise’ of jazz and swing, often in contrast to the classical operetta and ballet.⁸ *West Side Story* seeks to reconcile this disdain for the balletic and operatic, combining them with jazz and latin vernacular dance and music.

This focus on the mass market and a populist sense of music was integral to the genre’s success. As the musical evolved from jazz-swing to rock-and-roll in the 50s, young audiences were integral to the often low-budget productions. But alongside this evolution of beach party and rock-n-roll teen exploitation flicks was the co-rise of the epic musical: large budget, 2+ hours in length, sweeping romances, and lavish Cinemascope productions. *West Side Story* is a watershed film of the epic subgenre, and inspired studios to further fund big budget musicals. Where there were successes, they were massive: *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964). But there were also an equal number of huge flops, and the musical became to be seen as a vanguard of Old Hollywood,

⁷ Thompson, Kristin. “The Concept of Cinematic Excess.” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 487-498.

⁸ Recognizing that there was a strong early history of operatic musicals, such as those starring Jeannette McDonald and Deanna Durbin.

which was quickly dying out as the 60s drew to a close, climaxing with the critical and audience failure of *Doctor Dolittle* (Richard Fleischer, 1967), which due to studio trickery and bribes, managed to snag a number of Oscar nominations, including a baffling one for Best Picture.⁹

While the utopian drives of the genre didn't mesh well with the rise of the New Hollywood and the collapse of the Production Code, the musical's modernist impulses are closely linked to this optimistic viewpoint. Early plot points were often a young dancer's dreams of being a star, or a young potential couple playing the game of love. *West Side Story* particularly plays with the utopian drives of the musical, but also functions within the tragic mode; indeed, we can see the musical growing into a tragicomic phase as the epic musical reaches its apex in the 60s, and gritty musicals dominate the 70s. This move to tragicomedy will be discussed in Chapter Three.

My feeling that the American musical shares much in common with modernist art of the period is also felt by scholar Angela Dalle Vacche: "I want to suggest how much common territory can be found between a European 'art film' and an MGM Hollywood musical." (Dalle Vacche, 6) And the film that is perhaps the best bridge between the two (European art cinema and American musicals) is Jacques Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, 1964), which has a similar aesthetic to *West Side Story*, both narratively and in terms of design. An entirely sung-through pop operetta, Susan Hayward says of the film that it "undoes the happy romantic ending associated with American musicals", and here, subtly but powerfully, "(except *West Side Story*, of course)". (Hill, 34) Of course.

⁹ See Mark Harris' "Pictures at a Revolution" for a fascinating account of the production and reception of *Doctor Dolittle*.

Hill's study of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* points out that "for most of the film, the real locations stand in pointed, arguably Brechtian contrast to the wild colour schemes devised by Demy and his production designer, Bernard Evein (augmented by Jacqueline Moreau's costume designs). Berthomé describes the effects: 'Just as music shifts the dialogue, color shifts the locale, transcends it, gives birth to a world at once real and dreamlike: a town made of stones seemingly painted by a magician—familiar enough that we recognize it, but so transformed that we venture there with wondrous jubilation, as if crossing the threshold of the fantastic.' " (Hill, 39) Can we not say the same thing of *West Side Story*'s intense colour scheme, its violence and its pairing of gangs and ballet, its use of location and studio shooting with stylized mise-en-scène? Jacques Demy said that "If opera had followed the evolution of music, today we would have jazz operas, even in Europe." (48) [Demy, interview, *Cinéma 63 74* 1963, 19.] *West Side Story*, it seems, is the fulfilment of this dream.

But musical scholar Jane Feuer's suggestion of "an impulse of 'conservative reflexivity'" in many Hollywood musicals troubles the idea of a purely progressive-modernist genre. (Hill, 40) She points out that while many musicals often quote older films and lay their inner workings out in a pseudo-Brechtian manner, this is simply to suggest continuity with the past and to celebrate the "world of entertainment". (Hill, 40) This world is out of reach for the average audience, and by the time of the epic musicals of the 1960s, the Golden Age of Hollywood was long since past. We can still see this conservative reflexivity in the epic musicals of the 60s, which through their period settings harkened back to a time of elaborate, jewel-drenched jazz numbers. *West Side Story*, on the other hand, aims for a more contemporary, realist setting dealing with current issues while simultaneously adapting a now-mythical text. *West Side Story*

was self-consciously breaking with musical theatre tradition in virtually every aspect of its creation: from its modernist influenced and ballet-like choreography to its atonal score, and its very subject matter. The ethnic politics, while not seeming to be particularly progressive for contemporary audiences, were striking for the time, and the topic of juvenile delinquency was particularly timely.

Hill disagrees that Feuer's notion applies to all musicals, citing *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* as an exception: "For one thing, Feuer seems to assume that in order for such techniques to be disruptive, the story content of the film must be explicitly critical or revolutionary, so that the only Hollywood musicals to achieve "critical reflexivity" are those whose narratives openly challenge the establishment. This viewpoint perhaps makes too little allowance for irony, for ambiguity, or for critical reflection on the part of the spectator." (Hill, 40) As noted above, irony too can be a feature of modernism. He continues, accounting for the difference between Hollywood and French New Wave musicals, stating that "[s]uch a simple dichotomy (Hollywood vs. Godard) neglects the possibility of a range of Brechtian tendencies that a film or group of films might possess. I would argue that, even though Hollywood was and is a conservative institution, some of its films do achieve quasi-Brechtian distancing from time to time." (Hill, 41) In any case, distancing need not be Brechtian to be modernist, as distancing was a key concern of the Russian Formalists, who were not Brechtian (though his 'distancing' arguably was borrowed from them, and re-sprayed, the idea of 'defamiliarization'.) Hill then uses the example of an earlier musical than *West Side Story*, Vincente Minnelli's masterpiece *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), noting its "multiple cases of interrupted songs, its many faulty performances, and its dark undertones of death and

separation." (Hill, 41) Hill then cites *West Side Story* as an anomalous Hollywood musical, agreeing with its status as something different: "Whether or not we accept Feuer's argument that the Hollywood musical is largely incapable of Brechtian distancing, Jacques Demy departs significantly from the conventions of that genre and achieves a more disruptive effect in his musical films. The pervading presence of death, isolation, and dissatisfaction in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* finds few sources in the Hollywood musical (only *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *West Side Story* come immediately to mind)". (Hill, 41)

So then how does *West Side Story* fit into a larger context of the Hollywood musical's analogous relationship with modernism and modernity? The musical, I am suggesting, as a mode that relies on visual splendour and is particularly adept at incorporating artistic trends, was another medium through which high art was able to be reconciled with popular art.

Vincente Minnelli can be seen as the musical auteur *par excellence*, who would fill his films with numerous allusions to contemporary and modernist art. Of course, Minnelli is not the sole director to whom this can be applied, although he was particularly adept at this task. Other musical directors, such as Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly, George Cukor or Busby Berkeley explored the expressive potential of dance and music paired with bold visual strokes.

Such a skill is perhaps why *West Side Story* is such a surprise, given that it was Robert Wise's first musical as director and Jerome Robbins' debut (and only) film. The Hollywood musical, as I have shown, has had a long-standing tradition of incorporating elements of modernism into its folds; but as I will explore in the next chapter, *West Side Story* is a particularly vibrant example of this tradition, especially in how it relates to the modernist art movement of Abstract Expressionism. The movement's *enfant terrible* Jackson Pollock "became

both an icon of rebellion and a role model for the American painter [and] was brought about by the contradictory stance of *Life* / magazine itself, whose main purpose was to reconcile the masses with the art-world elite. Such a goal, indeed, is not incompatible with the celebration of communal values typical of the Hollywood musical.” (Dalle Vacche, 28-29) As Dalle Vacche further explains, “Pollock’s method of dripping paint over the canvas to visualize the inner recesses of his psyche can be compared to Minnelli’s reliance on dance and colour, camera movement and music, to convey the emotional appeal painting holds...” (Dalle Vacche, 31), and I am suggesting that *West Side Story* may be even the best example of a Hollywood musical that is able to convey this emotional appeal.

Chapter Two: The Cinematic Canvas

After establishing just exactly what one means by ‘vernacular modernism’, I shall now begin to investigate how *West Side Story* functions as an example of this, beginning with a broad overview of the similarities between the film and contemporary mid-century modernist art, primarily that of the New York school of Abstract Expressionists. Critical notices of the film’s production design and cinematography highlight the film’s bold use of colour: *Variety*’s review describes the film with “Technically, it is superb; use of colour is dazzling, camera work often is thrilling, editing fast with dramatic punch, production design catches mood as well as action itself”, (6) while the *Guardian* notes that “the colour laboratory have had a legitimate field day.” (7) *The Christian Science Monitor* declares that the film was made in “bold, Panavision dimensions, and vibrant colour” and that “[t]he use of colour in light and shadow is frequently as bold as the extensive reliance on dance to unfold the drama.” (4) This expressive use of colour and form in the film give rise to my notion of what I call *the cinematic canvas*, in which the film screen is seen as analogous to a painter’s canvas. From here I shall explore various examples from the film, beginning with a lengthy look at the film’s colourful Overture sequence. Overall, this chapter is focused on the *formalist* similarities between *West Side Story* and modernist art, with the following chapter giving room for an examination of the theoretical implications of this connection.

West Side Story and Modern Art/Abstract Expressionism

The term “Abstract Expressionism” has been applied to a broad group of primarily American painters working in New York in the post-WWII era; some of these artists would deny the label being applied to themselves, and it can be difficult to precisely define exactly what the

style is. In general terms, we can perhaps identify the following characteristics of Abstract Expressionism: non-representational or highly abstracted forms; a ‘painterly’ approach that highlighted the artist’s brushstrokes and actions; the bold use of large swaths of colour, often straight from the tube or intensely manipulated through idiosyncratic means; large canvases that envelop the viewer. The term itself is perhaps an accurate rendering of these artists’ works: formally abstract, shunning mimetic representations of landscapes and portraits, and emotionally charged, with works recalling either passionate bursts of energy (seen through, for example, trails of pigment violently flung at the surface) or melancholy, ominously serene fields of colour. The leading artists of the movement include Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.¹⁰ The Abstract Expressionist style can perhaps initially be seen as an attempt to ‘cool down’ the pathos of high modernism’s earlier Expressionist style. For Greenberg, “[p]ure expressionism was to be avoided; paroxysm and romanticism were very grave dangers that threatened the development of avant-garde painting”. (Guilbault, 161)

The name associated with Abstract Expressionism that is most instantly recognizable to the general public is Jackson Pollock, who simultaneously evokes responses of derision (“I can splash paint on a canvas, too.”), stoic appreciation and, in a minority voice, genuine awe.¹¹ The Abstract Expressionists truly came forward in the American imagination with a *Life* magazine photo story about the “irascible” group of New York artists in January of 1951. Angela Dalle Vacche notes: “That Pollock became both an icon of rebellion and a role model for the American

¹⁰ See Anfam, David. Abstract Expressionism. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990.

¹¹ Congressman George Dondero in 1956 declared with his speech “Communism under the Guise of Cultural Freedom Is Strangling American Art” that modernist art “was of ‘foreign origin’ and thus ‘un-American’.” Members of House Committee on Un-American activities would also accuse Pollock’s “supposedly ‘meaningless abstractions’”, complete with a statement from Dondero: “Modern art is Communistic because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country... Art which does not glorify our beautiful country in plain, simple terms that everyone can understand breeds dissatisfaction.” (Craven, 7)

painter was brought about by the contradictory stance of *Life* / magazine itself, whose main purpose was to reconcile the masses with the art-world elite. Such a goal, indeed, is not incompatible with the celebration of communal values typical of the Hollywood musical.” (Dalle Vacche, 28-29) Pollock said of modernist art in 1950 that “[m]odern art to me is nothing more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we're living in... My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique.” (Frascina, 99) Pollock’s most famed works of tangled webs of commercial paint are then perhaps the best way to differentiate his Abstract Expressionism from other varieties, because we can compare these paintings to his earlier, more representational compositions, and to those of some of his peers, such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning, each of whom represent other sub-styles. For the purposes of my thesis, I would like to focus on the two ‘mature’ styles of Abstract Expressionism --action (sometimes “gestural”) painting and colour field painting-- but stress the movement’s slow evolution away from the representational while emphasizing its critical roots in the mythical. But what do the painters mean by the “mythical”? David Craven writes that Abstract Expressionist paintings “are non-illustrative, non-diachronic, and necessarily dialogical in ways that recall Lévi-Strauss’ insights into the shifting, generative relationships of ancient myths, concerned as they are with the problem of kinship [...] and the problem of genesis (how to explain the origin of life, whether of the individual --i.e. ontogenesis-- or of civilization --i.e. phylogenesis).” (Craven, 21) He then goes on to give example of the titles of Abstract

Expressionist paintings by Newman (“Eve”, “Adam”), Pollock (“Birth”), and Gottlieb (“Labyrinth”, “The Alchemist”), all of which are mythical in nature.

Irving Sandler’s groundbreaking work on Abstract Expressionism, “The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism”, published in 1977, attempts to trace a genealogy and identify sub-styles. As stated, the two styles among the ones identified by Sandler that I am most particularly interested in regards to *West Side Story* are the ‘colour field’ artists and the ‘action painters’. The colour field artists may be best represented by Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman: large swaths of pure colour that envelop the viewer, with no representational forms and a stoical compositional style of balance and harmony. Their brushstrokes are often subtle and blended, creating an illusion of phantasmic depth that paradoxically emphasizes the flatness of the canvas and suggests that we can delve into it, as well. The action painters, in contrast, choose to emphasize their brushstrokes and highlight their artistic hand: most famously, in Pollock’s so-called ‘drip paintings’, in which he trailed, flung and splashed thin household enamel paint (among other pigments) across the surface, capturing the movements of the artist’s hand as it moved through space and time. It is perhaps not surprising that Pollock would paint while listening to hot jazz records, finding himself lost in its rhythms and his own internal voice: the paintings are thus also a ‘recording’ of his own emotional states, and the tangled web of paint in his mature works suggest a conflicted internal battle between the human and the environmental, composition versus chance, and the forward march of time.

And so how am I to connect the paintings of Pollock to *West Side Story*, which does not appear to contain a single frame like one of his best known paintings¹²? The connection here is

¹² For example, *Summertime: 9A* (1948)

not a superficial match only in aesthetic appearance, but in how both Pollock's works and this film capture the movement of the body in time and space on a flat surface: if we can follow a certain 'choreography' in Pollock's works, following the lines of paint as they twist and twirl, thicken as he slows down or approaches the canvas and thin as he rapidly expels the pigment from his brush, we see the same movement of bodies, limbs and fabric as we watch a musical number from *West Side Story*.

I shall next discuss the film's much-appraised overture sequence, because it may be linked to the colour-field aesthetic of abstract expressionism through its preoccupation with flat planes of singular colour. This series of hues and musical highlights is thus being viewed through an abstract expressionist filter, and the vernacular and the modernist meet in spectacular fashion.

Overture

Many audiences have been continually struck by the overture sequence for *West Side Story*, a nearly eight-minute sequence of colour and highlights from Bernstein's score, with conductor John Mauceri praising it as one of the greatest movie sequences¹³. Yet the fact that the film *has* an overture sequence is not particularly noteworthy, and was indeed standard practice for a large number of Hollywood films in the 50s and 60s. The connecting thread between these films lies in their supposedly 'epic' natures: big-budget Broadway musical adaptations (*Annie Get Your Gun* [George Sidney, 1950], *Gigi* [Vincente Minnelli, 1958]), sword-and-sandals adventures (*Ben-Hur* [William Wyler, 1959], *The Ten Commandments* [Cecil B. DeMille, 1956]), and prestige dramas contending for Oscar glory. The overture sequence presents itself as a *statement*, whetting the audience's appetite and preparing them for what lies ahead: establishing

¹³ *West Side Story* 50th anniversary blu-ray release, bonus feature "A Place for Us"

the picture's mood with little more than a single still shot, the word "Overture" emblazoned in a stylized font on the screen, orchestral music booming. For musicals, the overture is a bric-a-brac of instrumental highlights from the score, presented in standard symphonic order: a main theme in mid- or up-tempo, a legato second movement of the film's romantic ballad, and a final, rousing variation of the first movement. These sequences are little more than extended establishing shots with little cinematic interest, often played to announce to the audience that the film was about to begin: it is standard practice for most home viewers to skip the sequence entirely.

West Side Story's overture sequence, on the other hand, was designed to be an integral part of the film's visual schema. Barry Monush states that "Robert Wise had not wanted audiences shuffling about and talking during the overture and therefore had his visual effects specialist Linwood Dunn design an abstract pattern..." (Monush, 105) Given that iconic graphic designer Saul Bass created the film's famous poster -- a stunning red one-sheet with bold black font and two small figures meant to be Maria and Tony dancing, their arms and legs outstretched as in some of Robbins' most recognizable choreography from the musical -- and given the introduction's equally bold graphic design and his reputation for creating such title sequences, it is assumed by many that Bass was the sole designer. Sources are mixed -- Leemann credits them to Bass, while Keenan to Dunn-- but the conclusion I am reaching, in order to reconcile differing accounts, is that the Overture sequence was a collaboration between Bass and visual effects wizard Linwood Dunn. The design itself --the vertical lines-- appears to have been completed by Bass and his associates, but the filming of the sequence, including the colour changes and the zoom out, was Dunn.

Figure 1. Linwood Dunn (kneeling) and his associate Cecil Love (standing, and Dunn's optics expert), filming the overture sequence¹⁴

Considering this brief history of Hollywood overtures and their apparent superfluosity, Dunn and Bass's work for *West Side Story* strikes the viewer as an overt attempt to create a dramatically functional, integral part of the film: the sequence is intended to be a visual accompaniment to the dynamic changes in mood as the music shifts between instrumental pieces, solidifying Bernstein's score as one of the primary attractions of the film to come. This is in contrast to overture sequences of other post-War American musicals: *Annie Get Your Gun* comes to mind, with its off-kilter 'Western styled' font stating "Overture" over a bright, simple yellow and blue representation of the American midwest. The visuals remain static and unchanging, even as the music shifts between dance number and ballad. In contrast, Bass and Dunn's credit and overture sequences are remarkably active in an era when little more was expected than a title card. Bass's first title sequence was for Otto Preminger's adaptation of *Carmen Jones* (1954), where a stark image of a red rose is silhouetted crimson smoke, placed in the centre of a field of black as the credits -- in white-- flow overtop. Bass's lauded end credit sequence for *Around the World in 80 Days* (Michael Anderson, 1958) comprises a synopsis of the preceding narrative, expressed through bold, geometric graphic designs that recall cubist abstraction and Matisse-like paper cut-outs. Both are examples of an increasingly functional title sequence, one that audiences could take in and appreciate on their own account.

Yet the work for *West Side Story* is even more abstract than Bass's preceding efforts, and stands as an anomaly amongst Hollywood overture sequences: it is completely devoid of text,

¹⁴ <http://www.widescreenmuseum.com/widescreen/wingsp3.htm>, photo courtesy of William Luca.

without even the simple phrase “Overture”, and serves as a dynamic, expressive sequence that works in tandem with the overture score. Fading in quickly from black with a dissonant chord of horns, a scarlet red field fills the wide screen, surrounding an abstract collection of broken, vertical lines as the overture’s first selection begins to play. The scarlet is experienced as dangerous, hostile, enveloping, as much as it could also be associated with passionate love as is suggested by its use on Valentine cards. If the Overture remained with this single frame throughout its eight minutes, Dunn’s work would still be an uncomfortable match with its earlier Hollywood brethren. However, as the Overture moves between musical numbers, the screen colour changes dramatically: as the score moves into the marching brass and rhythmic drive of the Quintet version of “Tonight”, the image quickly transforms from the brief flush of scarlet into a bright canary yellow. The vaguely menacing tone of the music seems to be at odds with the cheerful purity of the yellow. But why does this yellow seem to be at odds with the music? The question itself embodies an inquiry many theorists who investigate colour find themselves having to confront. In simplified terms, the slippery semiotics of colour is elusive: in popular thought, individual hues can be equated at a one to one ratio with a particular ‘meaning’: a candy apple red would be passionate love; a yellow-green hinting towards olive, toxicity; a crisp white, angelic purity. Yet that same candy apple red can be associated with the joy of Christmas, or in such a context, lurid sexuality, or with an octagon, stop.

Returning to this canary yellow paired with the Quintet version “Tonight”, the music shifts to the Duet version: as this happens, the screen shifts to another red, an intense cardinal. As this happens, the hue once again seems to be at odds with the sweepingly romantic melody, as it is again dangerous, hostile and enveloping. Yet as we have already established, red can be

equated with romance, which would indeed be a logical pairing for the Duet. Then why does it strike as dissonant? Perhaps this is a continuation of the clashing 'at odds with-ness'; a jazzy dissonance that is indicative of the urban modernism. And what to say of the yellow? It may be worth noting its association with instability, its 'otherness'. Here it might be relevant to recall Kandinsky's comments on yellow, of which he says "if steadily gazed at in any geometrical form, has a disturbing influence, and reveals in the colour an insistent, aggressive character" [...] "[i]t can never have profound meaning". (Kandinsky, 37-8) (Quoted in Coates, 88)

As the Duet reaches its conclusion, the Quintet's rhythmic drive returns, and the screen shifts slightly to orange; the score then begins to slow to a legato, "Tonight (Quintet)" returns and the screen becomes overwhelmed with the intensity of electric ultramarine blue. It is such an intense hue that the black vertical lines seem to sink in, as the large swaths of solid hue on the screen's peripherals burn into the retina. Combined with the now defining musical phrase of the overture, "Tonight"s staccato drill of brass and drum, is clearly intended to evoke equal measures of excitement and awe in the audience. Perhaps this is the first moment which seeks to overwhelm the audience with the quality Mark Rothko identified as ecstasy. The image begins to 'pull out' and reveals the title text of "WEST SIDE STORY" centred at the bottom of the screen: it has always 'been there', just hidden out of sight throughout the overture. The text and vertical lines change from black to white as the overture's final chords ring out, and the illusion of abstraction --in both musical and colour terms-- is harshly match-cut to an extreme long shot of Manhattan, revealing that Dunn's apparently abstract collection of vertical lines is an

interpretation of the city's iconic skyline: a moment that John Mauceri fondly recalls: “we gasped, and we realized what we had been seeing.”¹⁵

What becomes apparent through this overture is the emotional potential of abstraction, with no need for words or iconographic realism -- but this abstraction is qualified, as the audience is *also* seeing images that are not entirely abstract but based on a New York skyline point of view. This combination of the (concealed) concrete referent and abstraction might be taken as paradigmatic of a modernism to which the adjective ‘vernacular’ is applicable, even though this isn’t precisely what Hansen does with the concept: the abstraction being modernist, and the preservation of the referent ‘vernacular’. (Coates)

Dunn and Bass had interpreted *West Side Story* through only line and colour, and not necessarily with the same palette as the rest of Wise's film, and Saul Bass would receive the popular acclaim for it. Indeed, Boris Leven, *West Side Story*'s art director, was frustrated that Bass was receiving too much acclaim for his contributions to the film's overall design.

Let us take into consideration the overture's matching of "Maria" with medium blue, in comparison to the song's appearance in the film proper. As Richard Beymer walks through the streets from the gym singing "the most beautiful sounds in a single word" during the film, he is doused in angular shadows, reds, and muted industrial tones of brick, clouded glass and pavement, all shot through a misty filter. It is a transformation of decaying residential streets to an almost other-worldly Cloud No. 9 -- but primarily, without *any* blue whatsoever. The overture is an interpretation, almost segregated from the rest of the film as much as it provides an introductory synopsis of the emotional narrative and musical styles to come.

¹⁵ Bonus Feature “A Place for Us”

Dunn and Bass's graphic choices for this overture sequence are ones of large swaths of pure colour, used in an expressive and emotional manner. This reminds us of contemporary American modernist art of the period, particularly the colour field artists of Abstract Expressionism. Comparing a still from Dunn's sequence to Barnett Newman's paintings, for example, we see a striking resemblance: a shared interest in the expressive potentiality of non-figurative swaths of pure colour.

Figure 2. *Vir heroicus sublimis*, Barnett Newman, 1951

Figure 3. Still From *West Side Story*'s Overture sequence

But there is a significant problem here: *there are multiple versions of the sequence*. I was made aware of this when I first watched the 50th Anniversary edition Blu-Ray. As I had been using two different DVD releases of the film up to this point, I have been used to an orange "Dance at the Gym", transitioning to an emerald green, before a finale of ultramarine. Yet this BluRay edition forgoes the green, and instead fades to black before returning to a darker indigo. This fade to black, right before the pulling out of the image to reveal the title, has created a flurry of reaction on the internet; the result has been a variety of users uploading clips onto YouTube, comparing releases. The dominant opinion seems to be that the two laserdisc releases of the 1980s (CBS/Fox 1984 and Criterion 1989) are the 'correct' versions, with an orange "Dance at the Gym" morphing into a blue finale -- yet as user [marcmartin1999](#) notes, there is a slight difference in the timing of the transition between these two releases. In correspondence with Rogel Fernandez of [XylonHD.com](#), he wisely suggests that only MGM 'knows which one is correct', as every home release has differed. MGM has re-released the 50th Anniversary DVD correcting a variety of 'mistakes' users have noticed -- but keeping the transition to black.

Which one is correct? Fernandez' cross-comparison of the 1998 DVD, Special Edition DVD and the two recent Blu-Ray editions,¹⁶ or the Criterion 1989 LaserDisc¹⁷?

The fact that this is different might even suggest that it is *not* the hue that is important for Dunn's sequence, but simply the fact that the viewer is engulfed in *any* colour, and that the colours kaleidoscopically shift along with the music. In a sense, that is the function of this overture: to pre-show all the kaleidoscopic colours of the film, to whet the eye's appetite for a range of colours -- and the overture exists to suggest that range and the richness of the colour experience to come, indicating its ability to encompass an entire world.

The Cinematic Canvas

a) The Expressive Use of (Techni)Colour and Form

Thus, I would like to suggest that the cinematic screen can be likened to a painter's canvas: a cinematic canvas, per se. The recording of brushstrokes on the surface of a canvas, in this sense, is similar to the recording of light, colour and form on film. As Rouben Mamoulian, director of the early colour film *Becky Sharp* (1935), declared: "we, the makers of colour films, are actually painters. We are painting with light..." [Misek, 66] The filmmakers of *West Side Story* use Technicolor and form in an expressive, expressionistic¹⁸ manner and in such a way that moves beyond the already expressive conventions of the genre: an upping of the ante, where the filmmaking, the music and the dancing all become extra-stylized. As *The New York Herald*

¹⁶ http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=EjEzv4_Gk20

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6e5w-ZYYHxY&feature=relmfu>

¹⁸ "Expressionistic" as in seeking to express emotional experience through distortion rather than a pictorial mimesis or naturalism, rather than the specific modernist movement of (German) Expressionism.

Tribune described it in its review of the film, “the pure animal energy at times overflows the screen.” (Berson, 156) Leemann writes, “From its inception, the filmmakers decided that *West Side Story* would be unlike any other film musical, one in which all the elements of film grammar would mesh to turn this blend of drama, music, and dance into a one-of-a-kind moviegoing experience. The cinematic style they strove for had to combine the realistic requirements of the film medium with the more stylized conventions of the theatrical presentation. So important was the creation of a unique visual presentation that virtually every major Hollywood cameraman was considered, and many of them tested, until Wise settled on Daniel L. Fapp as the one who would break with convention and go for the rather radical approach he had in mind.” (Leemann, 42-43) Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* wrote that “What they have done with *West Side Story* in knocking it down and moving it from stage to screen is to reconstruct its fine material into nothing short of a cinema masterpiece. [...] The drama ... which cried to be released in the freer and natural aspect on the large Panavision colour screen, and the music and dances that expand it are magnified as true sense-experiences.” (Monush, 106) On the other hand, Robbins, while generally happy with the final product, did express some discontent. It seems that the film was perhaps *too* stylized for his taste, or perhaps stylized in a different manner than he was anticipating, instead bordering on kitsch. As he said in a personal letter: “...some of it gets bogged down in the lack of understanding of what the scenes or the musical numbers were about. And occasionally ‘Hollywood’ rears its ugly head and splatters the screen with the soft lights streaming from Heaven or garish Technicolor or STEREOPHONIC SOUND.” (Berson, 157)

West Side Story's aesthetic strategy has a number of notable elements that play into the notion of the cinematic canvas: first, the use of still, deep focus long shots that create *tableaux vivant*-like setups that emphasize the background and mise-en-scène as they loom over the actors. The number "Maria" extensively uses this aesthetic strategy in the way it films the number, almost exclusively with long, still shots. Another such example is in the "Dance at the Gym" number, where the Jets and Sharks dance to jazz and mambo in the high-ceilinged gym, under an intensely red wall. In some shots, the camera is placed low to the ground, peering up at the wall which makes up well over half of the composition. The dancers are strewn at the horizon, and our attention is obviously meant to be focused there on Robbins' energetic mix of jazz and latin dance --but the red, stained and partially crumbling wall is also in crisp focus. Red, of course, can be read as passion here, a suitable backdrop for the score and setting. But the red walls are unusual for gymnasia, which are usually painted in neutral tones or left as untreated wood and concrete. The bold use of red makes the location almost seem uncanny, even inappropriate for its usual function as athletic facility. Thus colour transforms the space from the functional into the expressive and musical.

The Abstract Expressionist artist Robert Motherwell said in 1951 that "[t]he need is for felt experience --intense, immoderate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic." [Barr, 95] Here he is speaking of his and his colleagues' paintings, but his words can equally be applied to the goals of *West Side Story*'s creative team. The sets have been designed to be simultaneously realistic --the crumbling west side with its brownstones and rusty ironwork-- and expressionistic, with their projecting onto the external world of signs an interior emotional world. Even the on-location shooting of the prologue is made stylized by paint: red walls, yellow paint cans splashed

about, a plethora of graffiti. Oscar Wilde writes in *The Decay of Lying* that “[n]o great artist sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.” (Quoted in Misek, 59) For a project that is so self-consciously trying to marry the ‘high arts’ with the American musical, it only makes sense that the film version of *West Side Story* features an extra-stylized mise-en-scène that adapts modernist aesthetics in a vernacular way: and one of these aesthetic regimes of the modern is the freeing of colour from purely mimetic means.

According to Misek, modernism’s freeing of colour is described in an interview with Michelangelo Antonioni, where he cites “Picasso’s blue period, in which colour fulfills a sensual rather than a representational function. Elsewhere, he extended his analogy with painting to the practice of working with colour on film...” (Misek, 65) Colour’s emotional and sensual functions are in full use throughout *West Side Story*, and its use of hue and form is strikingly similar to the painting of the era. In terms of Abstract Expressionism, the colour field artists, such as Barnett Newman, are the most striking parallel to *West Side Story*’s mise-en-scène. Contemporary reviews of *West Side Story* near unanimously take note of the film’s overwhelming use of saturated colour. For example, Albert Johnson’s review of the film for *Film Quarterly* describes the film as “beautifully ‘visualized’. [...] the use of colour and lighting indicates an incredible grasp of everything a film image can do to an emotionally responsive audience.” (Johnson, 59)

Antonioni, in his first colour feature *Red Desert*, found that “[i]n short, colour in film is not painting but, at the abstract language of the future, conveys movements or changes at a psychological level. [...] Antonioni wishes to convey how a newly painted environment can externalize inner psychic mobility. [...] As sheer cinematic movement and psychological history, colour can only veer away from realism toward abstraction.” (Dalle Vacche, 69)

Of course, there are obvious differences between cinema and painting in that film is a flickering, moving image --but what do we make of *West Side Story*'s various iconographies that make still the film? By this, I am referring to the number of extra-textual images that are associated with the film, be it its iconic poster, film stills that have been transformed into lobby cards, advertisements, or promotional photos.

Greenberg, in "Towards a Newer Laocoon", suggests that modernism and the shift towards abstract representation seeks to shed the 'shame of the illusory', embracing the abstract as perhaps a more honest approach to the modern subject's psyche and the changing role of art in an age of mechanical reproduction. As Greenberg notes, the emerging modernist avant-garde had a great affinity towards music, which he suggests is because of music's "nature as an art of immediate sensation" (Greenberg, 68). We can also suggest that it is music's purely abstract forms, 'beyond' or in opposition to representational logic, that mark the affinity between modernist abstraction in the visual arts and music. That the New York school of abstract expressionists were also, for the most part, fans of jazz music and its improvisational melodies and rhythms, further marks the increasing conflation between 'high' art and populism, music and painting. This conflation is seen in *West Side Story*'s aesthetic strategy. We may also consider the musical as lacking this shame of the illusory: it breaks the fourth wall constantly, directly addressing its audience with its extra-narrative numbers and stylized mise-en-scène.

Robert Wise and his creative team of Dunn and Leven created striking images throughout the film, including dialogue scenes and the non-dancing musical numbers, as visions of the cinematic canvas. One example is the sublime "Somewhere" and the preceding dramatic scene. Maria's bedroom is painted a pale shade of violet and has a stained-glass door of many bold

colours. Light shines through this doorway and paints the room a kaleidoscopic range of hues. As Maria is told of the news of her brother's death at the hands of her lover, Tony sneaks into the room through the window to face the truth. Maria shouts at him "Killer, killer, killer!" and is reduced to sobs. From here we see a touching exchange of forgiveness and tender love, as they move into the song "Somewhere". Avoiding a shot-reverse shot exchange, we stay on a medium-close up of their shadowed faces longingly gazing at each other; as they sing, we notice that the light from her door is projected onto the wall behind them, split into two squares. Behind Tony is indigo-blue, and behind Maria a red-orange: colours that have been established as representative of their respective gangs. But as the song continues, the camera pulls out to reveal a staggered checkerboard pattern behind them of these colours: through Tony and Maria, the two gangs are joined as one. Furthermore, as the number ends and the checkerboard pattern of red and blue goes out of focus, we are moved to another setting and scene -- but upon returning to Maria's bedroom, the light show has ended and the audience is left seeing the actual colour of the room's paint: violet, the product of red and blue, and thus a reconciliation between Jets and Sharks.

b) Rubbles of Red

West Side Story's mise-en-scène is dominated by the colour red. For Natalie Kalmus, the 'colour supervisor' of virtually all early Technicolor films, red had a broad yet specific meaning:

[R]ed recalls to mind a feeling of danger, a warning. It also suggests blood, life, and love. It is materialistic, stimulating. It suffuses the face of anger, it led the Roman soldiers into battle. Different shades of red can suggest various phases of life, such as love, happiness, physical strength, wine, passion, power, excitement, anger, turmoil, tragedy, cruelty, revenge, war, sin, and shame. These are all different, yet in certain aspects they are the same. Red may be the colour of the revolutionist's flag, and streets

may run red with the blood of rioters, yet red may be used in a church ritual for Pentecost as a symbol of sacrifice. Whether blood is spilled upon the battlefield in an approved cause or whether it drips from the assassin's dagger, blood still runs red. The introduction of another colour with red can suggest the motive for crime, whether it be jealousy, fanaticism, revenge, patriotism or religious sacrifice. Love gently warms the blood. The delicacy or strength of the shade of red will suggest the type of love. By introducing the colours of licentiousness, deceit, selfish ambition, or passion it will be possible to classify the type of love portrayed with considerable accuracy. (Kalmus, 26)

For Bellantoni, red is associated with power and the manipulation of space, because we tend to see it first. (Bellantoni, 2) Yet her red “doesn’t come with a moral imperative”, and it can be chaotic, evil, neutral or good. (Bellantoni, 2) There are two particular examples where red is associated with power in *West Side Story*: the first being the iconic shot of Bernardo slamming his fist against a red brick wall during the Prologue sequence, gazing at the audience as he seethes in anger from his run-in with the Jets. Robbins has been famously credited with staging the Prologue sequence, his time-consuming perfectionism in rehearsals and shooting being one of the primary factors in his firing from the production. Yet according to Robert Wise, this shot -- of Bernardo slamming his fist into the wall-- was the only image from the Prologue that was shot in studio, implying that this was a particularly important addition to the sequence: it is a stylized shot, a *planned* shot, and one directed by Wise himself. So what does the red signify here? Placing the slippery semiotics of colour symbolism aside, here it appears to be bubbling passion and seething anger, setting the stage for the rest of the Prologue and the violence to come. It is the red of rage, of a small loss of power that he is trying to reclaim with his subsequent grouping with other Sharks. It is a Sirkian use of colour, where the *mise-en-scène* speaks for the characters

when they cannot.¹⁹ This is expressionistic, as the character's feelings are manifest not in words but in the appearance of the environment.

One striking example of the use of red in *West Side Story* is its climax, the famous quintet version of "Tonight". The Jets and Sharks are marching to battle, and we cross-cut between the gangs as they prepare for the rumble and gather discreet weapons, bathed in intense red back lighting: "Okay, we said no ruckus, no tricks -- but just in case they jump us, we're ready to mix." They walk menacingly towards the camera, breaking the fourth wall: but are their nearly blank stares a threat, or an attempt to justify their bloodlust? In long shot, we quickly see the Jets nod their heads off-screen, shouting "Well, they began it!" before a match cut shows the Sharks nodding the opposite direction, repeating both lyrically and melodically the same juvenile justification. A saxophone briefly wails, and we cut towards Anita donning silk stockings on her bed, and she begins to sing that she's "gonna get her kicks tonight", whether or not Bernardo is willing: "it don't matter if he's tired, as long as he's here!" She, too, is bathed in scarlet red light, but she is completely enveloped in it: the source is mysterious, and reduces her and the mise-en-scène to little more than shades of red and black. The low angle, long shot and intensity of shadow that surrounds her suggests a classic *femme fatale* compositional framing, revealing her as an alluring trap of femininity that recalls her earlier choice of bubble bath lotion, 'black orchid'. An allure of this kind is conventionally also associated with red. Suddenly, the final two

¹⁹ As David Batchelor says in his work on colour, *Chromophobia*: "Silence. The silence that colour may provoke is a mark of its power and autonomy. Silence is how we have to voice our respect for that which moves us beyond language. 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent,' said Wittgenstein, who saw in colour the outer limits of language. Silence is spoken by the body, through our gestures and postures. The body is one of the means by which we express ourselves when we run out of words. Colour is thus connected to the body in at least two ways: it is applied to the body as make-up," as Bernardo is clad in his bright red shirt, "and it is allied with the body in its resistance to verbalization. Moreover, with make-up we not only make our bodies more visible and vivid, we also make them more expressive and articulate." (Batchelor, 83-84)

vocal sections of the quintet of Maria and Tony singing longingly of their reunion later that night shift the song into more romantic, optimistic territory.

The fact that red lighting appears in all five sections of the quintet is illustrative of the illusive, slippery semiotics of colour; while it helps to connect visually each of the five sequences, the thematic and emotional impact of the hue shifts as suddenly as the cross-cutting shots and music. The red associated with the Jets and Sharks suggests impending bloodshed and violence: its source is off-screen, bleeding into their surroundings like the green mist of the plague in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956): this bleeding out of colour can perhaps be associated with looming disaster.

Red does not always seem to be correlated with the hotter, angrier power linked to it by Bellantoni, and in the song most associated with the gloating of power, "The Jet Song", as noted above, red is glowering over the Jets as they plan a rumble with the Sharks -- yet as the number proper begins, they leave the red wall and enter an environment of whitewash and blue skies. Instead, in the song "Something's Coming", which is the first time we see a set (the prologue through "Jet Song" was shot on-location), we notice some small details: the iron railing and bannister at the back of Doc's store is painted bright candy apple red, and the narrow alley is surrounded by dirty red brick. Red here is not associated with power, but it does manipulate the space into becoming something reflective of Tony's passionate longing -- it seems that red throughout the film is thus mostly associated with *passion* of various kinds.

The power associated with red can be noted in the scene where Maria and Anita are in the dress shop, altering Maria's dress to be ready for the dance at the gym. "I hate that dress!", Maria declares, because it is white: a colour that she says "is for babies." Maria pleads with Anita: can

they not alter the neck line to be lower and more revealing? Can they “not dye it red”? For Maria sees red as full of passion and excitement, with which she herself is filled to the brim. Eventually Anita reveals her handiwork: a beautiful white dress with a red sash: both virginal with the white and lace detailing, and towards sophisticated with this red detailing. It is a sign of things to come, Maria’s journey from naivety to world-weariness, for her final costume is a red dress. Tony has been led to believe that Maria has been shot by her fiancé Chino, and is running through the streets demanding that he be accorded the same punishment: but Maria hasn’t been murdered, and finds Tony in the playground. Shouting his name, she runs towards him -- but Chino has found them, too, and shoots Tony just as he embraces Maria. The red dress here represents a multiplicity of meaning: firstly, Maria is no longer a virgin, and this dress knowingly shows the audience this. But the red dress is also a sign of Maria’s passions beyond sexuality, as she angrily lectures the Jets and Sharks: red is violence, anger, and the hot blood of her lover as he dies in her arms.

The audience might also expect the hot red of blood to be present at the fatal rumble beneath the highway, where Riff and Bernardo are stabbed. It is another scene of overbearing passions, which boil over into violence: yet there is very little, if any, blood seen. This may be for any one or more of the following reasons: because of the production code; because there is so much red already present in the scene through the painted steelwork of the highway that actual bloodshed isn’t necessary; because the generic conventions of the musical don’t allow for bloodshed to occur; or that that the retinas have already been assaulted with red just as we move under the highway, with a bright red filtered shot of a chain link fence.

c) Filters

One of the most striking manipulations of light and colour in *West Side Story* is the use of optical filters. There are three particularly striking examples in the film: the first being with Maria twirling into red, blue and green shadows of herself in the dress shop with Anita after she announces her “new life in America”, which then turns into a trio of dancers in red, before a final swell of red as the “Dance at the Gym” number begins. The second use of filters is in the “Tonight (Quintet)” number, where Anita is doused in passionate red as she announces her intentions with Bernardo after the fight. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, is the swell of red directly after the Quintet and before the fight begins: the screen flashes red, and a chain link fence momentarily becomes an abstract warning.

Robert Wise has used these filter effects before *West Side Story*, to a near-hallucinogenic effect in his 1956 Cinemascope epic *Helen of Troy*. In a Bacchanal scene, the Greek lords plan to attack Troy while a celebration rages around them, all while doused in an intense red light. Red here is again symbolic of simmering passions with the violence they plan through warfare, as well as the wine, women and song surrounding them. I am unable to find a link between Dunn, Wise’s visual specialist for *West Side Story*, and *Helen of Troy*; I would surmise therefore that this use of filters in both was thus Wise’s idea.

Figure 4. The brilliant use of a bright red filter in Wise’s *Helen of Troy* (1956)

Figure 5. Maria “twirls in a white petticoat, her revolving figure blurs into a myriad background of hazes which focus into a huge, red-walled gymnasium, where the Jets swing out in a jazz dance.” (Albert Johnson review, 59)

These filters temporarily turn the representational into something abstract. As Maria turns into a kaleidoscopic twirl, we see a vision of her excitement in the spinning tripecta of hues: light broken into its three counterparts of green, red and blue, a trio that foregrounds the possibilities of the three-strip processing of Technicolor. It is a flurry that suggests Maria's excitement, her inner passions finally allowed to be let loose. The white dress she wears is symbol of her cloistered virginity --"my little lamb, my precious jewel"-- but it is also the white of unfiltered light. That it breaks into its constituent colours under Dunn's filters shows us that even a white dress can unleash hidden passions if given the opportunity. The filtered shot quickly loses focus and Maria becomes a twirling blur of blue, green and above all red, which then takes over the shot, the other hues being dropped. The twirling Maria becomes three blurred figures in soft focus and red, and as the shot slowly regains focus, we see them expressively dancing to a new rhythm, as yet unheard. The dichotomy of Maria, the sheltered virgin in white, and the freedom of dancers of red is thus shown to be a flexible, sliding scale: again, Maria if given the opportunity can show her 'true colours'.

This abstracted shot of blurred colours depicts colour free of form, unleashed hues that may expressively tell a tale of equally unleashed emotion. This shot is based upon the original stage version's rather cinematic set change between the bridal shop and the gym: as Berson describes, "When Maria twirls around as she models her new party dress in the bridal shop, her motion and the music whirl us into the dance at the gym, instantly evoked with a fierce shift of music, lighting changes, and a thicket of festive-colored streamers dropping from the rafters." (Berson, 62) The film version stretches this set change out and turns it into a fluid one, with the bridal shop morphing into the gym through the filtered colours. Regarding the stage

version, Sondheim reports that “We were influenced by the movies, [...] there was a fluidity in the staging which had a cinematic quality. No other show has ever been staged ... or conceived this way as a fluid piece which called on the poetic imagination of the audience.” (Berson, 9)

Perhaps the most expressionistic use of colour and form in the film comes at the end of “Tonight (Quintet)”: as the quintet sings out their final “Tonight”, we see the Jets, led by Riff, swell into a rush of bright red that overwhelms the screen. The red is overlain by a chain link fence. But this red filtered light strongly resembles the Abstract Expressionists’ colour-field paintings. While it is only a few seconds long in the film, spectators may feel that it burns into their retinas: scarlet red and a chain link fence that is turned into an abstracted pattern of diamonds and lines, spider-like and repetitious. There is then a sudden cutting of the filter, rather than a gradation or cut to another shot: it is just as shocking as this sudden filter of red, especially when paired with an equally sudden zoom out of by the camera, revealing more chain link fence and the first shot of the fight space, under the highway. This use of red filter serves as a warning of the violence to come, but it is also a sensuous climax of the over-boiled passions of the Quintet.

Figure 6. Chain link fence and a sudden filter.

d) Panavision

The large size of many of the Abstract Expressionists’ work is yet another similarity between the movement and *West Side Story*. The canvases of Rothko and Newman, for example, envelop the viewer with their sheer size and large planes of colour: we find ourselves lost in colour, our visual scope overwhelmed. *West Side Story*’s Panavision cinematography functions in a similar manner, with Wise and Robbins utilizing cinematic space to envelop audiences in bold

colour. This enveloping is described by Jacques Aumont as “the power that a large image can exert when a spectator is forced to be close to it, forcing him or her not only to see its surface, but also to be dominated, even crushed, by it.” (171)

As mentioned previously, many shots in the film have a *tableaux vivant* quality, with a *mise-en-scène* that equally emphasizes the actors and the setting with their low horizons and dominant backgrounds, most notably in “The Dance at the Gym” where the gym’s large red walls loom over the cast as they dance the energetic mambo choreography. But why is the background made to be so important in these scenes? As already mentioned, the red of the wall is unusual for a gym, and transforms it into a theatrical-musical space. Immediately afterwards, Tony sings of “Maria” as he walks through the darkened streets of the west side, the facades of buildings again looming over him. The horizon is set low, and the scenes are long shot dead-on without an angle, and Tony becomes a small figure as he walks by repetitious facades.

The shooting of many numbers and dialogue sequences in such a manner, with long shots and low angles while in deep focus, equates in importance both the characters and the background. Robbins and Wise would dig their cameras into the ground to get their extreme low angles, resulting in views of the musical numbers unlike anything seen in an American musical up to that point. One could also surmise that the backgrounds in *West Side Story* are so large as to emphasize the size or ‘bigness’ of everything in America (“Skyscrapers boom in America!”), and particularly, in New York.

Figure 7. Tony overwhelmed by a repetitious background in “Maria”.

Prologue

The Prologue sequence of *West Side Story* sets up the aesthetic strategy of the film: an extra-stylized strategy that is rooted in a realism. It is a metamorphosed, abstracted realism, and assistant director Robert Relyea says that “You either accept it, or you don’t.” (50th Anniversary DVD) Robert Wise declared that “What I wanted to do was show a New York that people hadn’t seen, almost an abstract one. I wanted to put the audience in a frame of mind to accept the kids dancing in the streets without feeling that twinge of embarrassment.” (Leemann, 166)

Wise says: “Putting a stage musical on the screen represents challenges. When you’re in the live theatre, you have the proscenium arch up there, you’re once-removed from reality. The screen is a very real medium and doesn’t take kindly to stylization. One of the things we struggled with the most in *West Side Story* was how to take all the highly stylized aspects of it and deal with them effectively in the reality of the screen. On the stage, you can have characters break out of a dialogue scene and go right into song and dance and you don’t feel a twinge of embarrassment, but you can feel that on the screen. On the stage, the turf that the kids fight over were stylized sets. There was no way I could realistically open the film without opening it in the real New York streets.” (Leemann, 165) Wise continues, “Jerry said to me, ‘I agree with you completely about the need to open it in New York, but you gave me the biggest challenge: to take my most stylized dancing and put it against the most real background that we have in the whole picture.’” (Leemann, 166) But throughout the sequence, the camera is performing some of the film’s most expressionistic and abstract movements: jump cuts, extreme angles (low, canted), swipe cuts that turn the action into an abstracted blur of colour; these all turn the on-location sequence of the dingy West Side into something fit for the stylized world of the musical.

The looking through chain link fences throughout the Prologue establishes another aesthetic strategy, one that will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The West Side is shown to be littered with graffiti, particularly that of the Jets and Sharks; what we can draw from this are the primitive impulses of modernism and expressionism in a vernacular form, and possibly the 'lowest' form of painting, graffiti. If we look at contemporary art of the period, for example Cy Twombly, we see a striking resemblance to the same graffiti that is often denigrated, yet 'raised' in expressionist modern art. This idea of splashing paint about is seen in the Prologue itself, as the Sharks splash cans of bright canary yellow paint onto the Jets. Actor Bert Michaels, who played the Jet Snowboy, describes feeling as "[m]odern art we were... street-level living graffiti." (53) Yellow itself can be seen as an insult, as in "you're yellow" or "yellow bastard". Yellow here is the colour associated in Christian painting with Judas, and has since evolved into its contemporary meaning of being a coward. By splashing the Jets with yellow, the meaning that emerges is a simple calling of the enemy a bunch of cowards. This same expression is actually said later in the film as Bernardo calls Tony a 'chicken' during the rumble; interestingly, the comment that gets Riff finally involved into a deadly battle with Bernardo is when Bernardo calls Tony a "yellow-bellied Polack": is this a racially charged moment, revealing that the white hegemony does not necessarily view the Polish immigrants as 'white', as 'white' seems to mean 'WASP'?

The Jets and the Sharks are visually separated by the use of colour-coded costuming, but it is particularly evident in the marking of the Sharks as Other. The first gang we see is the American Jets, and there is remarkably little common ground in their clothing besides the colour blue in Riff's shirt and in their blue jeans. The first time we see Bernardo, leader of the Sharks,

he is immediately identifiable as 'Other' through his strikingly different costuming choices: a long-sleeved red shirt, black pants, black leather bracelets and black hair. The rest of his gang is associated with these colours of red and black, along with violet: they are intense hues of passion, of exoticism, and with black, of ethnicity. The Other must be identified in some way: through the use of a unified colour, the Sharks emerge as a separate community. Their degree of commitment to colour is a sign of otherness, and possibly a need to band together in order to combat the dominant culture.

Chapter Three: A Real Cool Apocalypse -- The Neo-Modern Sublime and *West Side Story*

My goal for this chapter is to show that *West Side Story* embodies a vernacular rendition of John Orr's neo-modern, in perhaps the most unexpected of forms. I would also like to show that *West Side Story* embodies what I would like to call the vernacular neo-modern sublime.

1. A Question of Modernism(s)

Introducing Neo-modernism

John Orr's description of what he calls the 'neo-modern' is striking.²⁰ It is, like modernity-modernism in general, both a style and a period. It is the returned wave of modernist practice and thought in a post-War world; what Orr calls a 'Nietzschean return' to the high modernism of the pre-Depression years that also moves beyond that particular moment of modernism to a new, contemporary one that has expanded/more developed/changed practices. The period of the neo-modern is that of the Cold War, and according to Orr, ranges from 1958 and 1959 (with the appearance of Welles' *Touch of Evil*, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Godard's *Breathless* and Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*) to the mid-late 1970s. It can be closely linked to what is called European Art Cinema, but also some American cinema of the same period.

For Orr, "[t]he neo-moderns inherit four legacies from the high modern period [...] the modernist architecture of the European city, the death of tragedy in modern cinema, the inward turn of Expressionism in painting and the inward turn of narrative in fiction. Out of these legacies its cinema generates two distinctive structures of feeling which I intend to call the tragicomic and the cool apocalypse..." (Orr, 14) The cool apocalypse is a feeling of dread that prevailed during the Cold War, differing from the same sense of dread in the pre-War years in

²⁰ Orr, 1-13

that it is cool, ironic, distant instead of ‘hot’: nuclear annihilation is always around the corner, and death will be swift, and wars will be conducted through the press of a button instead of through grit and sweat. “[T]he cool apocalypse highlights the unspoken fears which lie behind the banalities of everyday life, the constrained anguish at the rapid fluctuation of unpredictable emotion.” (Orr, 18)

Although Orr’s emphasis is on cinema, in his description of the cool apocalypse Orr suggests that the feelings of the tragicomic and the cool apocalypse --indeed, the neo-modern-- can be seen in other media: importantly for us, he lists Abstract Expressionism as one of these, placing it alongside “other neo-modern forms [like] ludic drama, Beat poetry [...] and the French New Novel.” (Orr, 19) Abstract Expressionism, in this line of thought, is a return of Expressionist art but within a new context, that of New York being the centre of the art world, a push towards the secular spiritual and sublime, and a further rejection of representation. We can see similar trends in music --new forms of jazz that had been inflected by further abstraction and exoticism-- and as Orr notes, in literature with the emergence of the French New Novel and beat poetry, the ‘descendants’ of stream of consciousness high modernist writing. The neo-modern is a new mood ‘cool’, complete with cool jazz. It is thus no surprise to hear of the Abstract Expressionists listening to this same jazz while painting, and Beat poets socializing with these painters in New York cafés.

I believe it is also important to recognize that these apparent avant-garde forms reached a certain popularity (or perhaps notoriety) in the American popular consciousness, with these three forms of the neo-modern --Abstract Expressionism, cool jazz and Beat poetry-- as hallmarks of a uniquely American culture. Through the work of such outlets like LIFE magazine and the felt

need, after war victory, for distinctively American laureates of the ‘American century’, these neo-modern forms would become beacons of Americanism.

The shift of modernism after WWII: to New York from Paris; from utopia to dystopia

There is an importance of distinguishing and outlining that *West Side Story* primarily deals with an *American* form(s) of modernity and modernism, and that there is a plurality of modernities and modernisms within an American context, as well: for us, we are primarily concerned about Abstract Expressionism and the New York School, immigration to the USA, Damisch’s descriptions²¹ of an American modernity that is contradictory in its longing for the past, its hope for the future, and its designation of itself as simultaneously present and future. This blends into John Orr’s description of the neo-modern, with its concerns of apocalypse and tragicomedy. Where Damisch and Orr agree is that the American forms of modernity-modernism are uniquely their own, but in a fraught relationship with their roots in western Europe. The reasons for this fraught quality include the remnants of the cultural flagship status of the Paris in which so many American artists had camped during the inter-war years, or the difficulty of making one’s claims for novelty ‘stick’ when one is simultaneously aware of ‘the old country’.

Limiting our scope to the musical, we can see the immense popularity of the Hollywood musical in Europe, and a romantic vision of continental Europe and the United Kingdom in musicals of the immediate post-War period. Most notably, *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951) sees the City of Lights as both a real place and as a fantasy world where bohemian and bourgeois live in relative comfort side by side. We can also consider another Minnelli-Kelly vehicle, *Brigadoon* (1954), in its sentimental vision of a Scottish village

²¹ Damisch, Hubert. *Skyline: The Narcissistic City*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

permanently residing in the past. The United States, in contrast, seemed more in line with the new Europe that was reconstructing itself from the debris of the Second World War -- a place that was quickly being filled in with modern buildings, what Deleuze calls 'any-place-whatevers'. (Orr, 20) *West Side Story* takes place in the west side of New York City, in a derelict neighbourhood that somehow recalls both the destruction of WWII, with its piles of debris and broken windows, yet remains fundamentally American in its mise-en-scène of brownstones, and as I will argue, bold hues of reds and film noir shadows.

Serge Guilbault writes in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* that Abstract Expressionism would become an American export in the post-War period, moving the art world's focus and capital from Paris to New York. During the period of Nazi hegemony in the Second World War, many key artists fled Europe to New York, fortifying a new artistic centre. In the process of emerging as America's predominant artists, the Abstract Expressionists as leaders of the American avant-garde experienced a "slow process of de-Marxization" (Guilbault, 2) as they became increasingly visible to the American middle-class: previously, the American art of the Depression, Spanish Civil War and the New Deal years *had* been more overtly Marxist in nature, complete with murals and civil sculptures of the working class Guilbault makes a judgement of value when he states that "[i]n the process [of de-Marxization], of course, the art suffered tremendously--to the point that paintings by Mark Rothko lost their intended mythical quality to become colourful pieces of decoration in the modern home as shown in *Vogue*." [April 1950] (204) While this process of 'vernacularization' could be seen as damaging to the artworks' 'aura', it does speak of the fact that the apparently avant-garde works of the Abstract Expressionists had in a sense become *vernacular*, enabling them to be used by the filmmakers of

West Side Story. As a further example of this process, “Cecil Beaton photographed fashion models in front of Jackson Pollocks shown at Betty Parsons Gallery for *Vogue*, March 1951. In 1953 the well-known collector Roy Neuberger was proudly showing the entire country the Hans Hofmann abstract work he had in his office of his brokerage house. See *Look*, November 3, 1953.” (248)

2. A Neo-Realist Musical?

The goal of this section is to explore how the film tackles real-world issues and incorporates a more ‘realist’ aesthetic, simultaneously with recent American abstraction, diverging from earlier musicals that privileged an overtly constructed, studio-set ‘feel’. To begin, it is important to note that Jerome Robbins had an interest in Method acting --one of the earliest discussions Robbins had regarding the *Romeo* project was in a Method acting course with actor Montgomery Clift (Berson, 20)-- and this is seen in the way he directed his actors in *West Side Story*. The Method is relevant to our discussion of realism because it can be seen as a break with theatrical stylization and the actors’ distance from their roles, enabling them to tap a previously unspoken interiority: the closeness of that interiority being apparent in the break with theatrical diction (the famous Brando mumbling).²² The memoir anthology “Our Story -- Jets & Sharks -- Then and Now” is filled with stories from the cast of the film, many of which describe the way that Robbins handled them. One of his tricks was to encourage a real-life animosity between the Jets and Sharks during filming, much as he did for the original Broadway production. David Bean, who played the Jet ‘Tiger’, writes that “Jets were not allowed to frat with Sharks. To keep tension between the rival gangs, Jerry Robbins kept us apart.” (Banas, 77) Furthermore, Robbins’s

²² This is where a distance exists between Robbins and the Method, as he was known to be, along with Bernstein, very fickle about proper pronunciation in his performers.

co-director Wise was adamant on a realist feel for the film, (Monush, 88) and that the prologue sequence would be filmed on location in New York. (Keenan, 114) “According to Walter Mirisch, it was Robbins who, early in the project’s inception, had to be talked into the location filming, thinking that his work was simply too stylized to play believably against real buildings and city blacktops.” (Monush, 88)

Robert Wise explains:

It was exciting to think of *West Side* off the stage and put into real New York backgrounds and realistic sets. But it is first of all a musical, one that uses most effectively music, songs, highly stylized dancing, and lyrical and theatrical treatment to tell its story. On the stage, with the general acceptance of musical conventions, this offers no problem. But put against real New York streets, playgrounds and other completely realistic locations, the very unreality of parts of *West Side Story* becomes something that needs very special handling in order that it not be embarrassing to watch. It simply could not be done in any way that could be called ‘documentary.’ (Keenan, 116)

Keenan further notes that “[a]lthough generally categorized as a musical, *West Side Story* is a far remove from the typical Hollywood musical, a term usually thought of as a synonym for musical comedy. Part of what appealed to Wise in undertaking this project was the fact that it was not all lightness and fluff. It was a beautiful and tragic love story that effectively indicts bigotry and prejudice (told with beautiful irony in the ‘America’ number) and calls for reconsideration of the social conditions in our society that promote racial hostility and intolerance.” (Keenan, 115) This reconsideration is frequently seen in realist art, which often takes as its mandate to be crusading in this manner.

Even the Abstract Expressionist artists that strike one as the most overtly ‘composed’ -- Newman or Rothko, for example -- relied mostly on the processes of improvisation in the construction of their paintings. We should also note that improvisation can be seen as enhancing realism by eluding preset forms and formality. The film musical is also a strange, unsettling combination of the apparently improvised and the composed: presenting itself as the spontaneous expression of hyperbolic emotion, the fact remains that the musical is perhaps one of the most structured and rehearsed of cinematic fictional forms. That the 20th century American musical is also often based on jazz aesthetics is a further paradox: the improvisational elements of jazz are tempered. Even if we were to consider the possibility that the performer would be able to intervene in the set composition (adding a vocal trill, an extra dance step, subtle variations from performance to performance), the editing process can -- and often does -- remove these veering idiosyncrasies.

Jean-Luc Godard described his *Une femme est une femme* from the same year as being a “neo-realist musical -- that is, a contradiction in terms.”²³ I would like to suggest that *West Side Story* is thrusting in this same direction. As Berson describes it, “[t]he seesawing tension between realism and artifice is established immediately -- in the way a Jets procession is shot artily through the filigree of a chain-link fence, in how the dancers move in angular but disruptive patterns, and in the extreme close-ups and heightened music.” (Berson, 173) This then begs the question as to just how we can describe *West Side Story*: too violent and tragic to be a romantic comedy musical of the type that dominated Hollywood, lacking the raw sexuality and music

²³ <http://www.criterion.com/films/854-a-woman-is-a-woman>

style of the rock-and-roll musicals that were beginning to take off, too 'populist' to be an opera, too 'difficult' to be light fare like *The Music Man* (1962).

As an example of the film's resistance to categorization, the *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther writes of the Prologue that "[t]he effect is of the beginning of a starkly realistic crime film." -- "[b]ut then there's the click of snapping fingers. A nervous rhythm moves the kids and suddenly they're off in a swinging and leaping Jerome Robbins ballet, swiftly criss-crossing the playground, racing in threes down alleyways, tangling a group of Puerto Ricans and spewing energy and passion in dance. The frame of photographic realism is quickly and strongly overlaid with a splash of emotional expression that is above and beyond reality." (Crowther, X1) This is a vivid description of *West Side Story*'s tension between realism and expressionism, of realism being 'strongly overlaid' with expressionism. This tension between 'realism' and 'expressionism' in the cinema is thoroughly modernist, as this binary can be seen throughout much of modern art and modernist narrative.²⁴ The challenge for modernists is how to reflexively deal with realist modes of production, especially mechanical reproduction, and how to best reflect 'reality', be it the reality of mimesis or that of reflecting the internal world of emotions and psychology. This is particularly prudent in the cinema, especially pre-digital film that is stuck with renditions of the surfaces of things and hence a certain built-in realism. But the surface of things can be modified in an attempt to reveal strong emotions, whether it is through the manipulation of mise-en-scène or through the use of special effects and sound or music.

Crowther continues by saying that "[a]lways there is the palpable frame of a concrete and crushing reality enclosing the action on the screen. But within that restricted area, hearts and

²⁴ While "expressionism" is usually associated with German expressionism, the German variety of modernism, I use the term more colloquially and as tantamount to 'expressiveness'.

minds and frenzied feelings are set free and transmitted to the audience in eloquent songs and fierce ballets.” (ibid.) Dunne describes the setting of *West Side Story* in a similar manner as “a New York of mean streets, tenements and back alleys rather than of pristine landmarks and sunny afternoons. And yet, because *West Side Story* is a Hollywood musical, the sordidness is carefully contained.” (Dunne, 105) “*Just enough* hard-core realism is how much Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins wanted for *West Side Story*, and that is how much we get.” (Dunne, 106) For the film to be truly realistic, it would have to include many of the unsavoury elements of New York slum living: the film has a peculiar lack of dirtiness, garbage in the tenements, obscene graffiti, and true violence (Tony is able to wander the streets during “Maria” without ever being on guard). (Dunne, 105-106) And so as much as *West Side Story* suggests gritty realism, the conventions of its genre --the musical comedy-- cut off any true attempts at complete realism. Furthermore, can a Technicolor image ever truly approximate ‘reality’? (Coates, 11) The film purposely creates a superficial re-presentation of reality, with a Technicolor palette that Derek Jarman, in reference to Technicolor technology, referred to as ‘better than the real thing’. (Misek, 41)

Modality

There is a difficulty in classifying *West Side Story* generically, as it pushes the boundaries of what a musical comedy can be and what it can tackle thematically. Film scholars have used the concept of modality as a form of classification that acknowledges the difficulty of categorizing certain things generically (eg. melodrama, *noir*). Christine Gledhill describes modes as “adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures.” (Gledhill, 229) In other words, these are aesthetic registers that are “fluid across a range of genres, across historical moments and across spatial geographies”. (Jan Campbell, 201) Modes can be thought

of as supra-genres: to take the mode of comedy, for example, we can break it down into *genres* of comedy: the screwball comedy, the slapstick comedy, the romantic comedy. Other examples of modes include tragedy, romance and melodrama -- and “the most recent of modes, realism”. (Gledhill, 229) Which of these modes does *West Side Story* fit into? The answer is, of course, multiple -- and possibly all of those just listed. Numbers like “Gee, Officer Krupke” elicit laughter and delight, while tackling the genuinely serious issue of juvenile delinquency, while the film itself is also a romantic melodrama. But is the musical itself a mode? Kevin John Bozelka thinks so, in his study “The Musical as Mode: Community Formation and Alternative Rock in *Empire Records*” (164-175 in *The Sound of Musicals*, edited by Steven Cohan), and it is a prudent suggestion: it is visible across geographies and historical moments, and can be split into genres (backstage musical, musical comedy, romantic musical, anti-musical).

But the mode that I would like to primarily suggest is that of the tragicomedy, one that John Orr delves into great detail. While Orr lists the tragicomedy as one of two “distinctive structures of feeling”, along with the cool apocalypse, in the neomodern movement, I would like to suggest that tragicomedy is a mode, bolted together from two other modes, tragedy and comedy. (Orr, 14) As he describes, “[i]n tragicomedy, there is no happy switching of partners, no ‘remarriage’, no resolution. Mismatch and sexual role-reversal may start off as farce but end up as tragic stupidity and death.” (Orr, 17) The tragicomedy, Orr suggests, particularly came into its own during modernism, and is among the dominant structures of the neo-modern.²⁵ It is equal parts comedy and tragedy, but with comedy often turning *into* tragedy as the story progresses. Cinematic examples would include *Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959), where a flighty love

²⁵ The other modes that Orr describes the neo-modern as having are (neo)Realism and Expressionism.

story ends with a tragic, senseless death, and the surreal films of Luis Buñuel that skewer the European bourgeoisies, such as *Belle de Jour* (1967) and the aptly named *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

The American tragicomedy of *West Side Story* could be said to represent this neo-modern mode in a vernacular sense. *West Side Story*, of course, does not track the adventures of the bourgeoisie, but instead the lower classes of immigrants, both European and Hispanic, and does so in a musical tragicomedy.

Leonard Bernstein sets about with his co-creators in “making a musical that tells a tragic story in musical comedy terms, using only musical comedy techniques, never falling into the ‘operatic’ trap.” (Simeone, 75) He had doubts whether or not it would be successful, citing *Carousel* (“A Musical Play”) (Broadway play, 1945; film version by Henry King, 1956) and *Street Scene* (“A Dramatic Musical”) (1946), saying: “Can it succeed? It hasn’t yet in our country.” (Simeone, 75) Misha Berson considers the film to be a flawed adaptation of the stage play, which she praises as a masterpiece throughout “Something’s Coming, Something Good: West Side Story and the American Imagination”, but she does appreciate that the film shows “how a tragic tale could (and should) remain tragic for a mass audience, instead of being defiled and defused by a pasted-on happy ending.” (Berson, 158) That the ending remains tragic could point to a shift in audience’s expectations: instead of seeing a Miss Humanity veto, audiences accept the ‘original’ *Romeo and Juliet* ending as it were, in the Orr sense, tragicomic.

The Experience of Modernity

In order to live effectively within modernity, one must adapt what may be called a ‘modern voice’, and this voice must shift as quickly as modernity does. Speed is a putative

dominant quality of modernity, seen in Simmel's description of the city²⁶, or the Futurist exaltation of speed. Berman's description of this voice tells us of: "its breathless pace, its vibrant energy, its imaginative richness, but also its fast and drastic shifts in tone and inflection, its readiness to turn on itself, to question and negate all it has said, to transform itself into a great range of harmonic or dissonant voices, and to stretch itself beyond its capacities into an endlessly wider range, to express and grasp a world where everything is pregnant with its contrary and 'all that is solid melts into air'." (Berman, 23)

This new 'modern voice' for the neo-moderns is not the same of that of Benjamin or Baudelaire, but one for a new phase of modernity. This voice does not speak as earlier of 'high' modernism's anxiety-tinged awe for the city, but instead one that speaks *openly* of the city's chaos and desire for its inhabitants to find "somewhere a place for us" beyond its borders, for "peace and quiet and open air". Here, we can recognize the city-dweller's binary experience of both being drawn to it and being sickened by it, as Simmel, Baudrillard and the Frankfurt school speak of earlier for Paris and Berlin.

The experience of modernity is fleeting, and this fleeting sense is represented in its art by the flickering editing of a film, or the stream-of-consciousness of literature, or the momentarily enveloping experience of finding oneself lost in an Abstract Expressionist painting. *West Side Story* is constantly finding its characters lost in their own thoughts and fantasies: best seen in the "Tonight" Quintet, but also when Maria and Tony first see one another at the gym, when Maria dances alone on the rooftop, when Maria plays with the fabric in the dress shop, when Anita longs for Bernardo doused in red, and primarily with Tony and his constant longings for

²⁶ Simmel, Georg. *The Metropolis and Mental Life* in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* New York:Free Press, 1976.

'something coming', the lovers searching for 'a place for us, somewhere'. Each of these moments must stop, and many sharply and tragically: interrupted by news of death, of violence. The modern experience is an *objet petit a*²⁷: it is longed for, but never reached, despite the fact that it is always surrounding us. We cannot grasp with our fingers the modern experience, as it slips through the cracks. The utopian dreams of the early modernists are both fulfilled and destroyed in the metropolis. The first modernist dream dies in the First World War, and again in the Second. America seems to be the place to rescue modernity and modern art, as New York 'steals' it away from Europe and Paris during the War, as Guilbault would argue²⁸. Immigrants come to New York to find modernity there --washing machines ("America")-- but discover that no one really has it.

Rothko's paintings function the same way: we experience ecstasy in its colour, but are unable to find true 'content' other than (a perhaps sublime) nothingness. Only death awaits our lovers; tragedy and joy (Orr and tragicomedy) intermingle and are inseparable in the (neo-)modern. 'Reality' comes flooding in, just as in Bass and Dunn's opening title sequence when our abstracted screen, where we can project our internal responses to the music and pure colour, pulls out to be swallowed by a 'real' vision of the city.

The Experience of Montage/ A City Symphony

The craft of editing is extremely important in *West Side Story*, for a number of reasons: firstly, Robert Wise's experience as an editor; secondly, Jerome Robbins' fascination with the cinematic process and particularly with editing, which has been noted by Berson (Berson, 9) and Bernstein himself ("We were influenced by the movies -- there was a fluidity to the staging

²⁷ *Objet petit a* (object little a) is the unattainable object of desire in Lacanian thought

²⁸ Guilbault, Serge. How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

which had a cinematic quality ... No show has ever been staged [...] of conceived this way as a fluid piece which called on the poetic imagination...” (Simeone, 78), which the creators tried to replicate in the original stage version of *West Side Story* with a constantly moving set, innovative scene changes, and very few still moments; finally, the notion that some scholars have suggested, such as Barry Keith Grant, that *West Side Story* marks the beginning of the so-called “MTV” aesthetic of music video/film²⁹. This aesthetic --that of using editing to put together dance sequences-- is in contrast to most earlier musicals, in which the camera simply gazes at the dancers in a long shot and very little, if any, editing occurs. This pseudo-rapid editing of musical sequences and the narrative can be linked with the concept of montage, which in turn can be linked to the experience of modernity: that of rapidity, distraction, and connection. The links between montage and modernism are vast. There is in cinema, of course, the dialectical montage of Eisenstein and the Soviet filmmakers, but there is also the “kinetic linkage” of Léger in *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) (LeGrice, 38). In literature there is the prose of Dos Passos and other high modernists, where “[e]very word signifies a separate stage, a process that gives rise to a staccato of isolated snapshots of the feelings.” (Balazs, 34)

West Side Story uses this aesthetic strategy of rapid montage in the way it constructs its musical numbers. As noted above, Barry Keith Grant believes that *West Side Story* represents the beginning of a new kind of ‘MTV-style’ editing in musical film and media. We can connect this style of editing, with its rapidity and expressiveness, with the experience of modernity:

Rousseau’s *tourbillon social*. (Berman, 17) It seems particularly apt that *West Side Story* is also about New York City, and the violence and sensations the city gives birth to. In a certain light,

²⁹ Grant, Barry Keith. *The Hollywood Film Musical*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

we can view *West Side Story* as a neo-city symphony, recalling that genre from the 1920s in which the city and all of its glories are explored in cinematic form. There are, of course, some significant differences between *West Side Story* and the historical city symphony, which are usually panoramic documentaries that are organized as a single day, giving a cross-section of city life. Any stories are micro-ones rather than arching across the work as a whole, and the protagonist is always the city itself. Examples include *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927) and *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler/Paul Strand, 1921). Nevertheless in each case the city itself is seen as a particularly apt subject for the qualities of cinema.

West Side Story is introduced by an overhead sequence between the *Overture* and the *Prologue*: a series of images of the city taken from a helicopter, constantly moving and cutting. It is a new vision of New York and the metropolis, one that is shocking to our senses, just as the city symphony is. As Wise noted, he did not want to begin the film with a standard establishing shot of the New York skyline, but wanted a new way to see the city. His overhead vision of the streets of the metropolis is haunted by a feeling of falling out of the sky, the camera dangling from a helicopter. The city appears like canyons of modernist structures: the Empire State Building, the United Nations headquarters, endless blocks of apartment buildings. This is matched by the sounds we hear: the iconic distant whistle of the gangs, echoing; the subtle sounds of traffic and crowds far below us. The score then begins with a slow crescendo of horns as we move into the West Side, its brownstones repetitiously scattered below us. The camera then begins to zoom in to a playground as the crescendo of horns gives a chordal blast. We cut to the Jets snapping their fingers, gazing into the distance, and the *Prologue* begins. This next sequence features rapid editing and a jumping around of location: from alleys, to the streets,

from windows, to vacant lots full of rubble. It is Robbins and Wise's most complex use of editing to create space, and the Prologue sequence uses nearly every editing trick one can imagine: jump cuts, parallel cuts, shot/reverse shots, wipes and spins.

The experience of modernity is as much the experience of montage as it is anything else. As Benjamin notes, "technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyer belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film." (Benjamin, 328) In the song "Something's Coming", Tony sings: "Something's coming / I don't know what it is / But it is gonna be great / With a click / With a shock / Phone'll jingle / Door'll knock / Open the latch!" As much as he is singing about the possibilities that love could bring, he is also singing about the shock-like perception of modernity as well as its instantaneous effects, like the switching on of a light.

In his essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema", André Bazin describes the combination of montage editing and deep-focus photography as constituting a new style of realism in the cinema. "[D]epth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality", (Bazin, 35) and it also allows, unlike analytical montage, "at least a minimum of personal choice" as to what an audience member gazes at in a deep-focus shot. (Bazin, 36) The filmmakers can show us images in an order, but cannot dictate what we see specifically. We are free to look around the shot, from the foreground to the background, thanks to deep-focus photography. Bazin uses Welles as his director of choice, and there is a connection, of course, between Welles and Wise: Wise was the editor on Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and

The Magnificent Ambersons (1942), the second of which Wise was also credited as assistant director.

From here, we can talk about the tableaux-like features of *West Side Story*: why does it appear as such? Through the use of deep focus: remnants of Welles, the ultimate vernacular modernist. In one of our conversations, my advisor Paul Coates noted that the film will often use a tableaux-style shot to ‘freeze’ the flow of editing, calling it a kind of ‘spectacular punctuation’. This style of editing does a few things: first, it does work as a way to present the ‘spectacular’ in a way --long shot, deep focus-- that allows the audience to fully take in the visuals; but it also, in some examples, reveals the actors as pawns, overwhelmed by the background. (The image of a person’s overwhelming can be linked to the sublime, much like the way Kant and Burke conceive sublimity.)

Examples would be the long shots in “The Dance at the Gym” and “Maria”. Other examples would be the tableaux-like effect of some of the film's scenes in which characters are longing for something: they are framed, they are trapped, but they do not realize it. Perhaps they are like puppets, being manipulated for our entertainment. Tableau can be seen as a device that shocks time by freezing it. Wise's use of filters twice in the film isolate the lovers --when they first meet at the gym, and later when they sing the “Tonight” ballad-- and highlights self-reflexively the foolish, even artificial, love story, hinting at its purely fantastical/fairy tale-like nature. When the stars literally fall from the sky in the gym, marking them as Star-Cross'd Lovers, it is magical, it is uplifting, and it is completely over-the-top, artificial, cinematic. Their first meeting takes place on another plane that they are always subsequently trying to reach again (and sometimes, they do); but once again, it is fleeting, like everything in the modern world.

3. Tragedy, Ecstasy and Doom

“I am interested only in expressing basic human emotions -- tragedy, ecstasy, doom.”

This quote from Mark Rothko succinctly summarizes both what the Abstract Expressionists were aspiring to and it can be related back to Orr’s idea of the neo-modern cool apocalypse, with doom just around the corner during the Cold War. I would like to suggest that the creators of *West Side Story* were aspiring to the same thing. As Berson states, "[t]he musical's juxtaposition of violence and innocent romance, dreamy sexuality and hateful ethnic prejudice, is perhaps the greatest seduction of *West Side Story*. Love, death, and the whole damn thing--who can beat it?" (Berson, xii) Tragicomedy, escapism, transcendence, Romanticism, Expressionism and Realism, along with the Abstract Expressionist “[n]otions of ‘alienation’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘metaphysics of despair’”-- these are what make up *West Side Story*. (Pollock and After, 97)

Describing the Abstract Expressionists, Will Ghromann says that “[t]hey are painters without regard for the ready-made world. What they paint is real; it is the spectator himself who must have a certain amount of imagination in order to comprehend. Here, there is no comfort, but a struggle with the elements, with society, with fate. It is like the American novel; something happens, and what happens is disquieting and at the same time pregnant with the future.” [*Der Tagesspiegel*, Berlin, September 7, 1958; pg. 103 in Shapiro/Shapiro]

If we consider the historic specificity of 1961, especially of New York, we see a city established as world centre, with throngs of immigration, poverty, and gang warfare; we also see a world of the Cold War and the ever-present nuclear threat of the ‘cool apocalypse’. By the early 1960s, New York was changing from ‘hot’ to ‘cool’, much to the lamentation of the surviving

Abstract Expressionists. (Stevens/Swan, 421) Anfam describes the feelings of the Abstract Expressionists:

But in one primary matter they were all the century's children: a generation that came to maturity in the wake of a world war, followed by the Depression, the Spanish civil war, global conflict again, Holocaust and nuclear apocalypse. By Newman's reckoning they knew 'terror to expect. Hiroshima showed it to us. The terror has indeed become as real as life' (1945). A traumatic zeitgeist is discerned easily enough in Abstract Expressionism's daemonic figures and fractured forms, the sombre ritualistic atmosphere, unsparing surfaces, exacerbated drawing and more brutal aesthetic norm than the spiritual and sometimes utopian abstractions of predecessors like Mondrian, Malevich or even Kandinsky. These constitute what Gottlieb named in 1947 'the expression of the neurosis which is our reality'. (Anfam, 20)

West Side Story's creators shared some of these feelings, and in their quest to create a new musical form, they incorporated many of the dystopian and sombre elements that made up Abstract Expressionism. An early name for the Dance at the Gym music was "The Atom Bomb Mambo". (Leonard Bernstein: *West Side Story*, 34) As Robbins said: "love and positive and creative feelings cannot exist in a world surrounded by hostility and violence". (Monush, 40)

4. "There's a place for us": Transcendence, Transformation and Longing

A running motif of *West Side Story*, and one that will be further explored in this chapter, is that of longing and transcendence. Numbers such as "Something's Coming", "Tonight" and "Somewhere" speak of escape and hope for what is just around the corner. "Could be? Who knows? There's something due any day, I will know right away as soon as it shows," Tony sings in "Something's Coming". We can connect this idea of longing and transcendence with both colour and the Hollywood musical itself: the musical as a fantasy realm of escapism, and colour's associations with the fantastical and abstract. But, of course, there is the dialectical

element of the characters of *West Side Story* as being trapped, and the story ending in tragedy. As much as they are experiencing ecstasy in their moments of transcendence through song and dance, doom is just around the corner.

“I saw you and the world went away.”

The city, and by extension the neo-modern experience, is seen as partially suffocating, entrapping some of its poorer citizens within a crumbling urban landscape. This suffocation can be taken as the reality underlying, and giving the lie to, the modernist utopia; the neo-modern cinema, which I am attempting to situate *West Side Story* into, explicitly deconstructs this utopia, partly by viewing the city as a tense place where dreams are both striven for and falling apart. The city is indifferent as much as it is the site of passions.

It is here that *West Side Story* speaks most resonantly of (neo-)modernity, with this primary theme of longing, escape and imprisonment. Barry Keith Grant, in his recent book *The Hollywood Film Musical*, devotes half a chapter to analyzing *West Side Story*'s motif of entrapment, noting that many of the film's sequences are set within chain link fences, the prison-like iron bars of fire escapes, and graffitied brick walls that allow only a fleeting glimpse of the sky.³⁰ The romantic duet “Tonight” between Maria and Tony is a fascinating example of these tensions. The song itself speaks of transcendence and transformation: “Tonight, tonight, it all began tonight; I saw you and the world went away.” In describing “today” --i.e. his now past life-- Tony declares that “the world was just an address, a place for me to live in, no better than all right”; but now with their new found love, their inner experiences have transformed: “But here you are, and what was just the world is a star tonight.” Sondheim's lyrics are mythical and

³⁰ Grant, Barry Keith. *The Hollywood Film Musical*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

hopeful, longing for a new space that is not only outside of the city, but outside of the world altogether. The cruel irony of the *mise-en-scène* is that they are singing to each other on a fire escape, a grid of black iron that recalls the bars of a prison. Intended as a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*'s famous balcony scene, this choice of setting speaks volumes more than a simple 'updating'. It is not a balcony, but a fire *escape*, functional, uncomfortable, and not designed to be a place for gazing out at the world in comfort. There is no conventional beauty in this location: it is dark, wet alley enclosed by the facades of crowded brownstone apartments. Yet the swelling strings, the poetic lyrics, and the looks of bliss between Tony and Maria partially help to transform this space -- but the transformation is made complete by the use of a photographic filter that isolates Tony and Maria as they embrace and look beyond the camera in unison, blurring their surroundings out of focus and washing them out like an icy fog. They are not looking at the street down the alley, and we are never given the opportunity to see a reverse shot that could suggest an evening sky. They are not looking at the 'real world' at all, but gazing into an imaginary space off-screen; just as when we gaze at a Rothko painting, we find ourselves not necessarily focusing on the pigment staining the flat, textured canvas, but somehow *beyond* it and into a space 'behind' the canvas of colour and imagination through the removal of spatial markers. This functions in the same way as the loss of focus I've described as embodying the look of Tony and Maria. Perhaps most important is the final line of dialogue before the song proper begins, as Tony says "Oh, Maria, see only me", indicating how the lover is identified with the transcendent once spatiality has been fogged.

When Maria reaches out to Tony as he is leaving, she has a smile on her face, but we could easily interpret this shot as a prisoner reaching out towards a loved one as they depart.

And what to make of the fact that the primary image associated with *West Side Story* is that of a fire escape with two dancing figures on it? First, one should note its iconographic simplicity, a la Saul Bass's bold designs for past films such as *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956) or *Carmen Jones* (1954). Secondly, the prison again, with a gritty urban environment made up of the pre-fabricated and repetitious. Finally, the conflation of the entire film with its dancing: the figures on the poster, we assume, are Tony and Maria, yet they are the two characters who have the least amount of dancing, and never in such a way as to resemble the sprawling, arms-stretched choreography that Riff or Bernardo or Anita actually perform. But their passions are just as great as these three characters, and we can indeed imagine them performing these steps.

Somewhere

The haunting ballad "Somewhere" is the most obvious example from the film of characters speaking of transformation and transcendence. Tony sings "There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us. Peace and quiet and open air wait for us somewhere." Having just killed a man in the Rumble, Tony longs for a place where there is no violence to follow him; Maria responds with "There's a time for us, some day a time for us. Time together with time to spare, time to learn, time to care. Someday." Tony, with a new confidence, sings "Somewhere! We'll find a new way of living." Maria, recalling the violence that has just been shed in the Rumble, sings "We'll find a way of forgiving, somewhere." Together, in unison, they finish the song with "There's a place for us, a time and place for us. Hold my hand and we're halfway there, hold my hand and I'll take you there. Somehow. Someday. Somewhere." Dunne notes that "a Hollywood musical can create the kind of emotionally secure environment that a song in *West*

Side Story calls ‘A Place for Us’, a psychological opportunity to reorganize, recharge and ‘momentarily to forget’.” (Dunne, 3) But what is interesting is that Maria sings about ‘someday’, as if it were potentially distant and a long ways away -- it is something that she longs for, but secretly knows that is a near impossible place to find. Underneath the beautiful music, there is a melancholy in “Somewhere”. If they hold hands --if they confirm their love-- they’ll still only be “halfway there”. And sometimes, the last stretch is the most difficult.

Escape from an Ugly Island

New York is often held up as a ‘somewhere’ where the American dream lives, inviting denizens of the world to come live out their fantasies. But the song “America” is the closest that *West Side Story* gets to polemic, skewering this American dream: a song-and-dance-off between the Shark boys and girls, with the girls defending their new homeland and the boys sarcastically slicing through their praises. In a sense, the song is the bitter underside to “Somewhere”’s longing, where the place to which one longs to escape turns into a nightmarish locale. Puerto Rico, the Sharks’ homeland, is described as a place of overpopulation and natural disaster, while their new home, the mainland States, is a place of ethnic prejudice and a mere relocation of their poverty. MacKinnon describes: “the Sharks and their womenfolk sing and dance to ‘America’, a satirical hymn to escape from the ‘ugly island’ of Puerto Rico, on another rooftop. That location seems to represent the nearest thing to flight, as it were, away from unbearable realities.” (MacKinnon, 41) For MacKinnon, dance and song are an escape from ‘unbearable realities’, much like the musical form itself was/is an escapist experience for audiences. Where *West Side Story* obviously differs from most musicals, especially those made before 1961, is that it does not exist in an idealized world of no troubles or worries (*Gold Diggers of 1933*, especially

with its climactic number “Remember My Forgotten Man”, counter-examples). For the Sharks, they have immigrated from an apparent squalor, only to be faced with racism and continued poverty. The transcendent powers of song and dance, it seems, are only temporary for the Sharks, who must return to their tenements and to their underprivileged lives.

Multiple Diegesis

Jane Feuer in her seminal work “The Hollywood Musical” identifies the musical as having a similar heterogeneity of levels/narrative worlds that modernist film has, the kind identified by Peter Wollen in his essay “Counter Cinema: *Vent d’est*”³¹. In musicals, there exist multiple narrative worlds: fantasies within fantasies, numbers separated from narrative, “now spoken, now sung” (Feuer, 68). In late 1960s’ Godard, such as *Week End* (1968), “characters from different epochs and from fiction are interpolated into the main narrative ... instead of a single narrative world, there is an interlocking and interweaving plurality of worlds.” (Wollen, 11) Whereas in modernist film, multiple diegesis functions as a distancing technique to “call attention to the discrepancy between fiction and reality, or fiction and history”, in the Hollywood musical “heterogeneous levels are created so that they may be homogenized in the end through the union of the romantic couple.” (Feuer, 68) I would like to suggest that it is through this very denying of the ‘happily ever after’ ending for Tony and Maria that *West Side Story* breaks with Hollywood musical tradition and brings to attention this homogenizing tradition. The audience watches *West Side Story* knowing of the genre’s markings, and when they are denied one of the most fundamental of the genre’s tropes --the happy ending of the romantic couple-- it hits the

³¹ Wollen, Peter. “Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d’est*” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 499-507.

audience with devastating effect. The homogenizing tradition is thus brought to the forefront in a quasi-modernist, critical manner.

5. The Vernacular Sublime

The powers of cinema are such that it captures time on film; we can connect this to the capturing of dance on film, which is the capturing of movement onto a moving image. This differs from Newman paintings, which “draw the eye into the canvas, to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish between object and subject: the inside of the painting, the *ergon*, and the outside, the *parergon*, in which it occurs. For Newman, the effect of this warping of time and space is profoundly spiritual. As he writes in his influential essay ‘The Sublime is Now’ (1948), the intention is to ‘reassert ... man’s natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions (1990: 170-3).’ (Shaw, 121)

West Side Story can be said to embody elements of the sublime, especially through its use of tragedy and its location of New York. But does *West Side Story* signal an appropriation of the Abstract Expressionist sublime into a vernacular, capitalist “beautiful”, a defection to the aesthetic category traditionally conceived as the opposite of the sublime? Does it attempt to deal with the ‘terrible’ in a way that comforts and encloses it -- almost like making the *ergon* fit into a palatable *parergon*? The *parergon* here is the Hollywood style of continuity editing and narrative. Lyotard described the aesthetics of the beautiful as stressing the ‘unity of experience’ -- as does continuity editing. [Shaw, 123: taken from Lyotard 1984: 72] But *West Side Story* is interesting because it does not exclusively use traditional Hollywood editing styles: as mentioned earlier, the *Prologue* sequence uses jump cuts, swipes, spins and other editing techniques to create a jazzy

sense of drive and chaos. Throughout the rest of the film, spectacular punctuation ‘freezes’ the flow of editing.

Editing is apparently a shock to our system --and so in a sense, sublime-- yet continuity editing and the magic of Hollywood absorb us, as well. The difference between the two is that the Abstract Expressionist canvas is frozen in time, while the film strip never ceases in its movement. We must be dragged along with its current. So this dragging takes us away from, or dilutes, the shock to temporality that is central to the sublime.

Is this why the stills I have made of the film seem to have a more haunting, a more *sublime*, effect? Is this also why the moments of ‘spectacular punctuation’ seem to do the same? When one pauses the film or displays on a slideshow a still from the film, the cinematic canvas becomes frozen and reveals a hidden, almost painterly, still composition that demands to be taken in on its own. And when one juxtaposes images from the film with Abstract Expressionist paintings themselves, the similarities jump out and reveal themselves. This could be one of the reasons why the *Overture* sequence is so effective: it functions almost as a sequence of still images, allowing ourselves to become absorbed into the screen of colour.

Returning to the idea of ‘spectacular punctuation’, where the editing and pace is frozen momentarily, when we see a figure being dwarfed by the background, especially in these tableaux-like compositions, we near a vernacular sublime: Tony being crushed by the glowing repetitious windows, the dancers in the gym reduced to flailing pawns. These are haunting moments in the pacing of *West Side Story*, and perhaps help add to its mythical qualities.

Conclusion

West Side Story's relation with modernism is a strong one, as I have shown in the previous chapters. Rothko offers a "recipe for a work of art -- its ingredients -- how to make it -- the formula" in a November 1958 address to the Pratt Institute. (Borchardt-Hume, 91) This checklist that he provides offers a basis for a summing up of the Abstract Expressionism-*West Side Story* comparison that emphasizes succinctly the degree of its fit with the requirements of one of the key Abstract Expressionists. Following is a brief description of the history post-*West Side Story*, in a section entitled "The Musical Darkens". Such a darkening is an often-remarked feature of the modern art incorporated into the film, as well as the history of the American musical in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Recipe for a Work of Art

1. "There must be a clear preoccupation with death -- intimations of mortality ... Tragic art, romantic art, etc. deals with the knowledge of death.
2. Sensuality. Our basis of being concrete about the world. It is a lustful relationship to things that exist.
3. Tension. Either conflict or curbed desire.
4. Irony. This is a modern ingredient -- the self-effacement and examination by which a man for an instant can go on to something else.
5. Wit and Play ... for the human element.
6. The ephemeral and chance ... for the human element.
7. Hope. 10% to make the tragic concept more endurable." (Borchardt-Hume, 91)

It seems that *West Side Story* is a vernacular rendition of this criteria. To begin: the "preoccupation with death ... [and] mortality" is obvious in the tragic tale of Tony and Maria. The Jets and Sharks violently confront one another in a display of racial violence in post-War New York City. Juvenile delinquency is on full display as they rumble through the hardtop playgrounds of the West Side, spitting insults and exchanging fists.

Sensuality: The sensuousness of the dance, the jazzy, exotic and modernist melodies, the rubbles of red that dominate the mise-en-scène: *West Side Story* is above all a sensuous experience. The film's use of colour was described in Chapter Two, particularly pointing out colour's slippery semiotics and the film's 'rubbles of red'. Sensuality can of course also be seen in the film's themes of passion and love.

Tension: between the Sharks and Jets, a conflict that results in the tragic deaths of three young men. This tension is the driving point of *West Side Story*'s narrative, and is alleviated by the love story between Tony and Maria -- but even their tender moments together are marred by the tensions surrounding them. When they sing "Tonight", her father interrupts them, a man who "is afraid, like Bernardo", and perhaps with good reason, of the white hegemony in America. When Tony and Maria meet in the bridal shop, they are confronted by Anita, who warns them that they cannot escape scrutiny. Their final moment alone together is in Maria's bedroom, directly after the "Rumble", with Tony having Bernardo's blood on his hands. All of their moments together are marked by the tensions that surround them: every moment of love in *West Side Story* is followed by, or in conjunction with, tragedy.

Aesthetically, the film depicts a tension between realism and expressionism, balancing neo-realist tendencies with that of the Abstract Expressionists. The Prologue may have been filmed on location in the crumbling West Side tenements of New York, but the rest of the film was shot on stage in Hollywood. The set decorators may have sought realism in their reproductions of these tenements, but then they painted walls bright violet or red, or feature multi-coloured window panes. Robbins may have fostered a Method-like realism with his actors,

but then he also insisted that they dance and sing, quite unrealistically. It seems that for every realist move, there is an equally expressive or expressionistic element overlaid on top.

Irony: It is this element that *West Side Story* perhaps has the least; but as described previously, the musical itself is an ironic form, placing audiences in a distanced state from the song and dance numbers as they parade across the screen. For moments of self-reflexivity there are the use of filters, which self-consciously reveal the cinematic canvas as made up of light and colour. When the screen turns a bright cardinal red before the Rumble, it appears flat like a monochromatic canvas, much like the ever-changing colours of the Overture.

Wit and Play: For the human element, *West Side Story* is infused with the tragicomic. The comedic songs “Gee, Officer Krupke” and “America” are witty diatribes against the injustices the Jets and Sharks face, while “I Feel Pretty”, the other comedic song in the film, is also a witty ode to the overwhelming feelings of passionate love. The “Prologue” sequence’s visual wit and play is extensive, complete with a dizzying array of editing tricks and techniques.

The Ephemeral and Chance: The dancing has been practiced over and over again, but the cinematic canvas still captures individual idiosyncrasies. Jerome Robbins in all his perfectionism may have been striving to reduce these elements as much as possible, but these idiosyncrasies still find their way to the forefront.

And finally, Hope. *West Side Story* notably changes the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* such that it is still tragic --Tony is dead-- but that Maria chooses to live on. She does not give up hope, and the Jets and Sharks have uncertain futures, but it seems that they will not take the deaths of their leaders as a means for violence and vengeance, but for a new understanding between each other, as both Jets and Sharks carry the corpse of Tony out of the fatal playground. This element

of hope is what prevents *West Side Story* from being a severe, grim experience, but instead a heartbreaking one.

The Musical Darkens

West Side Story represents a wider shift in the Hollywood musical in the 1960s, that of the epic musical. These musicals, as previously described, are 2+ hour long spectacles that also function as dramas: hence a 'dark' element is almost always present in these films. This ranges from the overt --*The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (Robert Stevenson, 1971) are both about Nazi invasions, while *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964) is concerned with poverty and class-- to the subtle: *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964) comes to save the children from indifferent parents.

West Side Story seems to be the watershed moment in the development of the Hollywood musical, allowing the mode to begin to embrace dramatic or tragic elements along with the romance and comedy. Each of the musicals already mentioned, plus many additional ones -- *Oliver!* (Carol Reed, 1968), *Finian's Rainbow* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1968)-- freely mix tragedy with their comedy. By the time we reach the musicals of the 1970s, the process is complete and we begin to see the rise of the dark 'anti-musical' of Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972) and *All that Jazz* (1979). These dark musicals coincide with the New Hollywood movement of young, cynical directors reworking genres, of which the musical was no exception. The musical would get the darkest perhaps with Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977), of which the description 'spousal abuse: the musical' seems strangely appropriate. A few years later the dawn of the 1980s would see the dour *Pennies From Heaven* (Herbert Ross, 1981) and the disastrous

One from the Heart (Francis Ford Coppola, 1982), one of the key films signalling the end of the New Hollywood movement.³²

This history of the Hollywood musical over the course of twenty years looks to be a promising project, and is one that I hope to explore in a doctorate. Questions that I would seek to answer include: why the need for the ‘dark’ elements in these musicals? What are these dark musicals reflecting in the sociopolitical realm, and how? What are the key films that represent this trend? What is the connection between these musicals and trends in the world of modern art? How does the relationship between realism and expressionism, seen so forcefully throughout *West Side Story*, play out in other musicals from this period?

Conclusion

West Side Story is a vernacular rendition of neo-modern tendencies not normally seen in popular art, or reserved for the plateau of so-called ‘high art’. The incorporating of Abstract Expressionist tropes marks the musical, seen throughout the mise-en-scène and in *West Side Story*’s narrative and themes. The film’s mise-en-scène can be seen as analogous to a cinematic canvas, complete with the expressive use of colour and form. The use of filters throughout, for example, creates a self-reflexive, painterly effect, and large expressive swaths of bright colour are seen throughout the film, quite similar in appearance to the canvases of artists such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. We can thus say that *West Side Story* is in the tradition of modernist musicals with its incorporation of modern art trends and its self-reflexive nature, and can perhaps be seen as the critical height of the Hollywood studio musical.

³² *Heaven’s Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) and is often paired with *One from the Heart* as marking the collapse of the movement, as both were critical and financial disasters, making back only a few percentage of their production costs in box office.

The 50th anniversary of *West Side Story* in 2011 saw the release of a high-definition Blu Ray set, complete with booklet outlining the film's history and its creators' biographies³³. The physical set is bright red, with white and black text throughout: a continuation of the film's primary colour scheme. Also included are cards of international film posters of the original *West Side Story* release in 1961, nearly all of which feature a modernist approach to their designs. This emphasis on design shows that even 50 years later, *West Side Story* has a particular iconographic schema that is both instantly recognizable and loaded with expressive potential.

“For Greenberg, the art of his time and his civilization could only be a city art, and art of urban experience.” (Guilbault, 161) *West Side Story* most certainly is an urban art experience, an ode to New York City, the metropolis and their particular brand of modernity.

In the final chapter, we explored *West Side Story*'s themes of transcendence, longing, and escape. The film, through its use of 'spectacular punctuation', Abstract Expressionist elements and tragicomedy, nears (or even reaches) a vernacular form of the sublime. We also explored John Orr's concept of the neo-modern and its associated meanings, including that of the cool apocalypse. *West Side Story* is, once again, a vernacular rendition of the same concerns and feelings the neo-moderns had during the Cold War.

The modernists sought to make everything new again, and in so doing, they re-invented myths and used their terminology. The Abstract Expressionists' use of myth in their paintings, harkening back to universal values, fears and grand emotions, is seen throughout the neo-moderns. *West Side Story* taps into this myth-making with its contemporary rendition of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and is thus about the basic human values of love, death, conflict

³³ When watching this release, one notices that the Overture Sequence's colours are unlike other versions; this resulted in a recall by the production company, and it was this that tipped me off of other differing versions of the sequence.

and hope for the future: of tragedy, ecstasy, and doom. “The myth is dead. Long live the myth.” (Orr, 180)

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Curriculum Vitae

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Research Grants and Awards

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