

# Keeping time: Song and dance as phenomenological experiences of historicity in the film musical

Tomer Nechushtan, Tel Aviv University, Israel.

***Abstract:** This article examines the ways in which film musicals recreate the experience of living in history through their song and dance sequences. These sequences offer their audience a collective complex phenomenological experience through cinematic presence, excess and repetition. Using Bergson's idea of multiplicity in duration, this article demonstrates how these musical numbers invite us as an audience to a historicity in which time is shared with others without erasing historical conflicts and tensions. This allows us to both identify with historical communities and also question official histories and to seek out additional alternative bodily histories through its non-narrative elements.*

*Keywords:* Dance, Experience, Film, History, Musical, Phenomenology

Song and dance are common in films that take place in both the distant and recent past. From recent international festival films such as *Cold War* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2018) and *Jeannette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc* (Bruno Dumont, 2017), to classical Hollywood films such as *Meet Me in St Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944) and *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen & Gene Kelly, 1952), and throughout most of the twentieth century in films such as *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), or *Absolute Beginners* (Julien Temple, 1986), the musical film and the historical or period film tend to coincide with each other quite often.

Despite the prevalence of this combination, or perhaps because of it, the two interlinked genres — musical and period films — have each been studied to the exclusion of the other. In studies occupied with defining the Musical genre, the historical backgrounds are considered merely a ‘removal of the whole film in time and space [...] to places, that is, where it can be believed (by white urban Americans) that song and dance are “in the air”’ (Dyer 2005, 30). Studies that focus on the portrayal of history in film do not mention musical films, although

many of their conclusions apply to the historical musical film. As Robert Rosenstone demonstrates, historical fiction film's shortcomings are often the same as those of any written historiography, both tending to overly emphasise the narrative nature of history (Rosenstone 2006). According to these studies, the medium of film can compensate for its drawbacks by turning facts into memorable and emotionally charged moments. It may also offer us new ways of thinking about our histories.

In addition to the advantages mentioned above, musical films have specific elements that allow them to provide viewers not only with information regarding their historical context, but also a sense of historicity. The term *historicity* has been used with various meanings and interpretations in philosophy, film theory and other disciplines. This study relies heavily on the definition provided by phenomenologist David Carr, who defines historicity as the experience of living in historical time, asking what is it like to exist historically (Carr 2014, 47)? This definition helps us comprehend historicity as consisting of the different ways in which the personal and the public, text and body, past, present and future influence each other constantly as an experience.<sup>1</sup>

This experience of historicity is based on a constant contradiction. On the one hand, we perceive the world first and foremost through our own body and mind in a way that is more immediately accessible and powerful than any other person's subjective experience. On the other hand, meaning itself is created through shared experience and communication (Nancy 2000), and this sense of historicity requires sharing with others a sense of a common goal, which is often built on shared memories of the past (Carr 2014, 51-55). The historical musical offers viewers this complex collective experience that makes historicity possible, through its main generic feature: the song and dance number.

My aim here is not to propose a definition of the historical-musical genre, but rather to bring to light the aspects of musical film that express historicity itself. The films mentioned in this study belong to a variety of styles and time periods, both musically and cinematically. Many of them originated in successful stage productions.<sup>2</sup> These are intended to demonstrate the various possibilities of historical representation and experience in film, while simultaneously highlighting what it is these films have in common with each other. Previous

<sup>1</sup> Some definitions focus on the individual nature of subjective experience, rather than the shared, often narrative character of history (Heidegger 2010 [1927], 355-66), while others focus more on 'relations between the mode of historiography and the types of construction of history related by it' (Rosen 2001, xi).

<sup>2</sup> Not only are many musical films adapted from the stage, but these stage musicals are also often themselves based on literary historical and historical fiction sources (such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*, *Les Misérables* etc). This abundance of sources contributes to what will later be discussed as the excess of information experienced by audiences while viewing the film.

studies have described and analysed experiences and representations of historicity in film musicals which are not necessarily aiming at fictional historical representation (Dyer 2005; Herzog 2010). Inquiring about the particular qualities of the musical number in historical fiction musicals, this study hopes to find a frame of thinking about the combination of music and history in film which may then be considered in the analysis of any film musical occupied with history.

To do so, I rely on phenomenological texts and methods, inquiring into the experiences of both film and history. The following pages will elaborate on historicity as an embodied experience that is heavily connected to our sense of time and place, as well as our sense of identity and community. These elements are demonstrated and used in the film musical in a way which does not cover up the complexities of the past, but rather deepens the way in which it is perceived.

Through the analysis of sound, repetition, rhythm and movement, I show how the audience is being invited to an a-linear experience of time in which memories, expectations and the present all mix. Instead of defining this mix as a utopia in which all conflicts are temporarily resolved through music, the musical number can challenge pre-existing histories while emphasising the possibility of sharing with others our sense of existing in time.

### Historicity as experience

To do this, we must first begin to define what exactly historicity is and clarify how it is given to our perception. I would like to do so through the study of phenomenology, searching for the way in which the world is experienced by our consciousness. Rooted in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, phenomenological methods see our experience of the world as what may be understood of the world, and take into account our perception being grounded in a human body, placed in a certain time and space. Using the term *intentionality*, phenomenologists note how our consciousness is always *of* something — an object or an event, real or imagined. We think, remember, view and listen *to something*. The way we perceive this thing changes based on the relations between us and that which is being experienced.

The concept of intentionality assists us in describing, among other things, our relationship with time. How does our mind think, remember and imagine the past and the future, while constantly processing the sensory information of the living present? Husserl describes how we experience time as continuous, constantly moving from a remembered past in the direction of the future. In order to demonstrate this idea, Husserl gives the example of listening to music: we do not hear every note separately, but rather as a sequence that includes the sounds we have heard, and the expectation of more sounds to follow. Our very

perception of time is connected to the way we listen to music (Husserl 2012, 60-76).

David Carr's *Experience and History* (2014), which is dedicated entirely to the experience of historicity from a phenomenological perspective, defines historicity as the way in which we encounter the historical in our lives and the structures of consciousness and perception through which this encounter occurs. Carr assumes that our consciousness tends to perceive occurrences as narrative events with culturally specific inclinations. Those involved in the making of history act based on a narrative perception of reality. This claim gives new meaning to historiography, as a form capable of reflecting history in structures similar to the narrative nature of human intentionality (Carr 2014, 112-14). It is useful, in our case, to expand upon this claim and question whether our perception of shared history may be reflected also in the form of song and dance. The composition and writing of many a historical musical reflects primarily the popular music of its own time and is prone to anachronism and nostalgia, perhaps even expressing a certain zeitgeist, as demonstrated in Vera Dika's study of films produced in the 1970s which represent America in the 1950s (Dika 2003, 122-42). These will be discussed later, but this study first seeks the possibility of historicity within any musical composition or dance style. It is music and dance movement as cinematic phenomena which will first be examined for these experiences of shared historical time.

But is it even possible to speak of a shared experience, of time or otherwise? Phenomenologists have often occupied themselves with the question of intersubjectivity. Husserl claimed that our most basic experience of others is shaped by our desire (and inability) to perceive what they are perceiving. This frustrating experience is what makes them Other and not a part of our personal subjectivity. Heidegger argued that what constitutes our experience of social life is our perception of others as having a subjectivity like our own. This perception enables communication, and all other social and cultural activities (Zahavi 2001, 153-55).

In the experience of historicity, we are not only required to perceive others as having a similar subjectivity, but also a shared intentionality. We are not only existing in time with a past and future of our own, but in a common subjective perception of historical time. Carr notes that historicity is an experience possible only through the common intentionality of a community. This community does not have specific requirements or a formal definition. It only requires its participants to feel a part of a common subjectivity. This community he refers to as a 'We-subject', the very existence of the pronoun 'we' expressing the basic perception of a common intentionality (Carr 2014, 52). This 'we' may be a family, a gender, a social class, a nation, or a common profession. The we-subject can apply to different communities in the same temporal moment. For this reason, the experience of historicity as a collective experience does not have to be a

totalising, identical experience for all its participants. The contradiction between one's various collective identities creates a more complicated experience of historicity, often characterized by fragmentation or excess of meaning.

Henri Bergson uses the philosophical idea of *durée* as a sequence or moment in time in which our consciousness is aware of various qualities or activities, creating together an experience perceived as a whole. The different states of consciousness that influence and change each other constantly, according to Bergson, are what makes our perceptions of the world as rich and complex as they are. Bergson demonstrates *durée* using the experiences of music and movement which are perceived as complete works, but are made up of various qualities (instruments, sections, body parts) that influence one another (Bergson 1983, 70-71). Although Bergson himself claimed that this experience does not apply to film, several scholars (Deleuze 1986; Rodowick 1997; Olkowski 2014, 71-80) have shown that this multiplicity does in fact pertain to every film, as they are based on the elements of movement and sound.

The film musical offers us cinema in which movement and sound, the very exemplars of multiplicity, provide the viewer with the basic sensory experience required for a sense of a complex collective subject: the experience of a 'we' that contains various and contradicting qualities, and historical multiplicity that is not necessarily settled within a utopia. The following sections show the specific ways in which the complex collective historicity manifests in scenes of singing and dancing in the historical musical film.

### Multiplicity in song

The act of listening, in the writing of Jean-Luc Nancy, emphasises the presence of the body which is surrounded by music or sound. This presence is, according to Nancy, what constitutes our subjectivity. Listening requires the body to encounter, in time, the reverberations of sound traveling in a specific space. The space is defined by the movement of sound through it, and so is the listening subject. In listening, the subject that perceives sound becomes a 'self'. The physical echoing of sound establishes the listening body as a self that does not have a unified subject but rather exists as a state, an occurrence, a fleeting feeling or tension. This self is temporal in its nature but is manifested through the entire body as a space for the sound waves to reverberate within (Nancy 2007, 17-19).

In these descriptions, Nancy sees the echo as a self, facing another. One creates the sound and the other listens. Both are called 'self' and both are united by the time and space of listening. The moment in which listening happens may create a subject that is made up of many listeners becoming a space for the reverberation of sound, becoming a self that exists as a momentary tension. In this

tension, the individual subjectivity and the collective one overflow, create an excess subjectivity.

The historical musical has its own way of demonstrating this excess subjectivity, through the melody of its songs. Joseph P Swain analyses the repetition of melodies in historical musicals. As opposed to a regular reprise — in which a melody may repeat later in the film in order to add relevance and context to its earlier content — in operas and musicals a melody can return as a *contrafactum*, in which it receives entirely different lyrical content and mood (Swain 2002, 322). Swain gives several examples of this in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973), a musical based on a rock opera about the last week in the life of Jesus Christ. In these examples from the musical, Swain demonstrates how the followers of Jesus first worship him and then ridicule and curse him with the same melody. In this way, the melody becomes an experience that is not centred around a single meaning but is open to a multiplicity of qualities and meanings which influence each other in sound. As listeners, we become aware of this repetition and begin to hear the melody as having its own layers of history, folded into the moment it meets our bodies in time.

Another version of this idea can be found in the historical musical *Les Misérables* (Tom Hooper, 2012), a film about social conflict and revolution in early nineteenth-century France. The film presents several important characters who all come from different social backgrounds and represent many conflicting political positions. Over the course of the musical, the different characters trade melodies so that each song echoes previous ones and contrasts every situation with other perspectives. This type of composition is hardly unique to the historical musical, but what must be noted is the way these musicals employ the excess of subjectivity thereby produced. The musical film may offer a more complex representation and experience of its historical subject using these types of composition. Sharing the melody, we recall the different characters and situations that infuse the moment of listening and become a complex collective singing subject. Swain's study is of the composition for the stage musical, but its conclusions apply equally for both stage and cinematic productions. This experience is not unique to the film musical but is found in the historical musical on stage as well. Film, and film editing, can elaborate and emphasise the experience that this form of composition enables.

For example, in *Les Misérables*, many songs consist of several characters each singing their own song at once. Each character has their own lyrics and their own melody which influences the other and becomes a part of a single moment of listening. Such overlapping singing requires the listener to change their own intentionality while listening to the song. In a stage production one may decide as a viewer to focus only on understanding one character's singing, but the film's constant change of singing faces challenges this intentionality. In any attempt to stay concentrated on one character in this sequence, one must

concentrate on listening rather than seeing. It is possible that the film challenges this intent further, through the mixing of sound, which may prioritise one singing character over another. A different intentionality may have the viewer decide to let the layers of text and melody consolidate into one, the various texts disrupting each other's meanings in order to convey an experience of historicity as a collective temporality. As part of a we-subject, the individual text may become disrupted.

The film musical tends to fortify this experience through its medium. In *Les Misérables*, the editing and cinematography aligns with the musical experience so that no one character is preferred, and the characters are not placed before each other within a single physical space (as must happen in the stage musical). We see in these songs a sequence of close-ups, with the character in the centre of the frame, regardless of their narrative roles or where they stand in diegetic space. These sequences of faces unite the layers of narrative content into a collective temporal singing subject which shares two important aspects: having a face, and existing together in the historical moment. In such examples we see how a shared temporality is crucial for the experience of historicity, while the necessity of a shared space may be negotiated by the medium.

Layers of meaning are embedded into the musical experience totally, through the use of sound which is perceived from every angle and direction in space, as opposed to visual images and texts which we must turn and face in order to see (Ihde 2007, 51-55). The space belongs to sound (or its possibility), as its listener is already inside the space through which sound moves and does not need to tune in or place themselves as a centre in order to perceive sound. This is what allows sound to approach us from different channels and directions and yet be united in our perception of the musical moment. This basic experience places the listener inside sound, and not in front of it, as in the case of the image. Not limited only to the characters who are part of the collective singing subject, the listening audience is given a position of participation in musical time, instead of inspection from outside.

The historical musical almost always contains scenes of harmonious shared singing. These moments represent the we-subject as an experience of historicity. In these scenes the singing crowd not only functions as a background for the film's protagonists but is presented as a collective with a shared past and future which the protagonists may belong to, oppose, or both. While this applies for any kind of musical, we often see how these numbers are utilized in the historical musical, emphasizing the moment in which important historical moments unite the characters into a shared, synchronized time. Songs like 'Seize the Day' and 'The World Will Know' from the film *Newsies* (Kenny Ortega, 1992) represent singing as the moment the boys unite and unionise in a film about the 1899 Newsboys' Strike in New York City. Many of the songs in the film *Oh! What a Lovely War* (Richard Attenborough, 1969), a musical that represents the

First World War using songs which were popular at the time, show us soldiers singing together as part of the shared experience of fighting a war. Similar collective experiences are presented in the song 'It's the Hard Knock Life' from *Annie* (John Huston, 1982), which is set during the Great Depression, or 'We Go Together' from *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1982), a period film about American culture in the 1950s. These songs tend to repeat words such as 'we' or 'us'.

In many musical numbers, songs create sub-communities within the temporal collective. The film *Fiddler on the Roof* (Norman Jewison, 1971), also based on a stage musical, tells the story of a rural Jewish community living in Tsarist Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The opening number 'Tradition' shows the community as divided into smaller communities based on age and gender. In musical numbers such as 'Summer Nights' from *Grease*, white American teens are clearly divided into smaller collectives based on gender. As previously mentioned, the singing collective in the historical musical does not have to represent a community to which the protagonist belongs, according to the narrative. In songs like 'Ted Ain't Ded' from *Absolute Beginners* (Julien Temple, 1986), a film about 1950s race riots in London, or 'Ascot Gavotte' from *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), which takes place in London at the turn of the twentieth century, we see racist youth or a social elite, respectively, that may be opposed to the film's protagonist from a narrative point of view, yet share with the protagonist a common temporality. The simultaneous occurrence of sound is crucial here for the creation of collective subjects that are made up of multiple bodies, identities and conflicting histories.

These songs demonstrate the way the collective experience of historicity does not require affect or even emotional identification with others in order to belong to a common subject; only simultaneous existence in time and a conscious awareness of this shared temporality. All films reflect the time they were filmed in, so viewers throughout the movie are constantly aware of this filming time, the represented period and their own existence in time. This possibly disturbing multiplicity is synchronized into a complex temporal experience while listening to these songs as an audience. In these moments we can experience historicity, surrounded by the music, as it gathers both listening and singing bodies into a shared experience of existing in time.

### Multiplicity in movement

In dancing, the experience of the we-subject becomes even more palpable for the viewer. This is achieved in several ways. The first, and simplest, of these ways is the feeling created by the synchronised dancing of a large ensemble. Most of the film *Newsies* is based on sequences of dozens of dancing boys, representing the participants of the Newsboys' Strike of 1899. We can understand the synchronised dancing not only as complete synchronisation with the community, but also as synchronised with the rhythm of their historical time and

place. In the film's very first shots, before we are even introduced to the protagonists, we are shown large industrial printing presses creating newspapers. The visual image of industrial machinery is not only a conceptual icon of the time, but its sound and movement echo the synchronised dancing of the striking boys. Several studies have noted that the dance of the Hollywood musical is characterised by the qualities of industry (McCarren 2003). In such an example, it is easy to point out how the common past and future align with the synchronised dance and the way its rhythm is experienced by a listener. The intentionality of viewing such a performance requires not a perception of every individual movement, but of the momentary whole. The mechanics of dance unite the boys together as a physical we-subject, inseparable from the industry that has historically constituted it.

How is such a we-subject, demonstrating the experience of historicity, created in cases of dancing that is a-synchronic, where the dancers are not necessarily united by a common narrative goal? The collective subjectivity is then formed through an embodied viewing of dance that is based on rhythm and the presence of the dancing body. It has been suggested that the dancing itself begins not in the body of the dancer, but in the listening body (Ihde 2007, 156). Both Ihde and Nancy describe the way in which music is experienced by the entire body and tends to make us aware of its presence. Ihde goes on to compare the act of listening as a kind of dance, with the body following and reacting to the sound, even if in small invisible ways. This participation is sometimes seen in actively moving one's lips, tapping fingers, or just following the tune in one's mind. All the bodies which music encounters in space move, each in their own way, simultaneously with the sounds. This helps us understand how the perception of rhythm is not only an understanding between the ear and the mind, but an entire bodily experience which operates on our most basic abilities and is capable of uniting us in a sort of synchronized inner dance.

Dancing in a film not only expresses the characters' willingness to dance, but also carries out the viewers' silent (or not so silent) dancing. In an article from 2010, viewers of different genres of dance were interviewed in order to discern a common experience by looking for similar phenomenological descriptions (Reason and Reynolds 2010). The interviewees included dancers, dance aficionados, and people who had never seen a dance performance in their lives. In these interviews, they described a wide range of ways in which they related to the bodies of the dancers, whether by comparisons such as 'can my body do this?' or descriptions of feeling as if they were actually dancing alongside the performers. The researchers confirm a similarity between these responses and those viewing experiences that 1930s dance critic John Martin termed as 'inner mimicry' and 'contagion'. This inner dance echoes Ihde's description of listening. This special identification in viewing invites the viewer to feel as if they are an active part of the dance. An identification with the dancer in the moment

of movement is formed, enabling a feeling similar to the shared subjectivity of synchronised dance.

As a result of the many ways bodies can identify with movement, in the act of viewing dance, viewers are often invited to relate and identify with the embodied collective histories of the dancing characters. In many a musical scene, we are confronted by dancing characters who lack neither virtuosity nor grace but are intended to represent the movement of bodies in a certain state, time and place. The subjectivity of the characters is conveyed to us by the qualities of these movements. In ‘Perceiving subjectivity in bodily movement: The case of dancers’, an analysis of interviews is conducted, examining the ways dancers described their perception of their bodies while dancing. This study by Dorothee Legrand and Susanne Ravn uses relatively recent phenomenological studies regarding intersubjectivity, and finds that we often perceive dance, and bodily gestures, as proof of others’ subjectivity (Legrand and Ravn 2009, 389-408). When we see others performing movement, it reminds us of the way we use these movements to express our feelings and thoughts. The movement of others allows us not only to understand what others are feeling, but to relate to their ability to feel.

The act of identification occurs from within the lived body, and allows us to simultaneously become aware of our inhabiting a specific lived body with a need to share its own subjective experience, and to recognise through the similarity of gesture and movement an expression of the Other’s subjectivity. This ability not only influences our relationships with others, but also the way we understand and use our own bodies in order to express our inner thoughts and feelings — knowing that they may be recognised and understood as such from without. During the dance itself, dancers describe a tendency to view themselves as if from the audience’s perspective. The case is not a mutual recognition of subjectivity so much as an accumulation of sensory information. A similar, almost parallel process is happening for the audience, who simultaneously feel their own seated bodies as their senses are also hyper-attuned to the movements of the performing bodies, following each movement closely.

If we are able to relate to others while dancing, is that enough to create a we-subject? Can following the filmed movement really offer us a possibility of a shared goal or intentionality? And even if so, are these enough to be considered an experience of historicity? I would like to examine these questions — on the musical film’s potential to create or even represent such experiences — through an interpretation of the dance as a text that demonstrates historically structured bodies and movements in the dance sequence of the song ‘To Life’ from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

This sequence takes place in a worn-down local pub, as the characters are celebrating the engagement between one local man and the main character’s eldest daughter. This pub is full of men only, and at first it seems only Jewish

men at that. Suddenly, the revellers become aware of a group of local Ukrainian men who wish to join them in song and dance. The dancers in this scene are clearly divided into two embodied historical identities. The sequence begins with the dancing of the Jewish men, who are blatantly presented as unrefined, not even attempting to co-ordinate their movements with anything but the general rhythm of the song. These men dance with their backs tilted forward or back, eyes closed, and hands raised, presenting either the influence of drink, or a spiritual inclination, or both. They circle each other spontaneously, creating an additional rhythm using their hands and feet, which is not entirely synchronised with the musical number itself. The merry-makers beckon the other group of men to join the dance, and they do so, but in an entirely different form. This dance, the Ukrainian dance, is characterised by perfect group synchronisation, high physical fitness and the precise timing of sharp rhythms made via clapping and stomping. The contrasting dance styles represent the way histories are able to mould bodies and movements, as the narrative earlier establishes that the Jewish men are historically denied the ability to defend themselves, and are culturally encouraged to study and remain indoors in their spare time, as opposed to their Ukrainian neighbours.

The Jewish men appear in awe, some positively terrified. These responses are represented both through the men backing away and through a similar backing away movement of the camera. The *mise-en-scène* has the Jewish men literally framed by the new dancers. We then go through a few long minutes of music-less shot-reverse-shot in which the members of both groups are staring at each other, with only the sound of amplified heavy breathing. The characters' long inquiring looks back and forth echo the responses of the interviewed dance performance audiences, who claimed that they often respond to dance by comparing and contrasting their bodies and dancing abilities with those of the dancer they are watching (Reason and Reynolds 2010, 60-62). The gaze in both cases is similarly focused. As the men in the sequence begin dancing with each other, it is made clear that each group retains its former style of dance. The local villagers continue dancing with their hands held perfectly straight, parallel to the ground, while the Jewish men hold their arms close to their bodies, in no particular shape. The Jews dance shoulder to shoulder in small steps as the other men run and leap through the gaps the Jewish bodies create.

The movements of Jews and Ukrainians are woven into a single complex choreography that nevertheless maintains the integrity of each of those specific embodied experiences. This offers the audience the option of concentrating alternately on either group, particular dancers or the full dancing collective we-subject in time. Near the end of the sequence the camera participates actively in the choreography as it takes up the main character's point of view. First, it pans the dancers in a full circle, then speeding up faster than the dancers so that their personal, and collective, attributes become blurred entirely. The dancers become

a unified blur, embodying pure movement and dizziness. Such moments supposedly reflect Richard Dyer's idea of utopia as the overcoming of conflict through dance and song. Yet, this dizziness is not utopian, for it does not present the world as momentarily understandable and resolved, but rather as an experience of total anarchy. The lack of control over the speeding movement is experienced as a giddy weightlessness practically begging to be set back into the experience of singing and dancing historicity. This dizzy climax of the dance exposes how the dance may present us with the experience of collective historicity as an experience of personal bodies, moving in particular ways which reflect their time, place and past, and which cannot be truly united by the musical number itself because of the concreteness of their conflicting collective subjectivities. The dance sheds lights on the conflict between these bodies, presenting the simultaneous movement as a historicity in which violence may be delayed, but the conflict cannot be resolved.

The dance involves the dancers, viewers and time itself. The viewer, characters and different we-subjects express both a common temporal experience and its different historical points of view through their movement in the dance. Historicity is embodied in both the collectivity of the dancing moment, and in the complexity of the movement's different physical and historical identities.

### Presence in sound and movement

At this stage I would like to propose an analogy, taken from the field of the philosophy of history. Eelco Runia has investigated the 'thirst', both social and academic, for meaning in the field of history, meaning which he believes is no longer available to us due to the politically and theoretically problematic nature of forming definitive historical narratives, processes and conclusions. Runia claims that the study of history has turned to discussions of trauma in order to grasp for meaning in our understanding of the past (Runia 2006). He suggests another option for contending with the lack of meaning, which he terms *presence*. The presence of an object or site from the past allows us to grasp our existence as both the continuation of our past and its complete Other. This presence applies to actual sites and objects of history, perceived in a non-narrative way. While the films in this study are all narrative fiction films, I would like to suggest that we examine the possibility of seeing the musical elements in the films as attempting to imitate the experience of presence as a source of historical meaning.

The concept of *presence* is commonly found in film and film studies, as the technology of film often attempts to not only recreate or represent the past, but also to present the very passing of time. The long take has been considered a conceptualisation of the present because it is occurring consecutively in time with us viewers. This is opposed to the edit, which may be representing the past,

but which, according to Mary Ann Doane, is experienced as a 'historical present' (Doane 2002, 104-05). Even before the editing process begins, the very technology of film has always contained the contradiction between the feeling of presence and the illusion of it. Doane adds that the close-up, aside from existing as a text, also 'transforms whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence' (Doane 2003, 94). Despite this feeling, she also reminds us that the close-up by itself alerts us to the limitations of presence, pointing to the past's inherent lack of being-there.

One main strategy to overcome this limitation is through the use of sound, and particularly, through the voice. As opposed to the image, which is, at best, a convincing *representation* of a presence that has occurred in the past, sound is a *presence* in and of itself. There are many reasons why we tend to feel this.

First, sound occurs in time, and cannot be prolonged beyond its time the way a paused image may be lingered on. This immediacy gives the sound a power of presence, a sort of 'now' to go with 'here'. Additionally, as previously mentioned, sound travels through waves in space. As it echoes, it meets our bodies from every direction. This perception of space which occurs through sound for a fleeting moment only intensifies our experience (or illusion) of presence in the sound. The presence of sound is combined in the film musical genre with the close-up of a singing face or dancing feet. In addition to these, we are constantly bombarded with amplified Foleys representing the sounds of feet, arms, and bodies as they collide with the floor, the stage, the street or each other.

In the scene from *Fiddler on the Roof* described above, the characters' mutual hostility is expressed through emphasis on clapping hands and stomping feet, filmed in the centre of the frame and edited as the loudest sound channel on the soundtrack. Just as the singer's voice is critical to the presence of the singing image, the sound of clapping, stomping, or tap-dancing prevents the dance from becoming an abstract choreography of shape and colour. The dancing body becomes present through the sounds, which emphasise its weight, mass, texture and speed. The rhythm created by these sounds carries us into a silent participation.

In *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972), a film depicting the bohemian night-life of 1930s Berlin alongside the rise of Nazism, we encounter a wordless sequence that makes particularly interesting use of parallel editing dedicated to making the body present through sound. A dance onstage is integrated through editing into a scene of a club owner being beaten by a group of Nazis. The dance onstage is presented as supposedly light-hearted and comical, with slapstick gestures and various kicks and slaps in the choreography. The cinematography in both scenes is intentionally extreme — extreme close-ups and extreme angles, both high and low. These shots are edited together in a way which breaks all editing conventions of continuity. The musical soundtrack, which diegetically belongs to the dance happening onstage, flows across the entire sequence, as the

clapping and drumming alternate with the sounds of violent kicking and beating. The editing cuts back-and-forth between the scenes frequently, so that one almost unified sequence emerges. The rhythm combines the beating and dancing into a single dance, which contains two different (but not contradictory) situations that in turn interpret each other. This combination does not create a comforting utopian unity, but rather the experience of a rift between the need to keep a safe critical distance from the film's devastating historical narrative and the tendency towards sensory identification through rhythm and sound. The beating and clapping make present the real physical body represented in the visual. The rhythm is not that of a drummer, but a testimony to the movement and clashing of the body. Our bodily response to the sound is heightened by our instinctive response to sounds of violence, which indicate the presence of living bodies and their collision as the evidence of historical conflict.

The film explores the connection between body, history, and sound throughout. In the number 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me', we hear the singing at first as a voice without a body. This voice suddenly finds its embodied image-source in an extreme close-up of a singing boy. We follow closely the choreography of his singing face. The film reveals that this is the singing face of a young Nazi by using a camera tilt over his uniform, instead of a long or medium shot which would allow us viewers to place him in a context while distancing ourselves. The sequence continues in this fashion, showing us the boy's diegetic audience not together but as an assortment of close-ups. Acts of identifying politically with the boy, such as standing up or saluting, appear only in the margins of the frame, while the singing faces synchronised in song become 'micro-choreographies', to pluck a phrase from dance-film studies (Brannigan 2010). The close-up of the faces as the centre of the action, combined with the unique phenomenological qualities of sound, allow us to experience presence of individual singing voices instead of through the fascist image of the unified mass.

These experiences have already generated a good deal of criticism of the film (Mizejewski 2014, 208), but also recognition of the ways in which conflicting viewing experiences enrich the ways we perceive historicity in film (Pearlman 2012, 31). Our initial responses to the close up, music, singing and rhythm are those of identification and participation. While the narrative subjects of *Cabaret* cast this in sharp relief, these complicated identifications can also be found in other historical and period film musicals. Movement, sound and close-up involve the audience's bodies and give us sensory indication of the presence of historical time. The utopian pleasure is tainted by our knowledge of the grim historical consequences, and we are offered, instead, the opportunity to experience the presence of historical time. Without relinquishing identification with the singing and dancing we-subject, we are made aware of how excessively

complex and emotionally fragmented the experience of historicity can truly become.<sup>3</sup>

### Excess, saturation and complex collectivity

This complexity of this experience is also achieved thanks to the musical number's excessive qualities, echoing Marion's description of how saturated phenomena are perceived:

[...] saturated phenomena [...] must be allowed, then, to overflow with many meanings, or an infinity of meanings, each equally legitimate and rigorous, without managing either to unify them or to organize them. (Marion 2002, 12)

Many scholars have already commented on the film musical's potential to create alternative meaning through its sensory experiences. Rick Altman has suggested that the very existence of excessive experiences in film presents us with the possibility of an alternative interpretation existing alongside the text itself (Altman 1992, 34). These experiences usually occur when the cinematic spectacle overloads the viewer's senses. Brett Farmer has emphasised the potential concealed in such moments, in which the sensory overcomes the textual and allows the fragmentation of the text into multi-layered interpretations (Farmer 2000, 81). According to Vivian Sobchack, in film we encounter such a multiplicity of details, events and objects, which make it impossible for us to give each one its own separate meaning, or combine them into one total structured meaning (Sobchack 1990). Occasionally, we encounter one single moment in the film which is by itself charged with so many meanings, texts and experiences that it may be considered excessive.

Sobchack further elaborates on the experience of the historical epic film as one formed by excess, allowing the viewer to transcend time and experience the historical eventfulness. Instead of burdening us with historical facts, these films attempt to capture what witnessing an important historical event first-hand might have been like. Many of the attributes of the epic film recognised by Sobchack as excessive are also common in the film musical. The casting of well-known star actors, an unusually large cast of extras, an abundance of elaborate sets and costumes, commercial hype and emotional tones bordering on the hysterical are only some of these 'excessive' attributes. These excessive qualities of the films are often derided by historians and film critics alike. Yet, there is a

<sup>3</sup> Many musical films are complicit in creating historical absence and erasing historical conflict by not representing marginalised groups who were certainly present at the time and place shown in the narrative. *Oklahoma!* (Fred Zinnemann, 1955) is certainly such a film, and I am certain that as time progresses, we will learn to see the histories omitted from many other historical fiction musicals. This study is concerned with the experiences of conflicts that are present within the films, but it may prove just as fruitful to examine the experience of historical absence in film.

difference between the two genres in the way they allow their viewers to experience time, space and movement.

Like the epic, the musical film sometimes takes over two hours to watch in its entirety. Sobchack describes how sitting through a long film makes us aware of time passing, and of our bodies stuck in their seats. While this may ruin our ability to ‘lose ourselves’ in the world of the film, after such a long time we emerge from the theatre feeling that time itself has changed. The present is held back in order to transcend immediate-time through the extended viewing-time. I would like to suggest that, while the excessive experience of viewing-time exists for the musical as well, it is a slightly different experience of viewing-time. In the epic, historical and narrative time moves constantly forward, while the musical narrative is constantly paused and delayed in order to make room for song and dance. These song-and-dance numbers are themselves constantly fragmented, circling back to the chorus and repeating dance variations. The musical audience stays aware of their own bodies sitting for a prolonged viewing in their seats; but instead of inscribing historical duration onto these bodies, the musical interrupts the continuity of narrative viewing-time. The excess of time in the musical becomes an excess of a repetitive time, which spreads in every direction. Amy Herzog has pointed out how a Deleuzian reading of these musical numbers exposes them as creators of difference through the refrain (Herzog 2010, 145). The refrain is perceived as more meaningful by the end of the song than it was at first.

The importance of repetition to the experience of historicity appears in Sobchack’s studies as well. She quotes philosopher Paul Ricoeur:

in effect, repetition serves as a formal recirculation of signs that, when put to the service of linear and teleological ‘content’ — such as the chronology of historical events — does away with chronology and teleology and institutes a sense not of ‘being-in-time’ or ‘being-toward-death’, but of ‘being-in-History’. (Sobchack 1990, 38)

The excess of movement is one final element of the film epic that makes an appearance in the film musical, but here too as a different kind of experience. The epic is often rich with movement — battle scenes, revolutions, horse racing and sea journeys — not to mention events which are based on the premise of covering a great distance, such as the Exodus or Manifest Destiny. In the musical, movement in space may sometimes occur within the narrative (in films such as *South Pacific*, Joshua Logan, 1958, or *Oklahoma!*, Fred Zinnemann, 1955), but this movement is usually not emphasised as part of the cinematography or musical numbers. The excess of movement in the musical film is simply found within the dancing body. These bodies move far beyond their diegetic requirements and create an excess of movement, all while practically staying in the

same place.<sup>4</sup> Brett Farmer claims that musical numbers are in excess to the narrative in general and therefore have the capability of subverting their linear historical progress. These numbers form a ‘centrifugal’ dimension, which bestows us with an experience of historicity as an excess of repeating time not bound for a single definitive future (Farmer 2000, 96).

Finally, we must address the issue of nostalgia, as period and historical films that sing and dance are automatically suspect of what Fredric Jameson dubs *nostalgia*. This nostalgia, as he defines it, presents the past, through cinema, in a manner that demonstrates our inability today to contact our past (or present) without the mediation of commercial products (Jameson 1991, 19-21). This nostalgia is motored by one of Jameson’s main engines of late capitalism — the loss of historicity. The term *historicity* here is used with an emphasis on the awareness of one’s collective past and future, particularly in the political sense. Jameson describes this state as ‘a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images’ (1991, 25).

Nostalgia itself may be perceived as an excess, especially if we consider the way it is defined by Jameson — not as a longing for the past but as a longing for our ability to long for something, a meaningful experience of time that had supposedly existed in days long gone (1991, 156). Agreeing with Jameson’s descriptions of the fragmented character of both history and historicity in nostalgia film, we are also now aware that it is this dizzying fragmentation which is also able to contain and express the complexities of perceiving bodies living in historical time — undermining the idea of a single History which is formed of unequivocal facts and a totalising narrative for all humanity. We may find that by doing so, films, and especially musical films, present us with some of the experience of historicity, instead of representing its supposed loss.

### Conclusion

In many ways, the musical (and not only when it is occupied with the past) palpably conveys the experience of shared historical time. Bergson’s concept of the *durée*, which makes up time and contains a constantly contradicting multiplicity, is reflected in the period film-musical through song and dance, perceived by our senses in sound and movement. The sound and movement allow us to perceive the past as a presence.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dyer has written several texts on the ability of the musical number to occupy itself with the conquering of space. As his analysis shows (2005), this is often done through a metaphor such as the museum in ‘Prehistoric Man’ (*On the Town*, Stanley Donen & Gene Kelly, 1949) representing colonial space. I would like to observe the experience of movement itself as we experience it, in which case ‘Prehistoric Man’ is still very tangibly about young people moving excessively within the close confines of the museum building, literally running into the displays.

The historical musical's we-subject exists as an experience of excess, which consists of bodies or consciousness joined in time but divided by their historical identifications. This we-subject forces together the conflicted or diverse collectivities into multiplicities that constantly change our viewing intentionalities, from that of an individual viewing self to that of a participant in historical time.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my dissertation advisor Boaz Hagin for the ongoing support and comments on earlier versions of this article. I also thank the reviewers at the *Journal of Historical Fictions* for their insightful suggestions.

## Works Cited

- Altman, Rick, 'Dickens, Griffith, and film theory today', in Jane Gaines (ed), *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The paradigm wars* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992) 9-47.
- Bergson, Henri, *Creative Evolution* (1907) Mitchell, Arthur (trans) (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).
- Brannigan, Erin, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the moving image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Carr, David, *Experience and History: Phenomenological perspectives on the historical world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983) Tomlinson, Hugh and Barbara Habberjam (trans) (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
- Dika, Vera, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The uses of nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Doane, Mary Ann, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, contingency, the archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- Doane, Mary Ann, 'The close-up: Scale and detail in the cinema', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14.3 (2003): 89-111.
- Dyer, Richard, *Only Entertainment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (London: Routledge, 2005).
- Farmer, Brett, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, fantasy, gay male spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
- Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time* (1927) Stambaugh, Joan (trans) (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).
- Herzog, Amy, *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same: The musical moment in film* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- Husserl, Edmund, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)* (1966) Brough, John Barnett (trans) (New York: Springer, 2012).
- Ihde, Don, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of sound* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).
- Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
- Legrand, Dorothée and Susanne Ravn, 'Perceiving subjectivity in bodily movement: The case of dancers', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8.3 (2009): 389-408.
- Marion, Jean-Luc, *In Excess: Studies of saturated phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).
- McCarren, Felicia M, *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of the age of mechanical reproduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- Mizejewski, Linda, *Divine Decadence: Fascism, female spectacle, and the makings of Sally Bowles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
- Olkowski, Dorothea, 'Henri Bergson', in *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The key thinkers*, Colman, Felicity (ed.), (London: Routledge, 2014): 71-80.
- Pearlman, Karen, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the film edit* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2012).
- Reason, Matthew and Dee Reynolds, 'Kinesthesia, empathy, and related pleasures: An inquiry into audience experiences of watching dance', *Dance Research Journal* 42.2 (2010): 49-75.
- Rodowick, David Norman, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
- Rosen, Philip, *Change Mummified: Cinema, historicity, theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- Rosenstone, Robert A, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006).
- Runia, Eelco, 'Presence', *History and Theory* 45.1 (2006): 1-29.
- Sobchack, Vivian, "'Surge and splendor": A phenomenology of the Hollywood historical epic', *Representations* 29 (1990): 24-49.
- Swain, Joseph P, *The Broadway Musical: A critical and musical survey* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002).
- Zahavi, Dan, 'Beyond empathy. Phenomenological approaches to intersubjectivity', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8.5-7 (2001): 151-67.