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The American Film Musical and the Place(less)ness of Entertainment: *Cabaret's* “International Sensation” and American Identity in Crisis

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Abstract: This article looks at cosmopolitanism in the American film musical through the lens of the genre’s self-reflexivity. By incorporating musical numbers into its narrative, the musical mirrors the entertainment industry *mise en abyme*, and establishes an intrinsic link to America through the act of (cultural) performance. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope and its recent application to the genre of the musical, I read the implicitly spatial backstage/stage duality overlaying narrative and number—the musical’s dual registers—as a means of challenging representations of Americanness, nationhood, and belonging. The incongruities arising from the segmentation into dual registers, realms complying with their own rules, destabilize the narrative structure of the musical and, as such, put the semantic differences between narrative and number into critical focus. A close reading of the 1972 film *Cabaret*, whose narrative is set in 1931 Berlin, shows that the cosmopolitanism of the American film musical lies in this juxtaposition of non-American and American (at least connotatively) spaces and the self-reflexive interweaving of their associated registers and narrative levels. If metalepsis designates the transgression of (onto)logically separate syntactic units of film, then it also symbolically constitutes a transgression and rejection of national boundaries. In the case of *Cabaret*, such incongruities and transgressions eventually undermine the notion of a stable American identity, exposing the American Dream as an illusion produced by the inherent heteronormativity of the entertainment industry. The film advocates a cosmopolitan model of cultural hybridity and the plurality of identities by shedding light on the faultlines of nationalist essentialism.

Keywords: American film musical; chronotope; metalepsis; *mise en abyme*; Americanness; cosmopolitanism; transnationalism; performativity; heteronormativity; *Cabaret*

America’s impact on the rise and institutionalization of the film industry is undeniable. At the same time, the wide dissemination of Hollywood films around the globe, including the translation, adaptation, or remaking of American films, attests to the inherent cosmopolitan potential of this industry. While much labor goes into the production of film, it is, for the most part, invisible labor, eclipsed by the performances of actresses and actors on screen. As Richard Dyer (2004, pp. 4, 5) observes in his seminal *Heavenly Bodies*, the emerging star images “are made for profit,” and this profitability extends over the respective films as such because the images stars represent “are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual”. The stars of Hollywood move beyond the confinements and restrictions of their medium and the boundaries of America because of this mass-mediation and, at best, their global recognition. The American film musical stands out in the history of film as a genre that effectively embodies the entertainment industry and its focus on stardom by the inclusion of musical numbers into its narrative. Following Rick Altman’s (1984, p. 10) generic model, two levels can be distinguished here: The “semantic approach [. . .] stresses the genre’s building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged”. The inclusion of musical numbers is, first and foremost, syntactically conspicuous because the unity of film is disrupted.

As I will show in the following, we can read musical numbers as *mise en abyme*, meaning that they mirror, in a fictional microcosm, the production and reception of film. However, the show semantics introduced through musical numbers are not any less important because they intrinsically connect the musical genre to the entertainment industry. The semantics and syntax of the musical, according to John Belton (2013, p. 143), allow the musical to “transform the setting or space from one that grounds the action from the more or less realistic world of the story (its fictional reality) into a different register,” and the “conventions of classic realist narration, in which characters do not normally break into song and dance, suddenly yield to the conventions of the musical number, in which they do”. Drawing on Jane Feuer’s (1993, p. 68) distinction between the dual registers of narrative and number, the single most distinctive element of the genre’s syntax, Belton (2013, p. 148) here stresses the narrative justification of song and dance within the diegesis. In the subgenre of the backstage musical, he continues, “various characters are brought together to put on a show. The film then becomes about the milieu of the theater, about performance”, granting viewers a look behind the scenes. However, this alleged disclosure of a show’s or the film’s production inevitably remains part of cinematic illusion: “Because we are permitted ‘backstage’ within the film,” Altman (1987, p. 223) argues in *The American Film Musical*, one of the most comprehensive studies on the genre to date, “we fail to recognize that there is no such thing as backstage in the film world”.

Musicals mirror the entertainment industry *mise en abyme* by means of simple duplication (Dällenbach 1989, p. 35), by reiterating semiotic structures that emulate processes related to the production and reception of film in themselves. Due to this self-mirroring or self-reflection, they “were predominantly conceived of, by producers and audiences alike, as ‘pure entertainment’—the *idea* of entertainment was a prime determinant on them” (Dyer 1981, p. 176). Rather than laying bare the actual production processes of film, musicals celebrate a figurative lift of the curtain while dwelling in artifice, stylization, and illusion, so that viewers are not obliged to vacate their cozy position as passive spectators for whom it is “necessary to be entertained,” as Altman writes (1987, p. 204). The idea of entertainment and its idealization is also evident in the musical’s infatuation with its own genealogy. Films like *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) fictionally historicize the genre through the inclusion of musical numbers echoing its theatrical predecessors such as, in this case, Burlesque, Vaudeville, and Follies, or by following the introduction of sound at the cinema and with it the birth of the film musical. While *Singin’ in the Rain* overtly focuses on protagonist Don Lockwood’s (Gene Kelly) star image, the musical’s star iconography is not limited to celebrity status within the diegesis. The musical creates worlds where anyone can become famous so as to provide the audience of the film points of entry for identifying with both performers and audiences within the film (Feuer 1995, pp. 451–52). As such, Feuer (1993, p. 3) advocates, the musical manages to “bridge the gap” between producers and consumers of film “by putting up ‘community’ as an ideal concept,” eventually creating “folk relations in the films” to cancel “the mass entertainment substance of the films”. However, even though musicals might put on display the talent of ordinary people, of American folk, these characters’ stardom is always implicitly supported by the actual stars portraying them. When watching *Singin’ in the Rain*, for example, we are not merely immersed in Don Lockwood’s rise to fame but also the performance of Gene Kelly, a household name in the studio era.¹

If, as Altman (1987, p. 250) contends, the “power of the musical” subsequently lies in its ability “to embody an American popular mythology”, then the myth of entertainment, to use Feuer’s (1995, p. 453) terms, is also a decidedly American one: “Performance is no longer defined as something professionals do on stage; instead, it permeates the lives of professional and nonprofessional singers and dancers. Entertainment, the myth implies, can break down the barriers between art and life”. We see this most prominently in pre-Code films of Depression America such as *42nd Street* (1933),

¹ For an analysis of star images in the film, see Steven Cohan’s reading (Cohan 2000), especially pp. 68–73.

which reinforces genuinely American myths through its dual-focus narrative structure,² a conjunction of capitalism and romantic coupling: In the end, artistic endeavors—staging a Broadway show in the midst of economic crisis—will pay off financially as well as romantically. Reaffirming some of the foundational narratives associated with the American Dream, such as the rise from rags to riches, which take center stage especially in early film musicals, the musical “restored faith in individual initiative, in the efficacy of government, and in a common American identity that transcended social class” (Mintz et al. 2016, p. 19). As such, the American film musical, in its early stages (the first musicals were indeed produced during the time of the Great Depression), served the function of strengthening American community, a connotation that still prevails today because of these films’ emphasis on show making as a collaborative effort. The musical’s focus on the entertainment industry thus at the same time designates a particular focus on the Americanness of this industry, apparent in the ways in which the musical foregrounds the craftsmanship of Americans—a reassurance of the belief in American community and talent. The segmentation of the musical into dual registers and the semanticization of narrative and number accordingly hold several implications when it comes to the study of *cosmopolitanism* in the *American* film musical: With the development of the backstage musical, “the logically opposed cinematic elements of realism and escapism,” Michael Dunne (2004, pp. 13–14) argues, became increasingly associated “with the diegetic or performative settings appropriate to each”. This spatialization, the correspondence of dual registers with stage/backstage areas, makes the musical formula more malleable; because of the backstage musical’s installment of “competing spaces of representation,” this subgenre relegates notions of entertainment and escapism to the realm of the show-within-the-film, a “fictive mise en scène nested within the larger mise en scène” (Doyle 2017, p. 577). While the show-within-the-film, as a representation of the entertainment industry, will likely be identified as American because of the implicit structural and architectural similarities to the musical’s extratextual points of reference, such as Vaudeville theaters, nickelodeons, the cinema, or Broadway and Times Square (Bredella 2009, p. 75), the narrative surrounding the show can be set virtually anywhere.

Desirée Garcia (2014, pp. 8–9) characterizes “musicals as the product of people on the move,” and argues that this manifests itself not only in the stories told but also in the ways they are being told, including their structural and musical elements. While she focuses mostly on folk musicals whose central duality is that of the city and the idyll, a place characterized by familiarity while also possessing utopian and mythical features connected to the past (p. 6), I suggest that we can extend this observation to other musicals as well. In contrast to westerns, for instance, which rely heavily on settings evoking the myth of the American West (Belton 2013, p. 244), the musical’s embeddedness in American culture is secured through its narrative structure, so that the characters populating the world of entertainment can move beyond the national and geographic boundaries of the U.S. In *An American in Paris* (1951), for instance, the eponymous American, veteran Jerry Mulligan (portrayed, like Don Lockwood in *Singin’ in the Rain*, by Gene Kelly), who now works as a painter, falls in love in and with Paris. The 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!* is also set in Paris, where British playwright Christian (Ewan McGregor) falls in love with Satine (Nicole Kidman), courtesan and leading act of the Moulin Rouge, as he self-reflexively writes the story of the film. A jukebox musical, *Moulin Rouge!* does not feature a soundtrack of its own but rather borrows from various contemporary and classical musical sources, including Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* and Giacomo Puccini’s *La Bohème*, two operas which also provide key elements to the film’s plot. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*’s (2001) protagonist Hansel Schmidt (John Cameron Mitchell), born to a German mother, falls in love with an American G.I. in East

² Altman (1987, p. 200) proposes the model of the dual-focus narrative in *The American Film Musical*, according to which “the making of a romantic couple [is] both symbolically and causally related to the success of the show”. Rather than the narrative logic of “chronology and progression,” the musical’s dual focus thus prescribes that each “segment must be understood not in terms of the segments to which it is causally related but by comparison to the segment which it parallels,” focusing mostly on “stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values” (pp. 19–20).

Berlin and, after a botched sex-change surgery, returns to the U.S. with him as Hedwig. After being left by their husband, Hedwig tours America as the singer of the rock band The Angry Inch to share their story, and eventually learns about the importance of self-love.

Despite their obvious thematic differences, the previous examples of cosmopolitanism in the musical all operate within one major duality, similar to that identified by Garcia: In one way or another, these films negotiate the differences between America and the non-American world by moving their stories into other countries and cultures—or by letting their characters move between the two realms. In the following, I will argue that cosmopolitanism in the American film musical indeed mainly functions as a way of figuring out what it means to be American because of the implicit articulation of Americanness through the act of musical performance. Emanating from the distinction between narrative and number as the musical's dual registers, I will illustrate how cosmopolitanism in the musical goes beyond self-validation and the ascription of or belief in a unified American identity, since the inclusion of non-American perspectives and characters inhabiting non-American spaces allows the musical—as a distinctly American form—to critically reassess notions of Americanness, nationhood, and belonging. I subsequently read this self-reflexivity as a cosmopolitan potential inherent to the musical genre because it promotes hybridity, the porosity of borders, and the fluidity of identity. My analysis of the 1972 film *Cabaret*, set in Germany in 1931, shows that the incongruities between the American world of entertainment and a Berlin about to succumb to National Socialism illustrate that show business, as well as Americanness, are based on illusion. The show-within-the-film is heavily informed by heteronormative ideologies, a model revealed to be unsustainable by the relationships of the film's protagonist, Sally Bowles (Liza Minnelli). In this way, *Cabaret* puts American identity into a productive crisis and presents counter-narratives that subscribe to cosmopolitanism rather than Americanness.

1. “Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome” to *Cabaret* and the World of Entertainment

Cabaret's dual-focus narrative, or simply its various storylines, can only be understood through its protagonist, Sally Bowles, because she is the mediating link between the stage and backstage levels of the film, whereas the emcee (Joel Grey), for example, only appears in the show-within-the-film. Before her musical numbers, Sally is introduced as an “international sensation,” even though she is, almost ironically, the only American character in the film. Of course, this assumption is diegetically justified because of the film's setting in 1931 Berlin. Considering the film's production and reception as an *American* film musical, however, *Cabaret* reverses the cosmopolitan practice of borrowing from European art forms, predecessors of American (musical) theater and film. That is, even though the German Kabarett tradition³ as well as the film's setting and characters (who most prominently figure as German and British) pose as international for an implied American spectator, the film ascribes the only American character the status of both cosmopolite and spectacle, hinting at the fact that cosmopolitanism in *Cabaret* is heavily intertwined with notions of Americanness.

The world of entertainment in *Cabaret* is spatially identified with the venue of the Kit Kat Klub, denoted as American through its leading act and contrasted by Berlin and the non-American audience attending the cabaret shows. The film opens with the musical number “Willkommen,” in which the emcee addresses the audience of the film by breaking the fourth wall in three different languages: “Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome/Fremder, étranger, stranger.” This metalepsis, the transgression of the film's narrative levels and communicative frames (Genette 1980, pp. 234–35), elicits an implicit systemic metareference⁴ because of the homology between the title of the film and the art form

³ See William Farina's *The German Cabaret Legacy in American Popular Music* where he examines the tradition of German political theater in American cultural productions. Farina's reading of *Cabaret* focuses more specifically on the relationship between film, stage musical, and the adapted source, Christopher Isherwood's 1939 novel *Goodbye to Berlin* (Farina 2013, p. 77).

⁴ I am using the term metareference in line with Wolf (2009, p. 31), who argues that this special form of self-reference, “which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement [...] on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to” rather than the fictional work itself.

referred to in the lyrics of the opening number. When the emcee welcomes the audience within the film to “cabaret,” he simultaneously invites viewers into the world of *Cabaret*. This implicit act of metareference thus unveils that the film is explicitly directed at an external audience and that *Cabaret* is aware of its status as a cultural artefact. The beginning of the film constructs *mise en abyme* structures exceeding its intratextual, fictional discourse (i.e., immanent structures of exponentiation such as the show-within-the-film) because *Cabaret* holds up a figurative mirror to its viewers and cultural points of reference in the form of direct address, an actual mirror through cinematography and *mise en scène*. The identification of the audience of the film with the intradiegetic audience is further established through the use of language and the emcee’s gaze. During the line “glücklich zu sehen, je suis enchanté, happy to see you,” he turns toward the intradiegetic audience, which he addresses solely in English, showing that *Cabaret* conceives of the people visiting the cabaret as American, despite the fact that, on the level of story, they are not. The camera zooms out and shows the film’s intradiegetic audience in a huge distorting mirror on stage and, as such, blends it together with the audience of the film, establishing a metonymic link between them. The film plays with notions of Americanness and cosmopolitanism by merging these two concepts and, through the employment of self-reflexive narrative techniques like metalepsis and *mise en abyme*, gradually blurs the line between them both.

Critics have recently conceptualized the *placeness* of the world of entertainment, alluding to or designating American settings, within Mikhail Bakhtin’s framework of the chronotope, which suggests the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” in literature (Bakhtin 1981, p. 84). The chronotopic configurations within a genre, be it in literature or other media like film, make said genre appear as a distinctive and coherent form. Generic differences are thus not only evident in the narrative structure of the respective productions, as explained earlier, they also manifest themselves in the interconnectedness of time and space within various narratives of a genre. In her study on *The Migration of Musical Film*, Garcia demonstrates the applicability of the chronotope to the genre of the musical:

Bakhtin’s chronotope has been usefully applied to the study of cinema and, specifically, to film genres. In the American folk musical, the concepts of folkloric time and the idyll, especially the agricultural and familial idylls, exert particularly strong influence. This generic pattern treats home as a visual allegory for social integration and belonging in American life. [. . .] An analysis of the American musical film from this critical position makes clear how the basic duality of American identity—vacillating between the ideal of a classless, collective society and a place of hardship and social disintegration (the *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* of American life, respectively)—gets reworked onto narratives, formal structures, and musical scores. In chronotopic terms, the duality is grafted onto the time-space indicators of the farm/town wherein belonging is a utopian reality and the city/stage wherein individuals must perform new identities in order to survive. (Garcia 2014, pp. 7, 9)

The focus on the folk musical specifically speaks to the Americanness of the chronotopes of the musical. While in folk musicals, we find a “semantic emphasis on America of yesteryear” (Altman 1987, p. 127), in backstage musicals such as *Cabaret*, the chronotope of the world of entertainment, which corresponds with Garcia’s “city/stage,” is usually not supplemented by the chronotope of the idyll but a variety of other settings that semantically oppose the realm of the show-within-the-film.⁵ Dunne (2004, p. 106) advocates that, despite “strikingly conflicting settings, [. . .] characters in these films sing, dance, fall in love and [. . .] live happily ever after. That is to say, they act like characters in a Hollywood musical”, echoing Bakhtin’s (1981, pp. 84–85) original claim that the “image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic”. When redirecting the focus from folk

⁵ See Altman (1987, p. 209) or Julia Steimle (2012, p. 14) for semantic oppositions such as stage/backstage, fiction/reality, ideal/real, art/life, public/private, etc. frequently ascribed to the musical’s dual registers and, as I argue, its contrasting chronotopes.

musicals to backstage musicals, a shift from time to space as the dominant determiner of the subgenres' chronotopes can be discerned. In backstage musicals, characters occupy both chronotopes (expressed through the always implicitly spatial backstage/stage duality), and move back and forth between them. Rather than a disruption of time, traversing space constitutes the necessary dynamic of the backstage musical, since the chronotopes here correspond with diegetic settings. Placeness is therefore inevitably met with *placelessness* because, while the world of entertainment is constituted as American, the backstage world surrounding these (connotatively) American settings can be located anywhere. It becomes apparent that this paradox, the simultaneous placeness and placelessness of entertainment, is connected to the musical's narrative structure: Transitions between chronotopes correspond with shifts between the musical's dual registers. When characters sing and dance (or, generally speaking, perform) in performative or non-performative settings—the latter of which occurring mostly during metaleptic displacements—they enter the world of entertainment, no matter where they are. The world of entertainment thus also becomes an abstract space where Americanness is performed.

2. Performing Americanness

Sally's first number, "Mein Herr," for example, overtly expresses Americanness through highly sexualized spatial metaphors. The song is about a female speaker leaving her lover: "Farewell, mein lieber Herr/It was a fine affair, but now it's over." The end of this affair is connected to both female individualism and self-determinacy as well as sexual promiscuity, themes that are mirrored in Sally's backstage persona in a rather distorted fashion, depicting her as self-centered and opportunistic, enticing wealthy men into but never fully committing to a serious relationship herself. In addition, the statement that "I've always said that I was a rover" addresses the restlessness of the female speaker, who identifies as "a tiger, not a lamb." The comparison to a predator animal seemingly inverts the penetrative logic of heteronormative society; however, female individualism in "Mein Herr" is defined through asymmetry in heterosexual relationships and thus cannot be made sense of without heteronormativity and binary gender expressions. This idea is linked to America by means of spatialization: Promiscuous individualism is a necessity because Sally, as representative of America, is confronted with the "continent of Europe," which is "so wide, Mein Herr/Not only up and down, but side to side, mein Herr." The allusion to expansion and (potential westward) movement here is also resituated within a sexual context, since the speaker "couldn't ever cross [the continent] if I tried, mein Herr/But I do what I can/Inch by Inch, step by step/Mile by mile, man by man." In order to cross the continent, to overcome the frontier of "man," the female speaker must engage in promiscuous sexual behavior, which is visually expressed through the famous chairography of the scene. It then shows that the kind of individualism preached by Sally, who figuratively mirrors the trope of the city upon a hill as the woman on the chair in a clearly elevated position, can only exist within the framework of heteronormativity; it is only because of her ability to engage sexually with men that she can cross the continent and obtain individuality. After the number ends, we see reaction shots exclusively from male audience members, showing that, even though woman seems to be in power in this scene, she is at the mercy of a male gaze,⁶ exposing the notion of female individualism presented as mere illusion. Considering the interplay of the film's chronotopes which, at this point, are used to construct a divide between opposing genders, it becomes apparent that the female world of entertainment is part of a larger apparatus, embedded in a male version of Berlin.

The interplay of cosmopolitanism and Americanness within the diegesis has consequences for the performance of national identity. In relation to the implied American spectator, Sally's characterization as an international sensation logically subverts the reading of Sally as a representation of America. Resolving these inversions alters our understanding of the previously described scene. While the chronotopes remain diametrically opposed, they interchange their semantic attributes so that Sally's

⁶ See Laura Mulvey's conceptualization of the male gaze in narrative cinema (Mulvey 1990).

character now becomes an allegory for Europe or, in a broader sense, the European people settling the new continent of America. The overt sexualization of the scene accordingly does not relate to female self-expression and self-determinacy but needs to be understood in terms of the penetrative (and thus thoroughly androcentric) logic of heteronormative society which dictates that individuals can only ever become meaningful and viable when being literally or figuratively reproductive. Moving “man by man” evokes contexts such as, for example, settler colonialism and the eradication of Native Americans based on the assumption that indigenous peoples—as the other—are non-reproductive and non-valuable in Euro-American thought and thus needed to be removed.⁷ More than the specific example of settler colonialism as such, *Cabaret* in its entirety mirrors the here implied power structures of American society and draws attention to the unjustness of patriarchal and heteronormative hegemony which is intricately connected to a Western white supremacy. Focusing more specifically on the film’s immediate historical context, we see how this notion constitutes a response to the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s carried out in fiction. *Cabaret* puts the iniquities of the colonial project, cultural imperialism, and segregation on display and evokes a feeling of cognitive dissonance because of the conflicting images represented on screen: The film, following the inversions engendered by Sally’s characterization, turns the show-within-the-film into a grotesque spectacle reminiscent of the darkest chapters of (American) history and, as we will also see in my following analysis, does not provide the escapism associated with musical numbers. When looking for refuge in the complementary narrative, viewers are virtually trapped in their positions as passive spectators because the growing presence of fascism in *Cabaret*’s version of Germany does not provide the possibility of escape either. As such, *Cabaret* first and foremost creates critical distance by alienating audiences through the film’s points of reference (i.e., National Socialism) and its immediate historical and cultural context (i.e., the segregation addressed by the Civil Rights Movements), which emphasizes the film’s critical stance on nationalism and eventually substantiates the cosmopolitan potential of the film by showing that such reductive and essentialist preconceptions of the world result in instability and degeneration.

Performing Americanness in *Cabaret* accordingly does not signify an unreflective reiteration of the regulatory laws of American society, the norms which precede and (re)produce that which allegedly shapes the American character.⁸ In addition to the investment of cultural productions in retelling the myths that made America, to borrow Heike Paul’s wording, in the musical, these laws or norms especially refer to the supremacy of heteronormativity which not only regulates the modes of storytelling but also the visibility of non-normativity when it comes to thematic focus or character design. The film, in contrast to the functions Altman and Feuer ascribe the musical, uses these norms as a vehicle for articulating a *critique* of American society, a critique enabled by the film’s chronotopes as strategies of fictionalization: The film’s backstage storyline is set in Berlin of 1931, allowing viewers to enter a world of great spatio-temporal distance to their own, in turn allowing the film to forge social commentary without addressing American society directly. It is through *Cabaret*’s narrative structure, then, that the link between the intradiegetic German society and the extratextual American society is established. While this distance suggests that viewers are merely observers, *Cabaret* makes clear that the American context is equally at stake as its fictional counterpart through its complementary chronotope,

⁷ I am basing this reading on Judith Butler’s (1990, p. 151) concept of the heterosexual matrix, “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized,” and which “characterize[s] a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender”. As a consequence, cultural intelligibility is logically connected to “an ideological version of (re)production produced by the figurative cooperation of a naturalized capitalism and heterosexuality” (Roof 1996, p. xvii): It is only through heterosexuality and a stable gender expression that heteronormativity as the dominant ideology ordering social life can be sustained. Heterosexuality is, in turn, perceived as viable, valuable, and sustainable. In her *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed (2006, pp. 111, 126) links the ideas of space and sexual orientation to colonialism and orientalism.

⁸ See also Butler (2011, pp. xxi–xxiv) reformulation of performativity as citationality in *Bodies That Matter* and Susanne Hamscha’s (2013, p. 23) *The Fiction of America*, where she considers the ways in which “America creates itself in the realm of the cultural imaginary, at the intersection of foundational myths and signs of ‘reality,’ of re-inscription and displacement, of authenticity and performativity”. One of these myths, which is also under scrutiny in the following, is that of the American Dream (Paul 2014, p. 367).

the world of entertainment. The self-reflexive interwovenness of dual registers and chronotopes of the musical opens up spaces for negotiation, where notions of Americanness are performed, challenged, and continually (re)configured in attempts to overcome passive spectatorship and to look beyond the perimeters of representation. As Linda Hutcheon (1980, p. 42) contends, “the use of micro-macro allegorical mirroring and *mises en abyme* in metafiction contests that very image of passivity, making the mirror productive as the genetic core of the work”.

3. Making and Breaking the Illusions of Heteronormativity and American Identity

The incongruities arising from the musical’s dual registers and chronotopes thus substantiate the cosmopolitan potential of the musical genre. I am borrowing the term “incongruities” from Steven Cohan’s (2005, p. 1) *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical*, which focuses on the “incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality” and queer recognition. Camp raises the very questions of regulation and normativity by openly, and surely also demonstratively, positioning itself against what is perceived as “natural” through (deviant) stylistic expression and its high degree of artifice. By means of foregrounding camp sensibility through the tension between its dual registers, between artistic performance (on stage) and mundane expressions of the self (in the performers’ private lives backstage), the musical denaturalizes “the ideological construction of gender and sexuality” (Cohan 2005, p. 17) and with it dominant modes of storytelling ordered by, as Judith Roof (1996, p. 151) claims, the “heteronarrative politics of visibility”. If applied to narratology, the notions of “incongruities” or “incongruous presentation” prove particularly productive when describing the denaturalizing and deconstituting effect of self-reflexive elements such as *mise en abyme*, the mirroring of dual registers and chronotopes within one another, and metalepsis, the transgression or dissolution of the borders between them. These narrative techniques accordingly dismantle a narrative logic based on linearity and teleology; the musical rejects stable borders, which implies a rejection of Americanness as a uniform and coherent construct. Instead, the musical’s self-reflexive narrative structure, following Erwin Feyersinger’s (2017, p. 142) notion of metalepsis, suggests a “blend of two conflicting inputs”, a blend between that which the musical presents as American (i.e., the show-within-the-film and its reiteration of norms constituting Americanness) and that which is systematically opposed to the American world of entertainment. As the following will show, the musical’s self-reflexivity makes room for counter-narratives that dissent reductive notions of Americanness and offer, in Leslie Vaughan’s (1991, pp. 443–44) words, “a new conception of American identity that [is] both ethnic and modern, American and cosmopolitan”. Vaughan here builds on Randolph Bourne’s vision of a trans-national America and argues that “alternative forms of group identity and organization,” those marginalized by dominant discourses of nationalism, “are important [. . .] because they redefine normal politics, taking it out of the state and returning it to the city (polis), bringing it closer to the lived experiences of the many” (p. 459). In *Cabaret*, one of the dominant ideologies ordering social life is heteronormativity, which takes center stage in the show-within-the-film.⁹ Through incongruous narrative representation, the film undermines the supremacy of heteronormativity: As the number “Two Ladies” in relation to its off-screen counterpart, a *ménage à trois* between Sally, British writer Brian Roberts (Michael York), and German aristocrat Maximilian von Heune (Helmut Griem), illustrates, the insufficiency of heteronormativity puts the notion of a singular American identity in a virtually (re)productive crisis.

“Two Ladies” reflects heteronormative values as part of a male imagination of having two female lovers, one to “do the cooking” and one to “make the beds,” while the man is responsible “to earn [their] daily bread.” The diametrically opposed distribution of gender roles—women as objects of

⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, gender and sexuality play a vital role in the musical because both are readily associated with performance (Knapp 2006, p. 205). Following Altman’s dual-focus model, the narrative structure of the musical is informed by oppositions between binary gender expressions within a distinctly heterosexual framework. See also Altman’s more recent work on the musical’s dual focus (Altman 2010).

desire as well as useful tools in the confinements of the home and man as the doer, respectively—as well as the lyrics, which frame this love triangle as “two [women] for one [man],” emphasize the patriarchal alignment of the scene: A woman’s sole purpose, the number suggests, is to give pleasure to and care for her man. The androcentric set-up is preserved, since any additions to this constellation, as is indicated by the emcee’s interaction with an audience member, are exclusively female, built around the man at the center of the relationship as to ascertain that the heterosexual integrity of man is not compromised. As such, the number “Two Ladies” perpetuates a heteronormative model wherein man is perceived as potent (and thus superior) because of his ability to penetrate and reproduce—both of which are visually expressed through the choreography—, reducing women, no matter how few or many, to a means to an end.

As Hamscha (2013, p. 25) argues, “[r]epetition with a difference opens up the possibility of resistance to normalization and can offer other visions and articulations of ‘America’ that had previously been excluded from dominant discourse”. This assertion reverberates with the incongruities described by Cohan in his study on camp, and subsequently poses questions about the normalization of preconceived notions of America or Americanness. Due to its self-reflexive narrative structure and the incongruities between its dual registers and chronotopes, the musical can simultaneously provide unreflective iterations of the norms at the core of America and representations deviating from these norms. In the case of *Cabaret*, the representation of the first degree, i.e., the show-within-the-film in relation to its reception by an intradiegetic audience, performs Americanness uncritically through the lens of heteronormativity. As we have seen in my discussion of “Mein Herr,” looking at these representations in terms of their relation to the film as such, as representations of the second degree, shows how the incongruities arising from the shifts between dual registers and, accordingly, the double consciousness of the audience of the film—as spectators of the show and viewers of the film—alter our understanding of the film’s representation by amalgamations of the semantic elements of syntactically separate units of the film. In a similar vein, “Two Ladies” is influenced by its backstage counterpart—the love triangle between Sally and two male lovers. However, instead of looking at how this plotline changes the perception of the musical number, I would like to focus on the ways in which the backstage storyline, as an inversion of the number, articulates a crisis of Sally’s identity and heteronormativity in more general terms. For example, while the interaction between Sally and Brian, who are both foreigners in Germany, opens up the possibility of a heterosexual encounter and romantic coupling, their relationship cannot be sustained because Brian is homosexual.

Sally’s encounter with Maximilian equally results in an unsustainable relationship. Both Maximilian and Brian embody characteristics Sally is lacking or longing for such as wealth and adventures in the former case, intellect and the willingness to engage in a stable relationship in the latter. While the character configuration of the mirroring number “Two Ladies” is inverted, Sally assimilates to her male companions the same way the two ladies assimilate to their required gender roles, affirming the heteronormative logic of the musical number. This logic is broken, however, once Brian reveals the truth about the *ménage à trois* Sally had (unwillingly) become part of:

Sally: “You can’t stand Maximilian cause he’s everything that you’re not. He doesn’t have to give English lessons for three marks an hour. He’s rich and he knows about life. He doesn’t read about it in books. He’s suave and he is divinely sexy, and he really appreciates a woman.”

Brian: “Screw Maximilian!”

Sally: “I do.”

Brian: [laughs] “So do I.”

Sally: “You two bastards”

Brian: “Two. Two?—Shouldn’t that be three?”

This revelation seems to put an end to both relationships, not only because of the sexual nature of Maximilian and Brian’s friendship but also Sally’s hypocrisy. After their fight, Brian and Sally break

up, and Maximilian goes out of town, leaving behind a note and money for his two lovers. For Sally, the loss of her relationships simultaneously signifies the inability to make sense of her identity because she can no longer assimilate to a partner, a void filled by her work at the Kit Kat Klub and her star persona, the image she presents on stage. As we will see in the following paragraphs, however, this attempt at reconstituting her identity through acting remains unsuccessful because this act is based on an empty referent: The image she uses to perform her own identity is a piece of fiction, an illusion that can only exist within the confinements of the Kit Kat Klub and the world of entertainment, which therefore cannot make up for the identity she has lost.

Sally's pregnancy, which is revealed after an initial reconciliation with Brian, eventually transfers the crisis of her identity into a crisis of heteronormativity. While Sally considers having an abortion, she deems the price to pay—not the life of her unborn child but the money one would need to pursue this idea—too high and does not carry through with it initially. Brian is even suggesting a potential marriage between the two of them, raising the child as theirs, even though we never know who the father is. The film uses this proximity to heterosexual coupling to undermine binary assumptions about gender and sexuality. Instead of marrying and living together in Cambridge, where Brian is going to teach and Sally could care for their child, she deliberately stays behind in Berlin, completely isolated in her life backstage, and selling the fur coat Maximilian bought her to get rid of the fetus. The outcome of Sally's narrative thus poses a stark contrast to the heteronormative values presented during the show-within-the-film, especially the number "Two Ladies": The apparent rift between the film's chronotopes, between life on stage and backstage, between opulence, wealth and the celebration of heteronormative pairing on the one hand, and decay, poverty and solitude on the other, shows that heteronormativity can no longer provide meaning. The possibility of heterosexual coupling, as the dual focus of the traditional musical prescribes, is rejected in *Cabaret*, aborted in the same way as Sally's unwanted child. The film, therefore, does not merely challenge notions of heteronormativity; in *Cabaret*, heteronormativity arises as a product of the world of entertainment, an illusion the audience (and performers, for that matter) indulges in without realizing their compromised positions within such a framework. Sally's relationships with men outside of the chronotope of the world of entertainment cannot be maintained and a heteronormative approach to life remains non-conclusive, present in the film's circular structure (Sally starts out alone and ends up alone), and, ultimately, non-reproductive as her abortion illustrates. As such, the complementary chronotope of Berlin, which, to recapitulate, is metonymically linked to the American audience, cannot be sustained by heteronormativity. Rather, the ties between America and heteronormativity are severed, and the very notion of normativity, glimpses at which we only gather in the world of entertainment while the façade of a uniform Berlin—a singular American identity—crumbles more and more, is exposed as illusion and falsehood.

When accentuating the deficiency of heteronormativity, *Cabaret* thus also articulates a crisis of American identity, both of which are represented by the incongruities of Sally's character. This is most prominent in Sally's attempt to gain fame and live up to her proclaimed status as an "international sensation." The image of the American Dream, and the rise from rags to riches as its extension, in *Cabaret* is heavily distorted, however, because Sally only strives for a positive outcome, namely that of being successful in the entertainment industry, without putting in the work or showing any ambition to achieve this goal. This misinterpretation of the American Dream corrupts Sally's character in two ways. On the one hand, the film overtly employs the theme of wealth and material possession as a means to substantiate character integrity. While her relationships to both Maximilian and Brian are, in one way or another, dependent on money (in the former case receiving gifts and profiting from his wealth, in the latter supporting him by getting him a job as a translator), the film's conjunction of capitalism and heterosexuality—most explicitly addressed during the number "Money," where Sally and the emcee sing that "money makes the world go around"—remains insufficient in the search for identity and the American Dream. On the contrary, the film's implicit theme of prostitution leads Sally to sell herself and give up every last bit of her individuality and identity, showing that her ways of

seemingly ascending the social ladder place her at its very bottom. Even though Sally claims that she is not intending to “white-slave” herself to “Latin America,” she figuratively prostitutes herself for material growth and success. On the other hand, *Cabaret* shows how the world of entertainment blinds Sally and how this delusion eventually results in her decline. Sally seems to find happiness and success in the world of entertainment because, in the Kit Kat Klub, she is indeed a star, a status that she cannot obtain in her life backstage. As I argued earlier, the life she takes for granted, and which makes up a substantial part of her identity, is based on illusion and fiction. For Sally, “life is a cabaret,” as she sings in her last number.

“Cabaret” signifies the culmination of the rift between reality and fiction in *Cabaret*, between Berlin and the world of entertainment, and shows how Sally, deluded by the empty promises of show business, escapes into a world far away from reality and her problems: “Put down the knitting, the book and the broom/It’s time for a holiday/Life is a cabaret, old chum/So come to the cabaret.” The lyrics, amplified by Sally’s gestures, elicit a systemic metareference on the film *Cabaret*, metaleptically inviting the audience of the film into a fictional world far away from its problems. However, the escapism provided by *Cabaret* in its entirety, as opposed to its musical numbers, virtually traps those willing to enter (or those unaware of entering) a world of degeneration and violence. The film maintains that passive spectatorship results in stagnation; Sally’s story about her friend, Elsie, in itself is highly self-reflexive in the sense that Sally’s opening lyrics constitute a reiteration of what Elsie told her: “What good is sitting all alone in your room?/Come here the music play/Life is a cabaret, old chum/Come to the cabaret.” Besides the possibility of an infinite regress (Sally as an iteration of Elsie, her successor as an iteration of Sally, etc.)¹⁰ inhibiting progress and change, the self-reflexive narration in the number “Cabaret” is also symptomatic of the ways in which Sally succumbs to the illusions of the world of entertainment, eventually resulting in her death.

I used to have this girlfriend known as Elsie/With whom I shared four sordid rooms in Chelsea/She wasn’t what you’d call a blushing flower/As a matter of fact she rented by the hour/The day she died the neighbors came to snicker/“Well, that’s what comes from too much pills and liquor”/But when I saw her laid out like a Queen/She was the happiest corpse I’d ever seen.

The film establishes a homology between Sally and Elsie based on, for example, the theme of prostitution, which implicitly permeates Sally’s life, and which explicitly characterizes Elsie. The lyrics thus foreshadow Sally’s death because, “I made my mind up back in Chelsea/When I go, I’m going like Elsie,” i.e., Sally will die having fun, indulging in the ever-lasting joys of sex, drugs, and music at the Kit Kat Klub. While this adequately frames Sally’s character, “Cabaret” also points toward the incongruities between Sally’s lives on stage and backstage. As viewers of the film, we see how Sally is actually struggling and that she is, in fact, deluding herself by giving in to the world of entertainment and buying its ephemeral illusions, even if it is just for a moment’s worth.

If the cabaret is a mirror of society, it is not any less distorted than the society it reflects. If *Cabaret* functions as a mirror, too, as its *mise en abyme* structure suggests, we see how, in fiction, the film uses German society to negotiate the distortedness of American society. The world of entertainment, the film argues, can never provide real escapism but remains an illusion and is thus deceptive. The American Dream, which is used to bind the heterogeneous American people together on the basis of a shared, uniform set of beliefs and the mirage of a singular American identity, is exposed as an illusion—a dream and not reality—by the incongruities between the film’s dual registers and chronotopes: In *Cabaret*, notions of Americanness centered around heteronormativity and capitalism are, for the most part, relegated to the world of entertainment, a realm complying with its own rules, rules which

¹⁰ A special form of *mise en abyme*, infinite regress designates a “basically never-ending sequence” (Fricke 2011, p. 257) which endlessly repeats itself.

are inaccessible and oppose filmic reality. As such, instances of (hetero)normativity are necessarily contrasted by deviating or incongruent narrative presentation on the backstage level, showing that the version of Americanness presented in *Cabaret* is not real, carefully crafted, and directed at an audience. However, these incongruities ultimately reject the notion of a stable identity and the possibility of stabilizing discourse; the film conceives of Americanness and heteronormativity as in constant flux, and the imposed unity and their perceived absoluteness results in alienation. As spectators of the film, we are confronted with the unattainability of the film's version of a very distinct American Dream by witnessing identities in crises, failing to live up to the ideals associated with this American Dream. *Cabaret* not only shows how Sally's world is virtually falling apart, it also demonstrates that entertainment and the illusions of a show cannot fix identity, precisely because life is *not* a cabaret.

4. Self-Reflexivity and Cosmopolitanism in the American Film Musical

The musical inherently possesses a self-reflexive potential because of its narrative structure: Reading the segmentation into narrative and number, the musical's dual registers, as *mise en abyme*, proves instrumental when looking at both a mirroring of the film within itself (self-reference) and the mirroring of the industry and culture producing the film (hetero-reference). Reflexivity in the musical has previously been conceptualized as a conservation of form. Most prominently, in "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," Feuer (1995, p. 454) contends that, while "we tend to associate reflexivity with the notion of deconstruction within filmmaking practice," the musical "uses reflexivity to perpetuate rather than to deconstruct the codes of the genre". Considering Roof's (1996, p. 7) deliberations on narrative, the conservation of form cannot but operate within the framework of heteronormativity so as to ensure the sustainability and reproducibility of the "ideological connection of narrative and sexuality". As a consequence, when following Altman's (1987, p. 27) assertion that the musical perpetuates myths that shape American consciousness, it is not surprising that "the musical fashions a myth out of the American courtship ritual", emphasizing the musical's dependence on the logical conjunction of American identity and heteronormativity. Looking at the musical in chronotopic terms, however, shows that, while the world of entertainment may embody these ideals, they are all but infallible. As viewers of the film rather than characters attending the show-within-the-film, we are supplied with another point of view, an alleged backstage perspective, which can deviate from the world of entertainment and also be non-American.

The incongruities arising from contrasting chronotopes and the double consciousness of viewers allow the musical to engage critically with notions of Americanness; as Vaughan (1991, p. 459) argues, "trans-nationalism constitutes a significant narrative of dissent". By taking us backstage, these musicals stage cosmopolitan ideals, stories that do not subscribe to the mainstream but rather offer alternatives to nationalism and essentialism and their reductive representational politics. Self-reflexivity does not necessarily support the notion of a singular American identity. If incongruities serve as the basis for self-reflexivity, we may use Cohan's (2005, p. 1) terminology—incongruities foregrounded by camp aesthetics facilitate queer recognition—to describe the inherent cosmopolitan potential of the backstage musical: Musicals always implicitly articulate that which is non-normative by focusing on the norm as well as instances of non-normativity imply the existence of a norm. Non-normativity needs to be understood as everything other than the idea of having a singular or fixed identity, as questioning the preexistence of and privileges attached to what is perceived or posited as the norm, rather than constructing a binary division between thesis and antithesis. As such, the reflexive potential of the musical opens up spaces for negotiation and specifically speaks to the idea of cosmopolitanism. According to Werner Wolf (2009, p. 59), this reflexive potential is actualized by "(quasi)explicit forms of metareference" such as *mise en abyme* and metalepsis. If a transgression of narrative levels or dual registers actualizes the reflexive potential of the musical, then a transgression of national boundaries inevitably actualizes the cosmopolitan potential inherent to the genre; because of the correlation between dual registers and chronotopes, the reflexive potential of the musical is thus intrinsically connected to cosmopolitanism and signifies a unity between these chronotopes that goes beyond stable borders.

In *Cabaret*, the incongruities between the world of entertainment and 1931 Berlin are used to articulate such an idea of cosmopolitanism. The film's juxtaposition of normativity on both its stage and backstage levels holds various ideological implications: For example, the show-within-the-film makes use of imagery readily associated with America or Americanness, which it correlates with heteronormativity, and reinforces notions of nationalism in ways similar to the representation of fascism on the backstage level of the film. Through self-reflexive narration, the film eventually dissolves the border between these levels and promotes a conceptual blend between them. As a consequence, the show semantics overlay the representational realism of the backstage level and marks both as performance, illusion, and deception. As viewers of the film in relation to intratextual discourse, we remain passive spectators (we cannot possibly change the chain of events). But the film's harsh criticism of American nationalism through its fictionalized version of Berlin calls us into action in the extratextual world (this is where we can potentially make a change). Thus resonating with its immediate historical context, the film exposes the faultlines of nationalist essentialism in the U.S. and works toward an awareness of the cultural imperialism ordering social life and contributing significantly to the mechanisms—such as racial segregation in the 20th century—underlying oppression and inequality that still largely prevail today. Cosmopolitanism in *Cabaret* is not transgressive or non-normative in the sense that it disregards or negates the notion of normativity posed by its representations of fascism and heteronormativity. It is rather formed in discursive spaces carved out by transgressive and self-reflexive narrative techniques (metalepsis and incongruous presentation) as a critical reassessment of Americanness that moves from singularity to plurality, from essentialism to hybridity, and from false promises to being a self-aware construct. If self-reflexivity, to come back to my initial discussion of the musical as a reflection of the entertainment industry, forces cultural artefacts and its recipients to look into a mirror, it becomes clear that cosmopolitanism arises out of the very confrontation with mirror images of nationalism and essentialism presented in fiction.

Though *Cabaret* has been called a "revisionist musical" (Symmons 2016, p. 176), we have seen that the breaking with conservatism and Americanness is nothing unique to the film's story. Rather, it is *Cabaret's* narrative structure and its form as a musical that enables this revisioning in the first place. We may then use my analysis of *Cabaret* to rethink the American film musical as a genre in broader terms. For example, while *Chicago* (2002) is set in America, Raymond Knapp (2006, p. 115) points out that "the Chicago we see in *Chicago* is the Berlin we see in *Cabaret*, spiraling off into evil excess". If we follow this reasoning, *Cabaret* and *Chicago* are not limited to their German and American settings. On the contrary, both films emphasize the unmistakable Americanness of their narratives, only to eventually repudiate the notion of a singular American identity. Similar to *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, the title of the 2010 film *Burlesque* also alludes to the film's setting. Considering the prominence of the world of entertainment and with it questions of space, it might be useful to redirect the focus from geographical locations to the venues associated with the entertainment industry. It then becomes apparent that all three films establish a homology between their title and the venue where their characters perform, the Kit Kat Klub, a cabaret, in *Cabaret* or a burlesque club in *Burlesque*. In *Chicago*, the city of Chicago becomes a stage for Roxie Hart's (Renée Zellweger) trial after being committed for the murder of her affair, which she uses to obtain celebrity status. I heretofore stressed the musical's syntax and argued that the narrative structure holds a cosmopolitan potential because of its inherent self-reflexivity. However, we now see that the show semantics of the musical also make it a genuinely cosmopolitan project: While becoming famous is readily associated with American success stories such as the rise from rags to riches or seen as part of the American Dream, the idea of becoming a star—in the microcosm of the musical and the macrocosm of the entertainment industry—often goes beyond the perimeters of the U.S. and individual productions. Stars are, after all, citizens of the world.

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