

Lecture 11 - The Musical

I. Numbers

- 1927-1947: 919 films (48 films each year)
- 1949-1958: 23 films per year
- 1959-1980: 7 films per year

II. Themes

- Show business: community: the show goes on
- High culture, popular culture
- Class or position vs. talent, merit
- Convention, restraint vs. spontaneity, energy, "the natural"

III. History

- Revue, Operetta - *Love Me Tonight* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932)
- Busby Berkeley and Warner Brothers - *42nd Street* (1933)
- Astaire, Rogers and RKO - *Top Hat* (1935)
- MGM and "the integrated musical"
 - *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen and Kelly, 1952)
 - Arthur Freed (1894-1973): The Freed Unit

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

The Musical

▪ Numbers

- A breakdown:
 - 1927-1947: 919 films (48 films each year)
 - 1948-1984: 466 films
 - 1949-1958: 23 films per year
 - 1958-1980: 7 films per year
- Like American Westerns, the musical is one of America's true contributions to film.
- Product of studio era, musical was very central to this era, after growth of film, before explosion of television
- They coexist without realizing their effects on each other
- By 1970s they were having great effects on each other
- Musicals are not simply operettas, but from their own cinematic identity
- Declining numbers show decline of film as the central means of storytelling
- By 70s/80s, no longer a habitual experience
- 1949-1958 movies still dominant, but losing strength
- After World War II, more skepticism, and musical becomes attributed to pre-war sentiment
- After 70s, musicals seen as more experimental in form

- History
 - Three different aspects (subcategories) of musical film:
 - The first owes life to theater tradition – Revue
 - Remakes of Broadway
 - “You ain’t seen nothing yet”
 - Jazz very successful
 - *The Broadway Melody* (1929)
 - Tells backstage story (meta-theater)
 - Common plot of movie musical
 - Establishes basic back story
 - It’s a Revue – stage show not linked by plot
 - Show was immensely popular – won Oscar for best film
 - Drew and produced large numbers intermixed with comical sketches
 - 1930: 70 new musicals
 - It influenced increasing use of music in films in Europe as well
 - The second subcategory was Operetta
 - Influenced by European light opera
 - Example: Gilbert and Sullivan
 - Clip: from *Love Me Tonight* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932)
 - This is proleptic. A pass-along song.
 - Central character: Maurice Chevalier, a tailor
 - Plot: Aristocrat comes to his shop, he meets an aristocratic woman – class conflict, etc.
 - Crosses class and geographical boundaries – proleptic – music creates community across social classes
 - Multiplicity – art does many things at once
 - Notice how cinematic that clip was – you could not have ever done that on a stage.
 - The camera work was complicated – notice that in the tailor’s shop some of the shots were done through mirrors
 - The third subcategory that emerged was associated with the choreographer and director Busby Berkeley
 - These films exist for the musical numbers – the plot and characters are weaker
 - Berkeley was an essential and enormous innovator. He created a great sense of space, using the power of editing and the camera to make the space enormous. He exploded the older of idea of film as a theatrical space.
 - Berkeley anticipates a form of film that is severed from character, but becomes about an artistic expression of abstract pattern and music – it’s almost like he anticipates MTV.
 - Clip: from *42nd Street* (1933) – Warner Brothers
 - Note that it starts on a stage, in a theatrical space... but it grows, the camera moves...
 - Note the sexual subtext

- Note the Berkeley topshot – he cut holes in the ceiling of the studio so that he could film down
 - There are many Berkeley numbers that are even more extravagant than this one.
- Astaire and Rogers
 - In one six year period, they made nine musicals together
 - The classical romantic structure
 - Dance is important
 - Carnal, arousing nature of dance
 - The movies were censored, remember
 - Clip: from *Top Hat* (1935)
 - When this clip begins, she is very reluctant to be dancing with him – she thinks he’s a married man
 - Note how the dance moves into a private space
 - The dance becomes a metaphor for good sex, where there are no leaders and followers by the end – it’s entirely mutual.

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