

Transcript

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*All text is narrated by Daniel, The sounds of the films are not heard except in a few sections and captioned here in italics.*

In my presentation today I am going to talk about a specific scene from the film *State Fair* from 1945. This quintessential Hollywood musical follows a family of farmers in the 1930s who spend a week away from their small town to participate in the events of the state fair.

This film, for me, falls right at the crux of tensions between the forms of social organization on display in Hollywood musicals. Specifically tensions between more open and inclusive understandings of American social realities and isolating structures.

This is true of where the film lies in relationship to the progression of the genre. *State Fair*, as the only Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration designed for the screen is a clear cut book musical and like all book musicals of the period, employs a racially homogenous cast. It marks a transition away from the vaudeville style musical films which played more like the variety shows of the stage and as variety shows contained diverse performers with a range of backgrounds often outside of the Hollywood system.

In terms of the film's plot and central premise, we see the film falling into a similar pivotal contrast between wider social engagement and closed off filmic worlds. The film contrasts the state fair, which in certain instances represents corrupting aspects of a diverse and implicitly city-like environment with the rural simplicity of the farmhouse where the film begins.

*Mother: All you do is sit around and mope!*

*Margey: I don't sit around and mope.*

*Mother: Well stop moping now and finish your packing.*

When discussing this film in terms of the way it contrasts structures for social engagement, a final setting for imagining these spaces of entertainment and social interaction must be in the spaces for the consumption of film itself. This is a film which may now be viewed for free on youtube on the Vivian Blaine fan channel “Vivian Blaine” and has been viewed in this manner by hundreds of thousands. The space of the 1940s cinema as a setting of communal joy creates a space where the themes of solidarity and isolation I discuss here tend in one direction as on youtube, with its lonely anonymous viewing community, tends in the opposite

Within the film itself, these elements seem to all come together in song, in the scene in which the full cast sings “It’s a Grand Night for Singing.” Within the plot of the film, this scene serves to advance the love story of one of the two siblings in the film family, both of whom find new love at the fair,

*“It’s a grand night for singing/ the stars are bright above/ The earth is aglow/ and to add to the show/ I think I am falling in love”*

These lyrics typify a classic poetic understanding of romance, as a force which drifts through the air and expands beyond an emotion within an individual subject to consume the entire world surrounding the romance. This idea is first described by the lyrics, after which the idea consumes the scene. The love and joy projected into the air by the stage performer encompasses the crowd and the melody, like the love it describes, fills the voices of the full ensemble.

Wayne spontaneously takes the second verse. He sings directly to his partner, addressing the sentiment of the song to her, though his voice is again heard throughout the crowd. As he and his partner dance in the foreground, couples, all embracing in an identical position drift through the background behind them. The visual make up of the shot reflects how each member of the crowd can be presumed to be feeling the same as the film's everyman-ish main characters through which we understand the entire audience. This scene illustrates how the formation of the couple becomes the main carrier for all the ideas in the film. It is through the formation of heterosexual pairs we are able to understand the more poetic and abstract idea of love within the music and the song's lyrics. The visuals of the film contrast this in the way in which each time we see the crowd coming together it is always through the lens and spread of heterosexual pairs. The image of the crowd also disrupts the lovely generalities of the music in the racial segregation which defines the filmic world they all exist within. Their heterosexuality and whiteness are a prerequisite to taking part in the communal joy they share.

The form of abstraction undertaken by this sequence of shots will be familiar to any fan of the musical genre. The song which began with the audience of a performance in one location of the fair bends physical space and creates a magical sense of a wider community, as the entire fair seems to be falling in love.

In this sequence of shots we see the joyous celebration the camera flies away from spread across the entire fair. These images of characters who are not a part of the central plot of the film became important to convey the idea that the experiences and feelings of the characters the film follows are universal among the people within its setting. In this sequence we also see the celebratory ensemble number, common among stage musicals adapted to fit the new technology

of montage and create a magical sense of space which could not be as convincingly portrayed on stage. The technology of film becomes a means of uniting a wide range of characters but also a means of separating pairs who would share physical space into individual shots. The dual function of the intervention of film also becomes a way of filtering the notion of a community becoming unified, through the apparatus of heterosexuality, an isolating force.

Romantic love is the main subject of nearly every hollywood musical from this era. In instances like these, when music becomes a means of abstracting an emotion we can see the beauty of the idea as well as the narrowness with which it is carried out.

The formal apparatuses of film musicals including, the music itself, the function of the camera, and the types of settings and communities they imagine, show a potential for spaces in which freedom might truly be embodied. These aspects at the same time exasperate ways in which the plot is centered around the heterosexual family and romantic pair as a force of isolation within these wider communities. In terms of how the plot understands itself however, all these tensions are shown to resolve themselves in the reunification and embrace of the temporarily separated romantic pair, which occurs in the final minute of nearly every Hollywood musical including this one.

The themes of societal unification and social isolation, in recent months became a central axis by which I came to understand the meaning of the WWII and post-war American musicals I have been researching. With the introduction of government mandated social distancing measures due to the covid19 pandemic, these seem to have become overnight, the words on everyone's lips. It is important to re evaluate the ways in which entertainment has hoped to

embody words like “solidarity” in the past. Our current period of national struggle has also brought to the surface the ways in which urban and rural divides remain with us. It also has shown the ways in which disproportionate harm is still burdening communities of color and populations left out of previous visions of solidarity.

The ways in which the internet forms community and can also become an isolating force in our lives are both oft discussed topics in understanding how technology has shaped the contemporary world. Nostalgia for a simpler world which never actually existed is certainly one way of explaining the popularity of the many “golden era” Hollywood films widely available on the internet. However it is necessary to develop a more complicated read of the forces within these films in order to make sense of their effect today, not just in terms of film analysis but also as a tool for understanding how technology can and has been used as a tool for imagining spaces of communal rejoicing and social organization. Witnessing the ways in which these films were successful at motivating cooperation and at the same time contained caveats to the freedoms they imply could be an important place to begin in emerging from a widespread struggle with a sense of community that allows for a more free world.