



## DANCING WAR MACHINES: AN ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE IN THE MUSICAL FILM *WEST SIDE STORY*

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Musical films are a favourite among viewers since their emergence in 1927 (Chilton 2020) tied to the arrival of the “talkies” and the consequent possibility of including sound within what were, until then, silent films. Their popularity may relate to the amusement and relief of tension that comes when the song and dance spring up. But having songs in certain parts of the films does not only respond to a carefully chosen timing so as not to bore viewers. Michael North analyses jazz in the historic *The Jazz Singer* (1927) as a way to “rebel against Old World authorities” (Chilton 2020) precisely because of its artificial decision to mimic a minstrel at a time when other devices were available (North 1994). North contends that this decision metafictionally reflects upon the act of (un)masking on the screen, thus rebelling against the rigidity of categories represented by the Old World (North 1994). Similarly, he also claims that the final dancing scene in *My Fair Lady* (1964)—when Eliza finally manages to properly pronounce “the rain in Spain”—stands as an ironical way to drop all the decorum that had dominated the film so far, making fun of the previous efforts to shape this particular adaptation of Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (North 1994). Thus, in some cases the combination of dancing and music has been exploited by filmmakers to speak the unspeakable, giving space to messages otherwise deemed inopportune at the filming time. As such, these implied meanings change through time, unveiling the sociocultural repression distinctive of public discourse in specific societies and historical moments. By means of amusing songs and choreography, the much awarded 1961 film version of the Broadway Musical *West Side Story* tells, rather, a story of actual marginalisation, violence, and eventual death. As it happens in the aforementioned examples, the subtext behind the film is carefully placed within the most famous songs that interrupt the

development of the main storyline. These two songs—“America” and “Gee, Officer Krupke” —, composed by the world renowned Leonard Bernstein, together with the impeccable blend of ballet and jazz choreographies, are so ear- and eye-catching, as well as fun, that the graveness of what they relate may go unnoticed. However, these two tracks alone carry the most compelling critique developed throughout the whole film: the pressure intrinsic to acculturation and the impossibility of which for Black (and Latinx) subjects, resulting in eventual marginalisation and exposure to violence. Let us analyse these two moments in the Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise’s film.

*West Side Story*’s plot revolves around the impossible love between Tony (Richard Beymer) and María (Natalie Wood), two young inhabitants of Harlem who belong to different cultural groups. Despite being the child of European migrants, Tony is more acculturated than the recently relocated Puerto Rican María. However, María’s Puerto Rican relatives in the Barrio present similarly strong accents despite their consolidated presence in the United States. Forms of marginalisation in migrants respond to issues related with racism rather than (or together with) mere nationality of origin. The sociologist Robert Blauner offers a useful explanation. He states that while White European migrants become acculturated more easily in the US Anglo milieu, African Americans and Black migrants are subjected to a kind of internal colonisation in the United States exerted through structural violence. The inhabitants of the ghetto find themselves existing in an unequal space, where White property and business owners are prevalent and, consequently, lead the neighbourhood decision-making processes. (1969, 396-8). Edward W. Soja has extensively analysed the spatial processes by which injustices keep reproducing themselves to the detriment of the less well-off or racial Others. In terms of “ethnic enclaves” (Soja 2010, 48), while the formation of ghettos might be positive for reasons of collective resistance and self-protection and affiliation (2010, 49), spatial organisation in terms of ethnicity might be “imposed from above as a form of subjugation and control” (2010, 55). All these issues begin to be tackled at minute 50 of the film, when the aporia of assimilation suffered by the migrants is addressed through a discussion between María’s brother Bernardo and Anita, his girlfriend. Bernardo accuses Anita of having “given up Puerto Rico and now [being] queer for Uncle Sam,” an accusation which she denies just before staging a sung and danced satire of the two positions regarding Puerto Rican migration and acculturation in which the perpetuation of structural inequalities is also addressed.

The fact that Anita denies being “queer for Uncle Sam” while at the same time singing the country’s praises—stating that she wants to “live in America”—undermines all accusations that “the scene undeniably promotes sexist and racist depictions of immigrant Latinas as agents of assimilation and easily colonized subjects” (Paredes 2014, 333). Anita, just before starting to sing, utters the phrase “once an immigrant always an immigrant” but paradoxically goes on to praise, in the first stance, the “island Manhattan”. Just as she utters the word “island” spectators have the feeling that she is

going to talk about Puerto Rico, as the concept of the island can be easily associated to the Caribbean archipelago; nonetheless, she goes on stating that it is Manhattan what she likes (“I like the island Manhattan”), which in turn is also different from claiming that she loves the United States. Furthermore, the fact the she talks about America rather than the United States is also worth exploring; critics coincide that the semantic choice of the term to refer to the country represents a misnomer, as it should more correctly describe the whole hemisphere (Bauer 2009, 239). It is worth reminding that Puerto Rico is part of the United States—as an unincorporated territory (Pierce-Flores xii)—even if Anita has just described herself and her friends as “immigrants.” Anita’s mention of the “island Manhattan” falls in line with Ramón Grosfoguel’s idea of Puerto Rico as an imaginary island, in his words: a “commuter nation” or a “guagua aérea” (1999, 517), a concept drawn from Luis Rafael Sánchez’s homonymous collection to define a nation untied from territoriality (Aramburu 2012, 46). Grosfoguel describes the Nuyorican identity neither as an assimilated nation nor as a deterritorialized one (1999, 517-8): “Puerto Ricans articulate their identity in the transnational space between the metropole and the island through ethnic and national claims simultaneously” (1999, 518). In fact, the island Manhattan that Anita likes so much—and in particular its Barrios in East Harlem—can be seen as the postnational spaces that, as contended by Grosfoguel, the Nuyorican claim to identity creates (1999, 519), all contributing to strategies that “subvert exclusion from the dominant imaginary community called the nation” (Grosfoguel 1999, 516). Therefore, what Anita praises is not an idealized-from-the-outside notion of the United States but, rather, the hybrid environments that are created in these Barrios. Dalia Kandiyoti defines Puerto Rican narratives as barrio-centric (2009, 157), expressed through fictions that assert “independent, viable, multilingual places in which Puerto Ricans can have a future” (2009, 157) and, given the hostility elsewhere in the nation, the Barrio embodies such socio-spatial reality (2009, 158).

In *West Side Story*, both the Jets and the Sharks—namely, the Barrio’s gangs composed by White and Puerto Rican members respectively—express the same attitude towards the police, denoting a similar mistrust for the state and its institutions. The police is an institution which works on behalf of the state apparatus to impose order always in accordance to the current national interest, be it economic, social or ideological (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 352). As such, despite their enmity, the two gangs’ stance towards the police coincide, as they both avoid involving this institution in each one’s own plans to control the Barrio. The performance of the song “Gee, Officer Krupke”—inserted towards the middle of the film—confirms this view. In it, the Jets members expand on the overbearing presence of the state institutions with regards to Barrio children and conclude asking the officer to leave the Barrio with the following words: “Krupke, we have troubles of *our own*” (emphasis mine). As Kandiyoti concludes, Puerto Rican fiction is shaped around the Barrio and “not in the escape from

it,” identifying the Barrio “as a literary and political strategy seeking to overturn the coloniality that shapes it, that is, racism and economic exploitation that give rise to its worst conditions” (2009, 158).

The song describes how Barrio children with—in some cases—dysfunctional family or unstable habitation contexts are assessed by the state apparatus—embodied in Officer Krupke—as “ill.” Furthermore, the configurations of the alleged illness are designed according to the imperative social politics of each moment. For example, one of the boys, mockingly acting as a judge, explains that these children are not delinquents but need psychological help since they did not have “a normal home.” However, in the next segment of the performance, another boy acting as the psychologist claims that the problem is one of a “social disease,” and the need to work—“dear kindly social worker / they say go earn some dough”—is proposed as a solution to reassert one’s social functioning. When this solution does not solve the alleged problems, the next option is imprisonment: “Officer Krupke, you’ve done it again / This boy don’t need a job, he needs a year in the pen / It ain’t just a question of misunderstood; Deep down inside him, he’s no good!” This song deploys very clever transitions; moreover, the whole number is realized in a manner of performance, since the boys are acting as these workers of the state apparatus, thus mocking their professional discourses. The sequence transitions from substituting the claim of delinquency for various sociological and psychological problems (“Deep down inside us there is good!”) to eventually solving the local children’s issues with punitive attitudes. Once more, this narrative unfolding draws attention not only to a flawed judicial and penitentiary system, but also to the fact that the psychological and sociological institutions are devices of the state apparatus too. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have defined such apparatus as a complex system ordering society, that makes use of “police officers and jailers” (1987, 352) to “prevent [...] all combat” (1987, 353). Since the combat in this case is constituted by the possible alterations to the public order that these teenagers might cause, once its prevention is not achieved by measures such as ineffectively implemented psychological treatment or social work, the prison is proposed. In fact, there is evidence that mechanisms of imprisonment in the United States bear a racist component, since the members of communities that are racialised and marginalised by the workings of capitalism often represent the “perfect candidates” to be convicted (Davis 2003, 16). As Angela Davis explains, one of the fundamental reasons of this incidence is that “the economic base of these communities is destroyed” (2003, 16) by the workings of “contemporary colonialities of economic subjugation” (Kandiyoti 2009, 160).

Organisational and social alternatives created in barrios by promoting strategies of “self-help” (Kandiyoti 2009, 169) are termed “war machines” by Deleuze and Guattari, who also describe them as able to contest the logics of the nation-state, thanks to their very anti-systemic nature (1987, 356). Therefore, the postnational philosophy intrinsic to Anita’s speech on the Manhattan island is also, to an extent, present in the “Gee,

Officer Krupke” song as well. Performing the relationship between the two gangs and the police, the musical number suggests that the internal organisation of the Barrio transcends the logics of the nation-state. In both cases these ideas are expressed through the performativity of the characters, who—apart from singing and dancing—engage in the parody of institutional discourses. This exploitation of parodic representation reminds of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, as carnivals usually also carry an element of performance and an element of parody. Bakhtin draws on the carnival festivities that started in the Middle Ages, which were characterised by the suspension of the prevailing social order (Bakhtin 1984, 10). Bearing in mind the homeland of the film’s protagonists, Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s ideas about carnival are pertinent here, as he expresses that the Caribbean cultural machine (drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept) is particularly carnivalesque because of its historical supersyncretism, which impedes the location of a centre or a norm (1996, 17;19-20; 29). Through the theory of Chaos, Benítez-Rojo ascribes to the Caribbean in general a performative character because of its being continually self-referential (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 23).

Carnivals, Benítez-Rojo explains, are particularly “great” where a dense “sociocultural density” is observed, and non-coincidentally this happens in “the cultural map of the Caribbean” (1996, 306). And what is this cultural map that he mentions, one may ask? Benítez-Rojo also offers an answer, and it is a complex one: the Caribbean is where a Caribbean performance is found (1996, 24). Therefore, he suggests—which is pertinent for the object under study here—that “we would perhaps have to count New York, a city where the density of Caribbean population is noticeable” (1996, 25) when we consider the map of the Caribbean embracing place, networks, and the shared heritage connecting them. Caribbean cultural productions are multilinguistic, paradoxical, disrupted (1996, Benítez-Rojo 25), and characterised by the “erratic displacement of its signifiers toward other spatio-temporal points, be they in Europe, Africa, Asia, or America, or in all these continents at once” (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 12). What does one make of the classical music, reminiscent of Spanish *zarzuela*, and the choreographies with a touch of *flamenco* in Wise and Robbins’s cinematographic take on *West Side Story*? What about the romantic plot being a rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet*, a Renaissance tragedy written by an English bard and set in Italy? The intertwining of all these heterogeneous elements offers the same kind of syncretism and hybridity distinctive of Caribbean carnivals, and intrinsic to Anita’s claim that she is—and will always be—an immigrant and an American simultaneously.

The carnivalesque is all about performing in a parodic way (Bakhtin 1984, 4), just like Anita and Bernardo allegorically embody the opposite poles in the paradigmatic characterisation of the immigrant as either acculturated or nostalgic. Likewise, the little pantomime in “Gee, Officer Krupke” unveils the discriminatory violence of the

state apparatus. Motion cameras that accompany the choreographies and singing became characteristic of musical films in the 1930s, technically fulfilling the purpose of making “the audience almost part of the choreography,” therefore responding to the implicit “audience’s desire for escapism” (Chilton 2020). This non-realist connection with the audience—fundamentally based on the fact that in the musical films that canonised the genre there is no explanation as to where the music comes from—evidences that what the spectators are seeing is obviously a performance and, as Gene Kelly famously expressed in *Singing in the Rain* (1952), we do not know why but we just “gotta dance” (Chilton 2020). The emphasis that Benítez-Rojo makes on the idea of performing as a powerful device stems from a similar notion: he explains that Caribbean cultural productions are directed towards the spectator “in search of a carnivalesque catharsis” proposing a diversion of the existing “excesses of violence” (1996, 22).

Musical films are an originally American genre, as they “developed in a tandem with Hollywood itself” (Chilton 2020). The performative practices endorsed in *West Side Story* bring the reality of the New York Barrio configuration to American audiences. The unfolding of the musical is illustrative of both the power peculiar to the genre and the Caribbean “ritualization of identity”. The resistance the latter implies is highlighted by the notion that there is not a “definitive human word that once spoken and once formed, stands for all contexts and occasions,” (Forbes 2002, 12) be it that of the immigrant, the American, or the “ill” neighborhood youth. Anita and Bernardo’s mimicry of stereotypical migrant discourses—uttered as they maintain features and attitudes that in fact contradict these discourses—in the end becomes the creation of a safe third space that contests, as Benítez-Rojo reiterates throughout his work, the violence that surrounds their very (hi)stories. The kind of performativity endorsed (or, rather, parodied) in this case is the one defined by Judith Butler, who insisted that “identity [is] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (emphasis in the original; 1988, 519). More openly parodic is “Gee, Officer Krupke,” a musical number structured to unveil what is a taboo, a conventionally unmentionable topic as explained by North’s in his aforementioned work. The pantomime performed by these characters brings to light what is not so overt at first sight, what is hidden within the society that they inhabit. As Benítez-Rojo explains, in the carnival of the Día de Reyes the slaves kill a snake in a metaphorical exorcism of slavery (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 298; 307). Likewise, these characters set the stage for their retaking of social space through the killing of a scapegoat: Officer Krupke, in this case, who they do not kill but expel from the Barrio. In conclusion, the moments represented by the song and the dance within musical films are performances embedded within performances; *metaperformances* which draw attention to the very harsh reality lived by of the Barrio characters in the film. The lyrics make the critique clear, and the dancing, by its very artificiality, is a good mechanism to facilitate a carnivalesque performativity of identity. Performativity and performance, through their very nature, expose the artificiality of all the constructs—



including stereotypes related to identity—that negatively affect the lives of the characters who protagonise these films.

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