

Jumping on the Bandwagon: Analyzing The Bandwagon as a Vehicle for Sociopolitical and Philosophical Conversations

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Hart () "Jumping on the Bandwagon: Analyzing The Bandwagon as a Vehicle for Sociopolitical and Philosophical Conversations," *Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol8/iss1/6>

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Abstract

The Band Wagon (1953) was directed by Vincente Minelli with the help of MGM's Freed unit. It is one of the most revered musicals in Hollywood history, on par with *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). However, there is very little academic literature on the film 71 years later, especially compared to its counterparts of similar time and echelon, likely due to its relatively low level of gaudiness and excess generally associated with camp musicals. Musicals' self-reflexive nature allows many opportunities to comment on musicals themselves, and *The Band Wagon* exploits this well. This article analyzes this function as it is used to prompt introspective viewing experiences and comment on sociopolitical topics. Additionally, this article contributes to research of the film's significance, as well as contributes to work on the genre as a philosophical device.

Keywords: absurdism, camp, Hollywood, film noir, freed unit, Minelli, backstage musical

Jumping on the Bandwagon: Analyzing *The Bandwagon* as a Vehicle for Sociopolitical and Philosophical Conversations

The Hollywood musical has captivated the hearts, minds, and feet of the world since its inception in 1927. Embracing illusions of optimism and grandeur, it exudes a quintessentially American essence. Vincente Minelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953) was created at the tail end of the period's Golden Age and became the acme of the genre to many. Coming from a humanities background focusing on the sociopolitical analysis of film, this paper seeks to analyze *The Band Wagon* as a vehicle for philosophical and socio-political commentary. Much like the origin of the phrase, where Zachary Taylor began running his presidential campaign out of Dan Rice's bandwagon (a famous clown at the time), the film uses popular entertainment as a platform for its messages to reach a wider audience ("Bandwagon Effect.") In the first section, we will go over a brief synopsis of the film, historical context, and Vincente Minelli's artistic ideology. Next, we will analyze self-reflexivity in form, the Faust storyline, and the character of Tony Hunter. Lastly, we will do a deep dive into the final musical number of the film, "Girl Hunt Ballet." In this final section, we will discuss how the number utilizes camp devices, self-reflexivity, and the breaking of the fourth wall. Through these various methods, the film both critiques the film industry, gender roles, and heteronormativity, and encourages the audience to similarly investigate the world around them. In doing so, the notion of the musical genre as superficial is challenged.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

The film follows Tony Hunter (Fred Astaire), a thespian has-been hoping to rekindle his career by putting on a Broadway show with old writer friends Lester and Lily Marton (Oscar Levant and Nanette Fabray). Script in hand, the trio approaches Jeffrey Cordova, the hottest director in town, who Tony quickly learns has a more pretentious approach to the theater. For example,

when we first see Jeffrey, he is both directing and acting in his own stage- rendition of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. Later, when he agrees to work with Tony and the Martons, Jeffrey says he will rework their script to be a modern Faust story. This difference in their approaches to entertainment is exemplary of a popular trope in musicals, which is the culture war between high art and popular art. During show rehearsals, a series of slights and mishaps lead to high tensions on set between Tony, Jeffrey, and Tony's ballerina co-star, Gabrielle Gerard (Cyd Charisse). When the production does poorly on opening night, Tony is ultimately given the reins. He throws together a musical revue (a collection of varying independent acts, with no overarching plot) that wins audiences over. He names it *The Band Wagon*, the same as the title of the film. The plot is customarily simple. This was commonplace during the Golden Age, during which studios made films formulaically to prioritize quantity over quality. What sets apart film musicals like *The Band Wagon* is the ability to tell meaningful stories through visuals, performance, and the spaces in between. With this overview in mind, the article will proceed to contextualize the world that this film was created in.

While the first half of the twentieth century was full of atrocious acts committed by humanity, it acted as a forest fire for cultural currency, clearing out the dried-out underbrush and making room for new ideas to emerge. The years surrounding World War II were especially rife with inescapable cultural change across international borders. One such change came about in 1942, just a few years shy of the war's end, when the philosophical concept of absurdism was introduced. Absurdism is the belief that human beings exist in a meaningless, chaotic universe ("Absurdism"). European artists of the time were quick to embrace the concept, forming what is known as the Theater of the Absurd in the 1940s. Meanwhile, Americans were still clinging to the promise of the American dream, and this was heavily reflected in the popularity of optimistic mediums such as the Hollywood musical. In *American Absurdism*, Christopher Hilton describes this as an overarching metanarrative that permeated the nation's collective consciousness as a

driving force behind personal motives and art alike.¹ However, after the devastation of the Great Depression and the two World Wars, Americans had to come face to face with the utmost cruelties of life. While the United States was experiencing more economic prosperity than in prior decades, a scar was still left on the American spirit by memories of poverty, hardship, and large-scale death they were previously not privy to. With no option but to confront these harsh realities head-on, American artists started to incorporate absurdism alongside Europeans in the 1950s.

While there are many ways to express an absurdist view of the world, Vincente Minelli's work demonstrated it as "a constant tension between his awareness that the Hollywood musical is artificial and false, and his contradictory delight in being able to create that artificiality so well—a conflict which manifests itself in his unpretentious attitude that his 'art' is just a job" (Lowry, qtd. in Tinkcom 123). While it seems to be a state of mind evident across his prolific body of work, this is true especially in the case of *The Band Wagon*, creating a vivid piece of entertainment that exploits its triviality so thoroughly that the act of doing so becomes meaningful.

Minelli's attitude towards his art, as seen in *The Bandwagon*, extends as a metaphor for life itself. Lyrical elements of "That's Entertainment," one of the musical numbers in the film, formally draw the connection between entertainment and ordinary life. The number, which describes the wide array of scenarios that can be used as material for entertainment, is started by Jeffrey somewhere backstage when Tony expresses hesitation at proceeding with the production. Eventually, Tony and the Martons join in, excited at the prospect of creating something entertaining. Some of these examples are on par with Hollywood's tradition of spectacularity, like references to *King Kong* (1933) and Jeffrey's own *Oedipus Rex*. Others, however, are much more mundane, such as when the group sings "The doubt while the jury is

¹ Hilton, "American Absurdism," 7-11.

out, or the thrill when they're reading the will." While these are indeed dramatic (thus rarer) moments in a person's life, they are nonetheless moments that most viewers can either relate to or realistically see themselves experiencing. The hook of the number also clues us in, which includes the line "The world is a stage, the stage is a world of entertainment." This suggests to the audience that the stage of the world and the stage of the theater are one and the same. It puts the assumed average life of the viewer on the same plane as the glamorized lives that entertainment portrays and then begs the question: if the ordinary is extraordinary, isn't the extraordinary just ordinary? While the visual components of the number are ironically extravagant and boisterous, its lyrics strip entertainment of the artificial importance it is oft assigned. All of this is to say that what the film critiques about show business can also be assumed to be critiques about life as an extension. As we will explore next, this is primarily done by accentuating the intrinsic artifice that defines the industry and products it creates. So, the number acts as both a critique of Hollywood's romanticization and one of many instances for Minelli's personal attitudes to shine through.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY: MUSICALS AS MIRRORS

By nature, the musical is a self-reflexive form.² By holding a metaphorical mirror to itself, the musical reveals the artificiality of its nature easily and often; even the most integrated musicals are not to be seen as things that do happen in real life (though they sometimes *could*: think *The Sound of Music*). Considering this, self-reflexivity can be quite a useful tool when wielded craftily. In *American Absurdism*, Hilton maintains that "If theatre reveals its own construction, the audience will notice that same constructed nature of the larger world surrounding the play" (20). He goes further to argue that this is the only way to get the audience to do so. I will focus the next several paragraphs on highlighting the numerous ways that self-reflexivity is utilized in *The*

² Self-reflexivity: referring to one's own composition and form.

Bandwagon, revealing over and over the ways that entertainment is constructed and thus inspiring the audience to see how the world is made of arbitrary constructions, too.

When Jeffrey agrees to work with Tony and the Martons, he gloats over the prospect of turning the show into a modern Faust tale. This is in reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*, in which the protagonist sells his soul to the devil at a crossroads for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. Hilton argues that a play staged outside of its normal setting can act as an emphasis of its own construction, and uses the example of *Hamlet's (2000)* use of a contemporary corporate setting to comment on issues that Shakespeare would have never imagined.³ The very same can be said about Jeffrey's attempted twentieth-century Faust re-spinning of the Martons' play script. The premise of this modernization draws light on the artifice of the musical in the film; it references Goethe's story but also references its own existence, making it glaringly obvious that a piece's meaning is entirely what one makes it. There is no inherent truth to a script because it is manipulatable, transmuted through each pair of eyes it passes through. If we take the previous connection between life and entertainment from "That's Entertainment," this echoes what we already know about existentialism: life is meaningless unless one decides to give it meaning, whatever that may be. The script being changed over and over by a variety of cast members demonstrates how human nature is always trying to find meaning or "truth." Again, this expresses Minelli's absurdist views, but more importantly helps guide the audience into a more introspective and involved viewing experience.

Similarly, the character of Tony Hunter is also self-referential. Hunter's career path very closely resembles Fred Astaire's, who had already come out of his first retirement from acting. This lends the movie a robust filmography from which to pull inspiration. The opening shot makes this abundantly clear from the get-go. It shows Tony's top hat and cane being auctioned off (or at least trying to be), evocative of the height of Astaire's career during the 1930s, when

³ Hilton, "American Absurdism."

he was frequently costumed in a top hat, white tie, and tails while starring alongside Ginger Rogers in RKO musicals. Furthermore, the auctioneer mentions that the items are from Hunter's picture 'Swinging Down to Panama,' a reference to Astaire's 1933 *Flying Down to Rio*. There are numerous other nods to Astaire's professional run up to this point, such as the number in Tony's version of *The Band Wagon* in which he dances with Jeffrey. In it, not only is he dressed in his classic ensemble, but they are also tap dancing together (as he did with Rogers). The list goes on. Such references to Astaire's career are an incessant reminder that he is an actor, and that, in turn, he is acting. Of this idea, Hilton wrote, "The illusion of the play dissipates when the character and the actor are portrayed as two distinct individuals" (27). This is illustrated beautifully during a cameo by Ava Gardner, another major movie star at the time the film was released. On the train to New York City, two men are discussing Tony's wilting career and Gardner's blossoming one, not knowing he is sitting right next to them. However, Gardner is a real celebrity that the audience knows and loves, while Tony is a figment of the film. This creates a dissonance between what is real and imaginary in the story world. When the two stars are later standing next to each other talking outside the train, it is hard to forget the artificiality of the movie being watched. Gardner playing herself juxtaposes against Astaire still being Tony Hunter. This incongruence brings us out of the illusion of the film and reminds us once again that Astaire is playing a character. Gardner reminds us of the world that Astaire really belongs to, where the "real" literally stands next to the "unreal". Ultimately, this parallelism between star persona and character functions to remind the audience of the inherent artifice of the production and see its constructions in real time.

GIRL HUNT BALLET

At the end of the film, Tony and the crew take their theatrical version of *The Band Wagon* and showcase it across America. Several short musical numbers from the production are shown, with "Girl Hunt Ballet" being the final number in both the play and the film. It features a

protagonist detective named Rod Riley (played by Tony/Astaire), a damsel in distress referred to as The Blond (played by Gabrielle/Charisse), and a sultry female character referred to as The Brunette (also played by Gabrielle/Charisse). The number opens with Rod wandering the city streets at night, when The Blond approaches him in apparent distress. A man then appears from offstage and picks up a mysterious bottle that then explodes, leaving nothing behind except three clue items. Rod follows these clues and ends up crossing paths with The Brunette, who he believes is the murderer. In a clever twist, however, The Blond is revealed to be the true killer and is promptly killed by Rod as a result. Taking this summary into account, the remainder of the article will analyze how individual components of the number contribute further to the film's ability to amplify philosophical and sociopolitical messages.

Camp. Camp sensibility is essential to the messaging behind "Girl Hunt Ballet", but can be difficult to define. It is a term used in a variety of contexts, its meaning shifting vastly from one use to the next. In the context of film musicals, camp is perhaps best described by an example. In *The Pirate (1948)*, Judy Garland plays Manuela, a beautiful, innocent femme. She is a classic damsel in distress, who is ultimately saved from an arranged marriage by a traveling circus performer, Serafin (Gene Kelly). However, Garland's performance of Manuela is so dramatically stereotypical—almost a bimbofication⁴—that it takes on a double meaning that contradicts the helplessness the character is meant to portray and takes it beyond its superficial value. It is a rebellion in a way, with Garland making fun of "her own image in the film or on the vehicle in which she has been placed" (Dyer 109).

The Pirate showcases many markers of camp, such as exaggeration, self-awareness, overexpression to convey double meaning, and undermining expectations. Ideas were often

⁴According to Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, a bimbo is defined as an attractive but vacuous woman ("Bimbo"). While the phrase has been reclaimed by online feminist movements in recent years, it has historically been used in an informal and derogatory context. Hence, "Bimbofication" here refers to Garland leaning into this notion of a female who has little more to offer than her sexual attractiveness and/or femininity.

communicated in this manner due to the Hays Code, which censored taboo topics in Hollywood for over three decades. Predictably, homosexuality was among these censored topics. MGM's Minelli-Freed unit (responsible for both *The Pirate* and *The Band Wagon*) is known for its use of camp during censorship, finding it an outlet to tell queer stories in ways outside of plot. Camp is not inherently queer, however. For example, it is frequently used in feminist texts. Circling back to *The Band Wagon*, camp is one of the primary mechanisms that ideology is expressed. With this explanation in mind, the article dissects more instances of camp below.

Noir. "Girl Hunt Ballet" is a quintessential factor of the camp expression in the film, but some additional background is needed to discern exactly why. The aforementioned scar on the American cultural memory can be observed across media as the weakening of trust in the American dream made ample space for a subcategory of film that harbored an acute sense of pessimism: *noir*. As Robert Porfirio puts it, film noir "places its emphasis on man's contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates" (81). This world is evident in the crime-riddled plotlines, quests for justice, unwelcoming cityscapes, and even in the stories' titles (*I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), *I Walk Alone* (1948), *Nobody Lives Forever* (1946), to name a few). Despite being a centerpiece musical number, *The Band Wagon's* "Girl Hunt Ballet" draws heavily from the film noir world. Filled with a jazzy, sultry score, detective/damsel/femme fatale archetypes, and an abundance of chiaroscuro⁵ lighting, it is no secret that the number references noir films of the time. But, recalling Richard Dyer's canonical work on musicals, one of the defining features of a Hollywood musical is the utopian feeling that it fills the viewer with.⁶ In this regard, film noir is the thematic antithesis of Dyer's utopian musical. This is what makes "Girl Hunt

⁵ Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines chiaroscuro as the arrangement or treatment of light and dark parts in a pictorial work of art. In film studies, it specifically refers to the use of high contrast between dark and light to direct the viewer's eye and evoke emotion.

⁶ Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia."

Ballet” particularly interesting. The number’s existence in a Hollywood musical is camp in itself because the utopian mirage is disrupted by the dreariness that noir represents. This is why it feels out of place even in a revue-style show with little to no cohesion, plot, or theme. The contradiction between the musical’s optimism and noir’s pessimism—each of which are fundamentally tied to their respective genre—breaks audience expectations and allows *The Band Wagon* to distance itself from its subject matter. This violates a core tenet of what makes a musical a musical and communicates an indifference to itself. The contradiction is self-defeating, making both genres’ themes meaningless as they effectively cancel each other out in creating something entirely new.

Gender camp. The dichotomy of The Blond and The Brunette archetypes in “Girl Hunt Ballet” is another method in which the film exercises self-reflexivity, leaning into the camp self-awareness of Charisse’s acting. Though she plays both characters, they represent vastly different versions of femininity. These representations beg the audience to ask, what is different about the two women, if not the actor playing them? It takes the essence of the actor out of the question and forces the portrayal of the women to take prominence. The Blond takes form as a damsel in distress, dressing modestly in a yellow trench coat the first time we see her, and later in baby blue frills and lace. Furthermore, she is constantly falling into detective Rod Riley’s arms in dance, feigning submissiveness, helplessness, naivety. The Brunette, conversely, is a seductress; she wears sexy, form-fitting, sparkly gowns. Her choreography allows her to act as the aggressor in a suggestive back-and-forth between her and Rod. She is the femme fatale essential to the film noir structure the number is referencing. The narration in the sequence also strives to make a clear distinction between the two women. Rod says of The Blond, “There was something about this kid that made you want to protect her... for life.” While about The Brunette he says, “She was bad, she was dangerous. I wouldn’t trust her any farther than I could throw her.” It is obvious the number works hard to separate the two women with a rigid binary. This

juxtaposition forces the viewer to become an active participant instead of an observer, since it is nearly impossible to ignore the obvious commonality, despite stark differences between the two characters. The act of forceful participation instead of mere observation was crucial to the Absurdist plays of Europe during the prior decade. As discussed previously, Hilton argues that doing so not only causes audiences to deeper question the piece, but also the society they exist in. While there is no evidence that Minelli intentionally borrowed from the Theatre of the Absurd, there is no doubt that he achieves the same effect. This binary relationship serves a function in the number's narrative but, more importantly, highlights its own artifice once again.

This dichotomy is built upon other camp devices, which allow the number to also comment on heteronormative gender roles. The costuming is a major contributor to this, forcing Charisse-as-Gerard to essentially cosplay as the types of femininity each character falsely represents. The Blond's over-the-top helplessness is repetitive in the twelve-minute number, with her repeatedly falling into Rod's arms every time they dance together. The Brunette alternatively takes the lead in the dance on the floor of the Dem Bones Cafe. This is, of course, complimented by Rod's forced machismo, as demonstrated through his narration and fight-dance. Even the names play into the camp: the female characters are listed as simply "The Blond" and "The Brunette" on the playbill, and Rod's name is a less-than-subtle phallic innuendo that brings the concept of gender and sex forward. The exaggeration of these gender roles creates a double meaning. The fantasy of the feminine damsel is so over the top, and so clearly idealized that it mocks the ideals it glorifies with a tongue-in-cheek *je ne sais quoi*. This reads as a critique of heteronormative portrayals of gender, which by default is also a critique of a hetero-centered society. It is further emphasized when, at the end of the number, the killer is revealed to be the doe-eyed Blond. The irony contributes to the idea of artifice in that these stereotypes are cultural creations (or stage creations!) which don't actually inform us of a person's motives or inner character. By diverging from audience expectations, the meaninglessness of our collective subjective perceptions about femininity are highlighted. The irony is doubled when we

are forced to remember that the two characters are played by the same actress. This not only suggests that visual clues and social roles are arbitrary, but that it did not matter who was the killer in the end. The killer was the same person; the reveal, while surprising, is ultimately futile. Rod killed The Blond without hesitation—while he expected it to be the Brunette, knowing the truth does not change the outcome. This is echoed by Rod when he finds out who it is, saying, “Now I knew who the killer was, but it didn’t matter. Killers have to die.” Much like the example from *The Pirate*, The Blond’s ultimate death mocks the moral value associated with demure femininity.

Fourth Wall Breaks. The breaking of the fourth wall in “Girl Hunt Ballet” is the final element this article will dissect. Three times in the number, Rod looks directly into the camera at point-blank range. This instantly breaks the film’s illusion; it evokes a sense of intimacy with the viewer that is rare in musicals and Hollywood films in general. This simulated eye contact forces the audience member to engage with and participate in the show intellectually, once again driving the idea that Hollywood entertainment is by default a creation. It forces the viewer to cease simply observing and actively participate once again. It makes the viewer—now a participant—ask, what is the purpose of this? When Rod is looking at me, what is Fred Astaire, the actor, saying to me? This intuitive feeling is confirmed by context clues. The first instance of this happening is in the first scene in the number, after the man disintegrates and Rod is looking at the clue items. Rod’s narration says, “Like he was trying to tell me something. But what?” The addition of the question further creates the feeling of a one-on-one conversation with the actor. It begs the audience to ask themselves these questions, too, and by extension to similarly question other media they consume, as well as the world around them.

The second instance of a fourth wall break is after Rod wakes up from his beaten stupor. The last time is at the end of the number. Here, as he searches his suit pockets for a lighter, he narrates, “The city was asleep, the joints were closed ... And the killers were in their holes. I felt

good, but something was missing.” The Brunette’s hand then appears from out of frame, lighting the cigarette that hung from his lips. From a purely diegetic⁷ standpoint, this may be explained as a romantic quip; she is what he has been missing all along. She is the cure to his isolation in a cruel world. But given the context of the other instances of eye contact, what was missing is much more abstract than romance. What was missing was a meaning at all. This lack expresses Minelli’s existential views one last time before the curtain draws to a close, acting as one final plea for the audience to react introspectively.

CONCLUSION

The Band Wagon is an undercover agent of sorts, rebelling against the very ideas that the Hollywood musical sets out to exude. It is able to use a form infamous for its superficiality, glitz, and glam, and turns it into a piece of art that begs the audience to dig deeper. Ironically, it uses this superficiality to emphasize its philosophical exploration. Instead of an abundance of melodramatic set design, extravagant numbers, and other markers of the camp sensibility that Minelli/Freed unit musicals usually employ, it is much more subtle, using the self-referential nature of musicals to its advantage. Astaire’s nostalgic discography does a lot of heavy lifting to continuously point out the spotlight, breaking illusions of entertainment and expanding the world of the film. Tongue-in-cheek interactions with the viewer’s attention push this further, like the fourth wall breaks in “Girl Hunt Ballet” and Ava Gardner’s cameo, forcing the audience to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality and consume the film in a sociological context. Noir’s spirit-crushing essence combined with camp inclinations join perfectly to create a funhouse of mirrors, questioning the media that we consume and the constructs that we accept. With the height of the musical far in the rearview mirror, the explorations of this article are not necessarily temporally relevant but serve as an interesting model for the horizon. In an era where

⁷ Diegetic: existing within the story world.

engagement algorithms are king, social media companies provide an endless stream of content that provides an escapist solace, much like that of the Golden Era studio system. Taking the methodologies and gumption of pioneers like the Freed unit, contemporary filmmakers can relearn how to express ideas despite complexities of medium or hegemonic censorship. All in all, *The Band Wagon* is a wonderful testament to the notion of popular culture texts as having introspective and philosophical capacities that challenge the status quo as much as they entertain.

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