Alberto Mira, *The Pop Musical. Sweat, Tears and Tarnished Utopias*

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From Dear Evan Hansen (2021) and The Prom (2020) to In the Heights (2021), a plethora of musical films with highly pop-influenced scores have been released over the past few years, signaling yet another comeback of the musical film in movie theatres all around the world. As Alberto Mira writes in the conclusion to The Pop Musical. Sweat, Tears and Tarnished Utopias (2021), "certainly the musical [is] not as dead as some have argued" (p. 124). His book explores the new directions undertaken by musical films after 1955, a short time before the genre was declared antiquated and no longer adapted to the new social issues, transformed gender dynamics, and new sounds that rocked the United States from the 1960s onward. The chronology is interesting not only because 1955 is seldom considered a starting point in most historical studies of the musical – both as theatre or film genre – but also because it is intrinsically linked to music, and specifically to the birth of pop music and rock and roll. As Mira explains, "the shift in the music industry that took place during the mid-1950s shook the musical genre's key foundations" (p. 4). The book’s originality lies in the central argument that the "dynamics, uses, and meanings of pop music since the 1960s have had an impact on the evolution of key context and structural tropes in the musical genre and its audiences" (p. 4). Pop music is not simply defined as popular music but as "the music of the teenage rebellion" (p. 9) that emerged in 1955 – i.e. rock and roll. The term therefore broadly overlaps various musical genres like rock and roll, disco, and soul, "forms of
commercial music which reflect cultural attitudes and are addressed to various interpretive communities” (p. 12).

The term "pop musical" delineates a new subcategory of musical films defined by their use of pop music. Following in the footsteps of Rick Altman’s seminal study *The American Film Musical* (1975) which broke down the genre into three subcategories (the folk musical, the fairy tale musical, and the show musical), Mira’s study closely examines the variations, continuities, and radical transformations that the pop musical has brought to the genre. Its approach is overall diachronic, but also makes connections between films that are several decades apart. The second chapter thus navigates the gradual integration of pop songs within the film narrative, from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) to *Rocketman* (2019). Because pop music is the defining trait of the pop musical, the body of films assembled in the book is quite eclectic. By including films from the AIP beach party cycle, dance films like *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) or *Dirty Dancing* (1987), or even the more recent Elton John biopic *Rocketman*, Mira questions the canon and demonstrates how pop music has contributed to unsettling generic categories.

While Mira aims at efficiency, he also provides insights into scenes, editing and staging as an ensemble of elements that produce meaning. For instance, his analysis of the film version of *Dreamgirls* (2006) masterfully highlights the film’s direct tackling of the historical material in the story. From Elvis to Beyoncé, Mira also emphasizes the role of the star vehicle to convincingly demonstrate that the influence of pop on Hollywood cannot be reduced to sounds and songs. Another strong section of the book is his analysis of the often ambiguous social implications of dance in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Dirty Dancing*.

One might regret a lack of systematic recontextualization of those films within the broader history of the genre and its intrinsic link with Broadway. Indeed, the number of changes that have similarly affected Broadway musicals over the same period of time points to the ambiguities delineated in this book. Though the circulations between stage and screen do not form the core of Mira’s aesthetic and thematic exploration, they might have offered another insight into pop music’s entrenchment on the stage musical, including through the subgenre of the megamusical (or "poperetta"). Mira’s conclusion, entitled "Qualified Joys", underlines how the pop musical can tarnish and nuance the genre’s utopian tendencies. Yet, one might argue that a lot of Broadway musicals which do not necessarily belong to the pop repertoire have also contributed to darkening the genre and questioning its utopian potential (take Stephen Sondheim’s musicals, for instance).

Through Richard Dyer’s works, Mira approaches utopia as a central tenet to his study of pop musicals, as the book’s subtitle *Sweat, Tears and Tarnished Utopias* indicates. However, the introduction does not sufficiently delineate the utopias usually associated with musical film and theatre – more specifically, community-making and the dissolution of differences through one or several heterosexual pairings. The notion of utopia is a slippery and often contradictory one, and a stronger theoretical approach would have made a redefinition of the term emerge more clearly. Perhaps the most interesting "utopia" brought about by these films is the one associated with Mira’s reading of *Velvet Goldmine*, which explains how "pop performance shapes audiences’ worldviews and identities" (p. 117). Mira comes to the conclusions that these pop musicals, despite their ambivalent claim for liberation and the lies at the foundation of
the pop music industry, "did achieve something like a utopia" (p. 118). Perhaps this "something" owes to the collective force of pop music – one of the key notions in the book – which is expressed through the composite nature of the term "pop", but also resonates deeply within collective memories and experiences, as The Pop Musical successfully demonstrates.

NOTES

1. Mira states that his approach is not dissimilar to that of Kelly Kessler in Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity and Mayhem, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, one of the very few studies on musical films that take the 1960s as their starting point. As a result, Kessler’s book moves away from the classical age as the sole aesthetic and thematic point of reference and rehabilitates a body of musical films that were long considered as not being part of the canon.

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