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Metatheatre and the body as commodity: To what extent can showgirls be seen as figures of resistance in Hollywood Films 1930-1940?

Submitted to the Department of Design and Visual Arts in candidacy for Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Design for Stage and Screen Costume Design

Faculty of Film Art and Creative Technologies

2023

Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire in partial fulfilment for the BA (Hons) in Design for Stage and Screen. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed:

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents, Noel and Jacinta for their endless encouragement. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Siobhan O' Gorman, whose continued support and insightful feedback was invaluable throughout this process of writing my thesis and bringing my work to a higher standard.

Abstract

This thesis looks at the image of the showgirl in Hollywood films from the 1930s to the 1940s, through the lens of metatheatre and self-reflective cinema, to examine to what extent these showgirls act as figures of resistance to the voyeur/ exhibitionist exchange that takes place between the viewer and the performer. I focus on three films in this thesis, *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *42nd Street* (1933) and *Dance Girl Dance* (1940). This discussion looks at how theories such as Lionel Able's metatheatre, Erving Goffman's theories on impression management and Brecht's concepts concerning self-reflective theatre to examine the awareness the showgirl character in the film or the director of the film has in the image they put forward to the audience and to what extent do they have power and control of the exchange. I have considered the social, political and cultural concerns of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s as a basis for my discussion. There is an on the one hand and on the other hand approach to my argument in this thesis in that, on what hand I believe the showgirl characters' body are seen as commodity and objectified for the pleasure of the male voyeuristic audience, however on the other hand, through their awareness of this commodification they are able to take control of their position in the exchange and act as figures of resistance.

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to examine films centring on the image of the showgirl in American films in the 1930s and 1940s. I would like to investigate how on one hand the showgirls are represented as objects in a patriarchal system of exchange between the voyeuristic viewer and themselves as the exhibitionist performers. However, on the other hand, there are moments in which these showgirls act as figures of resistance to that very patriarchal system in their awareness of the exchange and their ability to negotiate this system to their own advantage. To do this I think it is important to focus on the self-reflexivity and the metatheatrical qualities of these films which will form an important backing for my discussion of showgirls as potential figures of resistance. This allows me to discern to what extent is there an awareness from the showgirl character or the director of the film of the exchange system they are putting forward for the viewer, whether that is the audience in the film or the viewers of the film itself. The films I have chosen to discuss in this thesis are *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *42nd Street* (1933) and *Dance Girl Dance* (1940). I will be discussing these films through the lens of more recent theories such as Lionel Able's theories on metatheatre, Erving Goffman's studies of performance in everyday life and Brecht's theory of self-reflexive theatre, but also in relation to the social, political and cultural concerns of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s.

To begin with, it is important to outline the social, political and cultural concerns of America from the 1930s to the 1940s. The 1930s brought about great change in American culture and society from the previous decade. After the glitz and glamour of the roaring 20's in America, came the sudden crash in the country's economy known as the Great Depression. The following statement from Patricia Mellencamp in her essay "Sexual Economics of *Gold Diggers of 1933,"* clearly highlights the impact this crash had on the American population:

> On October 24, 1929, the US stock market crashed. The crash resulted in a 1932 estimated unemployment figure of 13 million, out of a population of 123 million. Wages were 33 percent lower than in 1929. In spite of this decline in income, movie attendance was estimated at between 60 to 75 million per week. (Mellencamp, 2002, pp. 67-76)

I think it is interesting to note that even with the great decline in jobs and income, there was still a huge influx of people attending the cinema each week. The films acted as a form of escapism from the dire circumstances of the Depression. This highlights the value the people in the 1930s put into films and the influence the films of the time would have had on the population.

On top of this influence, films can act as a mirror for the identities in their production contexts, documenting the social, political and cultural concerns and the shifts in national identity, but also acting as an aid to the audiences of the time in navigating these cultural transitions. As John Belton states in his introduction to *Movies and Mass Culture:*

> The movies assist audiences in negotiating major changes in identity; they carry them across difficult periods of cultural transitions in such a way that more or less coherent national identity remains in place, spanning the gaps and fissures that threaten to disrupt its movement and to expose its essential disjointedness (Belton, 1995, pp.1-24).

Thir representation and assistance in the USA's changing identity can be clearly seen in the films I discuss in this thesis. The Great Depression is a recurring element in the films *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street,* while the theme of unemployment even after the Depression carries into *Dance Girl Dance.*

The crash in the economy not only brought with it the huge unemployment rate of the Depression, but also a shift in American national identity, from a nation of individualism to the mass collective. In "The Crowd Collective and the Chorus, Busby Berkeley and the New Deal," Martin Rubin (1995, pp. 59-94) points out that although it seems the shift from rugged individualism to the mass collective came from the Depression, there were many people in the 1920s beginning to take on the pessimism of the individualist and the beginning of the shift towards the mass collective. Examples of this idea of individualism can be seen in film characters of the 1920s such as Charlie Chaplin. Rubin goes on to use this idea of the shift in national identity and applies it to the work of Busby Berkeley and his "relationship to a fundamental shift in American socio-political attitudes that occurred in the late 1920s and early 1930s" (Rubin, 1995, pp. 59-94). This is all key to my thesis in analysing the portrayal of showgirls in 1930s and 1940s films: with two of the films *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street,* having production numbers directed by Berkeley, and all three films using showgirls as both characters in the narrative and performers in a spectacle, an interrogation into the work of Busby Berkeley is imperative. Understanding the shift in American culture from individualism to the mass collective highlights how the popularity of the uniformed showgirl ensemble reflected the changing ideals of the nation as opposed to the director's own personal view.

I would like to investigate his position in the role of the commodification of showgirls and how this relates to the extent to which showgirls act as figures of resistance in Hollywood films. On the one hand, scholars such as Steven Cohan in *Hollywood: The Film Reader* (2002, pp. 63-64), argues that:

> Perhaps no musicals better illustrate, not to say exploit, the blatant display of the female body than Busby Berkeley's. For many critics and viewers, his overhead camera shots of women arranged to form abstract patterns epitomizes the genre's ability to eroticize the female body, fragmenting it beyond recognition. (Cohan, 2002, pp. 63-64)

I discuss this view of Berkeley in greater depth throughout the thesis, commenting on the difference in how the showgirls are portrayed in the production numbers directed by Berkeley in contrast to the narrative sections of the films. Using contrasting viewpoints from various scholars is key in dissecting how the cultural and social ideas of Hollywood in the 1930s to 1940s adds context to how and why the showgirl image is portrayed in a certain way in the films I discuss. On one hand I have come across the idea that "even in a Berkeley musical, the genre simply reproduces without problematizing ideology which subordinates the female body to the gaze of the male voyeur" (Cohan, 2002, pp. 63-64). This brings us back to the idea of the cultural shift from individualism to the mass collective. Rubin argues that Berkeley's numbers do not unify and objectify the dancers into a solid dehumanised machine and that his spectacles "develop a much more complex and fluid interplay between the individual and the mass" (Rubin, 1995, pp. 59-4). I draw on these arguments in my thesis but build on them further, using the work of Able and Goffman to highlight the deeper complexities that can be explored when discussing the showgirl image. Here Rubin is painting the image of the showgirl in a highly simplified manner, as passive objects in uniformed formation which reflects the ideals of Hollwood in the 1930s to 1940s. I hope to highlight in this thesis that there is much more to the discussion than this and that by using the performance theories that I have mentioned above, I can highlight how the showgirls are not simply passive objects but figures of resistance.

To foreground this argument, it is important to note Berkeley's background and how it fits in with the ideologies of the time. Berkeley was educated in a military academy. He eventually was shipped off to France where he became second lieutenant and then entertainment officer where he "choreographed and conducted all manner of military marches, manoeuvres and parade drills" (Hoberman, 1993, pp.1-79). This reveals the origins of Berkeley as a choreographer and a reason behind the uniformity of his choreography. He then went on to become a Broadway director in which he was influenced heavily by the Ziegfield follies for his ensemble choreography, before moving to film.

Berkeley had a fascination with this new idea of mass collectivism and the machine. His spectacles are a celebration of the collective and perhaps a celebration of the dehumanization of beings into cogs in a spectacular display of beauty. As Rubin states:

> In Berkeley's numbers, the experience of losing oneself in the group, in the big ensemble, is presented as primarily ecstatic. It is a moment of transcendence and sublimation, analogous to orgasm but erupting beyond the confines of the ego to fuse self and society, sexuality and politics, emotion and ideology. (Rubin, 1995, pp. 59-74)

Berkely is a product of his time and the changing ideals of American society, the shift from individualism to the mass. In this thesis I investigate to what extent Berkeley was influenced by the ideals of the time and the result of this influence shown in his choreography. The numbers act as a sort of propaganda, glamorising the impersonality of the mass collective. All this is important in relation to the films I will discuss in this essay and the extent to which Berkeley's input into these films either serves to further subordinate the showgirl image into that of a dehumanised object for male pleasure, and/or his choreography is simply a result of his background and the ideology of the time in which he lives. Therefore, it is a question of the extent to which his production numbers are simply a celebration for the idea of the mass collective, or can they be seen as a tool in the objectification and dehumanisation of the showgirls?

On top of this interrogation into Berkeley who choreographed the first two films I discuss in this thesis *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street,* it is also important to make a note of Dorothy Arzner who directed the third film I discuss, *Dance Girl Dance.* Arzner was the only working female director in Hollywood at the time of the film's release in 1940 (Casella, 2009, pp. 235-270). This is significant in relation to my thesis in exploring the difference in how the showgirls are portrayed in *Dance Girl Dance* in contrast to the other two films. In this thesis I use metatheatre as a tool in discussing the way in which showgirl characters and directors present themselves and the film to the viewer. This metatheatrical element is used most notably by Arzner in the film in a scene where the character of Judy directly addresses the audience of the film, while simultaneously addressing us the viewer of the film. A look into the socio-political climate during Arzners filmmaking according to Casella (2009, pp. 235-270) reveals that "gender norms in the United States were under scrutiny as a result of women's newly hard one political, educational and economic rights." This gives us an idea of the environment in which Arzner was working with while creating the film and how this could have potential effects on the contents of the film. In this thesis I discuss the similarities between *Dance Girl Dance* and the other two films, but also how they differ. Mainly in how the showgirl's awareness of the voyeuristic/ exhibitionist exchange between the audience and performer are addressed. *Dance Girl Dance* is perhaps the most successful of the three films in portraying the showgirls as figures of resistance as opposed to commodification which I will explore in this thesis. This is perhaps largely due to the fact that Arzner was a woman and therefore was looking at the showgirls from a different perspective than Berkeley.

Fig 1. Dorothy Arzner directing

Fig 2. Busby Berkeley surrounded by images of his choreographed sequences of showgirls

It is also important to note a great change that happened specifically in the realm of cinema at this time, which was the introduction of the Hays Code. The Hays Code was a serious of censorship guidelines for film introduced in the 1930s (Lewis, 2021). Before the introduction of the Hays Code there were much less restrictions on the content of film. For example, in films in the 1920s women characters on screen could have children out of wedlock, get divorced and enjoy sexual freedom. However, this all changed after the code was introduced. It became very rare for a woman in film to do anything "morally corrosive and get away with it" (Casella, 2009, pp. 235-270). Even for a female character to conclude a film happily without a man was rare. This is a key element to note when discussing the three films as they were all filmed within the restrictions of the Hays Code. Therefore, it is significant, in the context of the Code, that elements of resistance portrayed by the showgirl characters or directors of the films may be implied rather than shown. Women's liberation in this period needed to be negotiated in subtle ways through sometimes subtle acts of resistance. Subsequent chapters will discuss this, in particular the subtlety of the resistance in *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street,* and the less subtle resistance in *Dance Girl Dance.*

To successfully analyse the portrayal of the showgirl's body as a commodity versus as a symbol of resistance in Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s, I draw on theories and discussions relating to the idea of self-reflexivity, performance in everyday life and metatheatre.

Metatheatre is the idea that there is an awareness from the characters on stage or in a performance that they are performing. The term was first coined by Lional Able in 1963, in his book *Metatheatre: A New Vision of Dramatic Form* (1963). It's the idea of 'a play within a play' or the performers awareness that they are performing. Another feature of metatheatre according to Thomas Rosenmeyer is that:

> The audience is drawn to the theatrical space and into the development of the action, so much so that the events are not so much impressed upon our receptive minds, as they are

> the result of our constructive responsiveness, somewhat along the lines of reader-response theory (Rosenmeyer, 2002, pp. 235-270).

If applying metatheatre to the three films I discuss in this essay, I can discern to what extent the showgirls, and by extension the filmmakers, have an awareness of the exchange system in which they are a part of, in terms of their characters performing for the audience in the film but also the viewer of the film itself. In the case of the quote above, this theory can be applied to how the audience of the films are unified with the audience in the film as we are drawn into the theatrical space.

Taking this a step further, I wish to analyse not only how the showgirls are aware of their performing and role in the exchange system of the physical theatre space in the films, but also how there is an element of performance off stage, in the narrative section, or in the case of the characters in their everyday life. To explore this, I use Erving Goffman's theories of impression management and performance in everyday life. Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is a 1956 classic sociology book, in which the author uses the imagery of theatre in order to portray the importance of human social interactions; this approach would become known as Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. Ashleigh Crossman describes this theory as follows:

> According to Goffman, social interaction may be likened to a theatre, and people in everyday life to actors on a stage, each playing a variety of roles. The audience consists of other individuals who observe the role-playing and react to the performances. In social interaction, like in theatrical performances, there is a 'front stage' region where the actors are on stage before an audience, and their consciousness of that audience and the audience's expectations for the role they should play influence the actor's behaviour. There is also a back region, or 'backstage,' where individuals can relax, be themselves, and the role or identity that they play when they are in front of others (Crossman, 2019).

This idea can be applied firstly in the way the showgirl characters perform for the literal audience in the films, but also how they perform in the social interactions and settings backstage. I use this idea throughout my thesis when discussing each of the three films. In each of the films we see the showgirls performing on a stage but on deeper inspection into their social encounters off stage we can see that they are still playing a role. In the three chapters that follow I discuss how this idea of performance in everyday life serves to benefit the situations of the showgirls and allows them to gain control of the patriarchal system in which they exist. The characters use this idea of performing in everyday life to subtlety negotiate resistance and female liberation without notably disrupting the social systems of the time which oppose them.

There is also the question of the self-reflexive quality of the films and how analysing them gives the audience an awareness of these metatheatrical and performative qualities which I have just discussed. Brecht's theory of self-reflexive theatre can be used as an implement in exploring the showgirl as a figure of resistance in Hollywood films. Further than this, drawing here on the work of Angelos Koutsourakis on Brechtian theory, I apply this theory to the musical films which I discuss in subsequent chapters. It is the idea that a film draws an attention and awareness to itself or to concerns outside the realm of the movie. In "Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflective Cinema", Dana B. Polan (1974) states that the self-reflexivity in film can be seen as the "attitudes an artwork can adopt towards the material world and the dynamics of history." I use this idea in my thesis to reveal

the ways in which the three films draw attention to the commodification of the showgirl body and the exchange system between the audience and the performer. This audience/ performer dynamic refers to both the literal audience and performer but also the off-stage performance between the showgirls and other characters of the films.

An interrogation and understanding of this audience/ performance dynamic is crucial when discussing the tension between the commodification of the showgirl image and her resistance to the exchange. Laura Mulvey discusses this dynamic in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' with her analysis of voyeurism and exhibitionism. In this thesis I draw on Mulvey's discussion of scopophilia and the idea of women as spectacle for the pleasure of the male viewer (1975, 57-68). The idea of the exchange between voyeuristic audience and the exhibitionist showgirl is central to this discussion, as is the tension between who holds the power in the exchange. In this thesis I discuss how these power relations are negotiated more subtly than perhaps Mulvey's seminal article suggests.

Accordingly, I have explored all these components throughout three chapters. 'Chapter One: *Gold Diggers of 1933*' looks at the tension between how the showgirls are portrayed in the film in the narrative sections directed by Mervyn LeRoy and the spectacles directed by Busby Berkeley. 'Chapter Two: *42nd Street*' examines individual characters in the film and how the metatheatrical and self-reflectivity of the characters are implemented to either support the commodification of the female body or used as devices of resistance. Finally, 'Chapter Three: *Dance Girl Dance*' looks at the relationship between the showgirl and her audience and how the film draws attention to itself. As we shall see, having the showgirl call attention to the representational strategies of the film (and the shows that it depicts) in this way positions the showgirl in this film in particular as a figure of resistance.

Chapter One Gold Diggers of 1933

Gold Diggers of 1933 is a comedy musical film directed by Mervyn LeRoy, a contract studio director, and Busby Berkeley. The movie follows the showgirls, Polly, Carol, Trixie and Faye who are struggling due to the Great Depression in the US in 1933. The film is the second backstage musical made by Warner Brothers that year, after the success of the film *42nd Street*. The film is based on the 1919 play *Gold Diggers* by Avery Hopwood, which ran for 282 performances on Broadway. David Belasco, the play's producer turned it into a silent film in 1923, and again as a talkie in 1929, directed by Roy Del Ruth. The film was entitled *Gold Diggers of Broadway* and was one of the biggest box office hits of that year. This version of the play was written by James Seymour and Erwin S. Gelsey and was one of the top-grossing films of 1933.

The direction of the film was shared, with the narrative sections being directed by Mervyn LeRoy, and the spectacles directed by Busby Berkeley. Because of this, perhaps, there is a division in the styles and narrative of these two alternating types of scenes. In parts, the film underscores the idea of women as commodity, and that the showgirls are part of a uniformed group that serve as objects of voyeuristic pleasure, á la Laura Mulvey's discussion of scopophilia and the idea of women as spectacle for the pleasure of the male viewer (1975, 57-68). However, in other scenes the women are portrayed as strong, witty, intelligent individuals who find solidarity in female friendship. I discuss this portrayal of women as commodity in the following chapter and consider to what extent do these characters appear to have awareness and control over this exchange. I also discuss how metatheatrical elements help to disrupt the ease with which female bodies are commodified, mainly using Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* as a basis for this discussion.

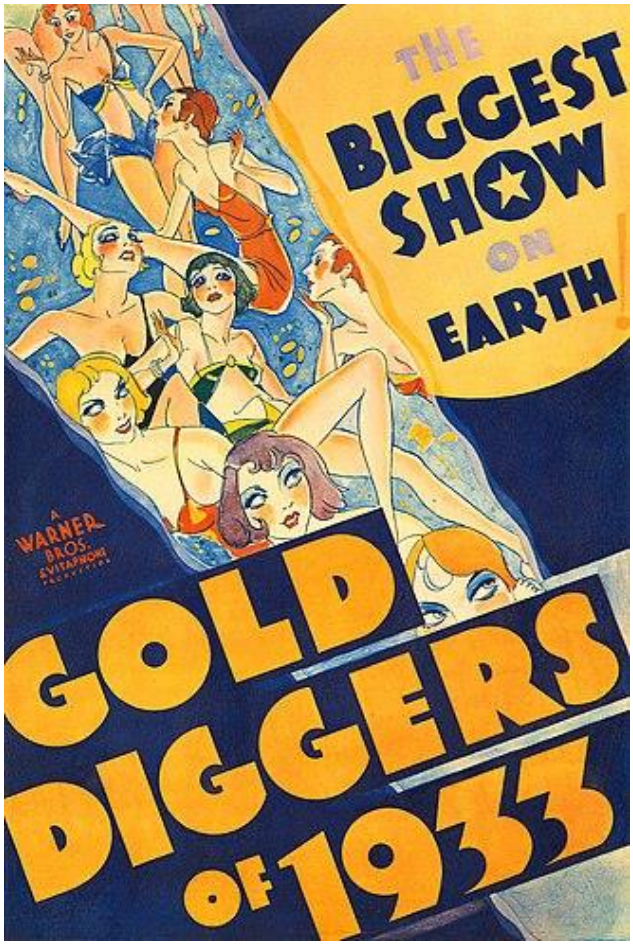

Fig 3. Theatrical release poster for *Gold Diggers of 1933.* The poster depicts an illustration of scantily dressed showgirls.

Polly, Carol, Trixie and Fay are four showgirls out of work due to the Depression. When the opportunity for a show and a chance to work again comes along, Polly's beau Brad Roberts comes to the rescue and provides the finance for the show. It is then revealed that Brad comes from a wealthy family in Boston, who, on hearing about his involvement in show business come to put a stop to it. J. Lawrence, Brad's Brother and their family lawyer Fanuel Peabody arrive with the intention of dismantling Brad's involvement with the showgirls. However, it is clear from the beginning that the showgirls are the ones in control of the situation.

After learning of Lawrence's plan to try and dismantle Brad and Polly's relationship, based on his sexist and classist views of showgirls as 'gold diggers,' Carole and Trixie take charge of the situation and decide to deceive Lawrence and Peabody. Being aware that Lawrence is a man who believes in the patriarchal constructs that pervade society, the women use this to their advantage, as Mellencamp (2002, pp. 65-76) explains:

> The women use men's false (stereotypical) notions about women's character to get what they want. Masquerade and the double standard become story, with the audience keyed in on the deception, told from the woman's point of view. The marital inevitability is manipulated by the women for economic pleasure and gain as much as, or more than the romance. (Mellencamp, 2002, pp. 65-76)

There is a metatheatrical element here. The women are playing roles, albeit in everyday life. As per Erving Goffman's theory in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the idea of the front stage, backstage and off stage could be applied here. According to Goffman, the front stage region is where the characters perform in front of an audience, i.e., the showgirls performing directly to the audience in the spectacles. The backstage region is where the actors can relax and be themselves. Off stage, is the performance the actors give to the audience when they are not on stage (Goffman, 1969). This can be applied in relation to the performance the showgirls give to Lawrence and Peabody. Using metatheatre and performance, the showgirls act as figures of resistance against the patriarchal system. The showgirls play into the image the men have of them and in doing so they use the exchange to their advantage. By performing in everyday roles off stage the showgirls negotiate a way to benefit from the exchange and liberate themselves, showing their superior wit and intelligence to the audience.

The men believe that because the women are showgirls and of a lower class, they must be gold diggers. Trixie and Carol play into this notion: they get the men to buy them expensive clothing, bring them to extravagant restaurants and ultimately play into the men's assumptions by deceiving them into thinking they are prostitutes. As Linda Mizejewski in her essay "Beautiful White Bodies" aptly observes: "The narrative and staging of Gold Diggers of 1933 suggests straightforwardly that the only reliable work for women is sex-illegally, as prostitution or legally, as marriage. Gold digging, conveniently enough, refers to both." (2002, 183-193). It is clear here that the showgirls are completely aware of the stereotypes the men connect them with and use this to their advantage. They are in control of the exchange, not the men. Mulvey states that a woman as a sexual object, "holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire" (1965, 57-68). What the women are doing here in the narrative, is playing into the voyeurism. In doing this, they simultaneously undermine and disrupt it. The audience are in on their charade. The viewer is aware that the showgirls are playing into the men's stereotypical views of them and using this knowledge to their advantage. Therefore, any aspect of the showgirls being perceived as sexual objects for the pleasure of the audience is undermined.

Lawrence and Peabody inherited their wealth; they come from families of old money, and potentially never had to earn or work for any of their wealth and privilege. Throughout the film, the audience never sees the men working. In fact, they are only ever shown in nightclubs or restaurants and other social settings. In contrast to this, it is clear in the film that the showgirls had to work for everything they have. The film paints the women as resourceful and intelligent compared with the foolishness of the men. Mizejewski (2002, 183-193) makes a similar point, "The film goes through great pains to expose the contradictions in women's economic predicaments and in men's foolishness in falling for superficial female images." This is important to note, as by doing this the audience becomes sympathetic towards the female characters and how although they do not match the male characters in finances, they supersede them in intelligence, wit and resourcefulness. The film brings the audience in on the deception and through the point of view of the women. Like *Dance Girl Dance* (1940) which will be discussed in Chapter 3, the female protagonists have an awareness of their role as supposed 'products' in a patriarchal system and use their awareness for their own benefit. They reveal this system of exchange to the audience and bring the audience into their experience.

There is a metatheatrical and self-reflexive element to the narrative á la Able and Brecht. The female characters appeal directly to the audience and are reflective of themselves. Patricia Mellencamp in "Sexual Economics: *Gold Diggers of 1933*" addresses this appeal the showgirls make with the audience of the film, "the narrative is thus an address and an appeal to women-who are let in on the

joke which is on J. Lawrence and Fanuel. These chorus girls are not stupid, inexperienced characters" (2002, p. 67-76). By bringing the audience in on the joke, which in of itself is metatheatre and self-reflexive, the showgirls are performing a subtle act of resistance to their supposed commodification. The chorus girls are fully aware of this exchange and use it solely for their benefit and to make a fool out of the men. The audience is aware of what is going and how the women are playing the men, but it is not directly addressed to the audience. The audience are left to figure it out for themselves.

Carol and Trixie finally play the ultimate trick on Lawrence by intoxicating him and putting him in Carol's bed so that he would awake thinking he slept with her. When he wakes, he gives Trixie a cheque, assuming that Carol is a prostitute. Carol later has the cheque framed to remind her "never to get mixed up with [Lawrence's] kind again!" (*Gold Diggers of 1933,* 1933). Lawrence's immediate reaction of payment after the time he had spent with Carol and after evidently falling in love with her is further proof of his viewpoint that she is a commodity in which he can buy. This perpetuates the idea of the female performer as commodity, not only in a voyeuristic sense, but the notion that her physical body is for sale. Whether it is in the form of prostitution or later in the film, marriage, the film's narrative gives the showgirls little choice in their position in the exchange. Regardless of the superior wit, intelligence, resourcefulness and knowledge that the women possess, the concluding message that the film seems to be conveying is that it is wealth that trumps in the exchange. However, when analysing the film in relation to metatheatre, performance in everyday life and self-reflexivity, I believe that there is still a subtle sense of resistance portrayed by the showgirls in how they navigate the confined and restricting situation they exist in (due to the social, political and cultural concerns of the 1930s in America).

Fig 4. Ginger Rogers as Fay on stage with a group of chorus girls dressed identically as coins preforming, the opening number of the film, 'We're in the Money.'

To disjoint the viewer from the narrative sections of the film in which I have described above, is the insertion of dazzling choreographed sections known as spectacles. Busby Berkeley's spectacles serve to dazzle the audience and disjoint the viewer from the narrative. The above image is the opening number of the film, directed by Berkely, 'We're in the Money.' The sequence consists of a large, synchronised group of showgirls dressed as coins. It is the first of five spectacles Berkeley directs in the film. Spectacles, according to Mellencamp (2002, 65-76), are "enclosed units within the larger narrative, set off by a system of visual and aural brackets." She goes on to explain that "these spectacles mirror the narrative, have beginnings and endings, and presumably might rupture the filmic illusion of reality and halt the forward movement of the story" (Mellencamp, 2002, 65-76). In the context of Berkeley's spectacles in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, the sequences do disjoint the illusion of reality that was created through the narrative and halt the progression of the story as Mellencamp states. However, I disagree with her statement that they mirror the narrative. In the case of *Gold Diggers of 1933*, the spectacles are connected to the story in that they are also set in The Great Depression, but they also provide a contradiction (rather than a mirror) to the narrative.

As I mentioned above, the portrayal of the showgirls in the narrative are of witty, intelligent individuals who find solidarity in female friendship. In contrast to this, the synchronised showgirls in the spectacles perform in unison like cogs in a machine with the choreography and costumes reflecting a uniformed display of fetishized beauty. Laura Mulvey discussed this idea of the fetishized female body parts in her essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema":

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 1975, 57-68).

Here, Mulvey is pointing out the use of women as a key symbol of eroticism in film. Women displayed as sexual objects, is a recurring theme in erotic spectacle, as we can see here in Berkeley's musical numbers, but even prior to this with the Ziegfield follies, pin ups and strip tease. As Mulvey states, "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey, 1975, 57-68). Therefore, the spectacles in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, serve to disrupt the narrative of the showgirls' story, to provide moments of eroticism for the audience and halt the progression of the narrative. The question is whether in doing this, is the resistance towards the patriarchal society that the showgirls display in the narrative undermined by their position as sexual objects for the viewer's pleasure?

The portrayal of the showgirls in these sequences, such as "We're in the Money" and "Pettin' in the Park," serve to standardise the showgirls into a collective product to please their audience. Mulvey discusses the idea of scopophilia, and the pleasure of looking. She explains how Freud associated scopophilia "with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey, 1975, 57-68). Berkeley's spectacles demonstrate this theory in a very literal sense by standardising the showgirls into a unified product for the pleasure of the viewer. In these spectacles the women are a collective commodity, promoting the spectatorial position of male voyeur. Berkely's "overhead camera shots of women arranged to form abstract patterns epitomizes the genre's ability to eroticize the female body, fragmenting and fetishizing it beyond recognition." (Cohan, 2002, 63-64). Berkely uses interesting camera angles matched with elaborate set and costume to further subordinate the female body to the gaze of the male viewer. The costumes

represent a literal commodification and transformation of female forms into an object. The showgirls' dressed as coins are a literal representation of their value in the patriarchal system of exchange in which they exist. Representing inanimate objects in the costumes leads the viewer to equate the wearer of these costumes with these objects. The showgirls are the currency.

The spectacles serve as a high point of pleasure for the viewer of musicals. In the case of *Gold Diggers*, there is a slight metatheatrical element to them, in that the showgirls are aware they are performing to an audience. This materialises in two levels. First, they are performing to the fictional audiences of the film, but further than this they are performing to us the viewer of the film. In the film, there is no physical portrayal of the audience, the sequences are performed directly to the camera. This serves so make the viewer of the film feel that we are the audience the showgirls are performing towards. As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, the use of metatheatre can serve to bring the audience into the film. In "Metatheatre: An Essay on Overload", T. Rosenmeyer states, that metatheatre "works as a mirror reflecting the playwright's self, or it reflects (upon) itself and its position within the generic realm of drama" (2002, 235-270). If this is the case in relation to these spectacles, Berkley is attempting to reflect his idealisations onto the viewer through the performance. The spectacles are underscoring the narrative of the play, highlighting the struggles of the Depression such as the symbols of gold coins in "We're in the Money" ironically contrasting to the very lack of money at the time or in "Where is My Forgotten Man," highlighting the loneliness and abandonment people of the Depression feel. However, these numbers also appeal directly to the audience, which heightens the impact they have on the viewer. The spectacles amplify the commodification of the woman's body as a product suitable for show. Linda Mizeiewski argues that "Berkley's women as mass-produced images materialize and complete the production of woman as glorified and trademarked" (2002, 183-193). The showgirls in the spectacles are products of fetishized pleasure for the male, voyeuristic audience.

Although the subject matter of the spectacles relates to the narrative, with the use of the same characters and the references to the Depression, they also contrast each other in how the showgirls are portrayed. In contrast to the individualism of the showgirls in the narrative, Berkeley uses the "play within a play" element of the spectacle to clearly and effectively underscore the view of women as commodity. As Mellencamp states, "Men transform female sex into art as an excuse, a cover-up for male desire" (2002, 65-76). These dazzling spectacles guise themselves as art and as a tool to underscore the narrative of the film. The narrative story of the film represents the showgirls as hard-working, intelligent individuals as opposed to the collective, unified product we see in the spectacles. Mellencamp sums up this point:

> While the narrative is propelled by these fast talking, inventive women, in the spectacles (which freeze the story's advance) they become identical, anonymous, Freudian symbols. In fact, their masquerade serves to make them so identical that Ruby Keeler, the film's star, is unnoticed in the anonymous chorus line of 'We're in the Money.' In one reading, the end functions as a resolute, albeit "logical," containment of women, which includes separating them. (Mellencamp, 2002, 65-76)

Although there are similarities between the narrative and the spectacle sections of *Gold Diggers of 1933*, they contrast how they depict the showgirls. Throughout the narrative, the showgirls reveal to the audience their superior knowledge and wit they have over the men and expose how antiquated and ridiculous the men's views on showgirls are. Despite this, the film ends with a resolution of the girls all becoming reliant on the men whom they have married. In this way, it could be seen that the narratives and the spectacles relate to each other in more ways than solely through the theme of the Great Depression. However, I believe there is no doubt that the narrative portrays the women in

a much deeper level than simply dazzling objects of beauty. Even if the narrative has a subtle message of women's place in society and their reliance on men to survive, I think this is discredited by how the showgirls make use of this situation to their advantage, creating a subtle act of resistance, which under the theories of metatheatre and self-reflexive cinema highlights to the audience the superiority and deeper emotional intelligence of the female characters.

Chapter Two: 42nd Street

This chapter focuses on another MGM production with choreography by Busby Berkeley, the 1933 film *42nd Street*. The film was the first of three MGM backstage musicals released in 1933, in an effort to revive the musical as a form (Hoberman, 1933, pp. 1-5). The film follows an identifiable cycle, similar to *Gold Diggers of 1933,* which I discussed in my last chapter. Each film contains production numbers directed by Busby Berkeley with the narrative directed by someone else. Each film also centres on a story about putting on a show, using showgirls as both characters in the narrative and performers in the spectacle. In the introduction, I gave a brief analysis into Busby Berkeley. In this chapter, I use this analysis of Berkeley to examine to what extent his position plays in the commodification of showgirls in this film. Through a discussion of Berkeley's spectacles in this film, I will consider how these musical numbers and the staging of the showgirls portray the showgirls' body as commodity. In my last chapter I discussed the metatheatrical elements of Berkeley's staging through his use of camera angles, sets and dance formations. I would like to further discuss this here in relation to the dancers and their potential awareness of this meta-theatricality. It is important when entering this discussion to make note of the shift in American national identity in the 1930s from the individual to the mass collective and how this has played into Berkeley's work. Similar to the last chapter, my discussion of the film can be broken into two separate sections between the narrative section and the performative spectacle. I will discuss the narrative with a focus on the intertwining stories of the two female protagonists Dorothy Brock, the already successful leading lady played by Bebe Daniels, and Peggy Sawyer, the innocent and naïve newcomer, played by Ruby Keeler. Although the two films, *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street* appear very similar, they differ greatly in how the showgirls are portrayed in the narrative. Dorothy and Peggy represent two contrasting symbols of the showgirl image. I investigate in this chapter how both of these juxtaposing roles play into the patriarchal system and how they might be seen as figures of resistance to this system. These characters can be seen to be playing a metatheatrical role, performing in everyday life, in the manner of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* To bring it back to Berkeley and his role in the world of the showgirls of the 1930s, the character of Julian Marsh potentially holds a position as a filmic representation of Berkeley: like an author putting himself in a play. I am interested in the effect that this portrayal has on the viewer.

Fig 5. Julian Marsh directing the showgirls in 42nd Street.

One of the potential key instruments of metatheatre is the way in which an author can put himself in the play. In the case of 42nd Street, the character of Julian Marsh appears to have immense similarities to Busby Berkely. Both Berkeley and Marsh are showrunners that choreograph mass sequences with a collective group of showgirls. Perhaps, in portraying a representation of the showrunner and choreographer in the film influences how the audience views the sequences. Marsh appears as a hard-working and passionate man, who through his intensity and obsessiveness with every show he puts on, has already caused himself one heart attack and is in great risk of another. He is shown as a tough man to work for, pushing the dancers to exhaustion every rehearsal up until the night before the show. He is clearly focused on the women as objects and dehumanises them throughout the film, such as making them lift their skirts in the first round of auditions to show their legs. He does all this for his vision of a unified group of unindividual dancers to perform as a collective machine of spectacle to be realised. However, despite his harshness there is an endearing quality to the character. It can be perceived that he believes his passion and intensity should be seen as greatness when he says:

> Why even the cops and the newsboys recognize me on sight. 'Marsh, the Magnificent.' 'Marsh the Slavedriver!' Actors tell ya how Marsh drove 'em and bullied 'em and even tore it out of 'em! And maybe there's a few that'll tell ya how Marsh really made 'em. And they've all got somethin' to show for it-except Marsh (*42nd Street,* 1933).

Marsh is aware of his harshness, but instead of showing remorse for his behaviour towards people, he seems to only care about how he doesn't get enough credit out of it as he thinks he deserves. The effect of this is that the audience feels similar towards Marsh as he feels about himself. If Marsh is a

reflection of Berkeley, it gives a deeper undertone to the film and how we see the showgirls. T. Rosenmeyer describes what Lional Able's theory says about the author putting himself in the play:

> The play, [film], it is thought, works as a mirror reflecting the playwright's self, or it reflects (upon) itself and its position within the generic realm of drama. The artists self-consciousness produces an art that is self-conscious in that it submits its product to an internal evaluation and to a ricocheting between form and intention (Rosenmeyer, 2002, pp. 235-270).

Perhaps the character of Marsh is referencing a view of Berkeley and his work, whether it is Berkeley's view of himself or the impression that society would have had on him at the time. Here the film is being self-reflexive on itself, making the audience aware of the supposed struggles of the choreographer in what he is trying to achieve. When we look at this in the context of today, using a self-reflective lens, the character of Marsh creates a tension between the struggles of the choreographer and the struggles of the showgirls. By painting this view of the choreographer to the audience, it serves to dilute any sympathy the audience has towards the showgirls in how harshly they are treated by the choreographer.

At the end of the film, after Ruby Keeler performs wonderfully on stage and saves the show, Marsh exhales his last woeful scene as if speaking directly to the audience, how he has done it again, made another success, another star, and will again get no credit for any of it. If Marsh is mirroring Berkeley, then any views the audience of the film has of Marsh when watching the film then gets reflected onto their views of Berkeley. The idea of the cruel showrunner and the objectification of women as necessity in making a good show is prevalent in the character of Marsh. Creating a character that has all these negative traits yet is a figure of sympathy for the audience, serves to simultaneously paint Berkeley and his objectification of women in his spectacles in a much more positive light. It highlights the hard work of the choreographer and undermines any praise due to the dancers as they are simply tools the choreographer uses to bring his vision to life.

Fig 6. Busby Berkeley directing showgirls, note the similarities between this picture and the above picture of Marsh.

On the surface, *42nd Street* is a backstage musical about a young, unknown girl getting her big break and becoming a star. However, on closer inspection the film reveals much about the underlying seediness of the glamourous showbiz world. Ruby Keeler plays the bright eyed and innocent girl next door, Peggy Sawyer, who decides to try her hand at showbusiness. She arrives to the audition of a brand-new production, with the auditorium filled with the air of excitement and hope. The film opens with an announcement that the production *Pretty Lady* will be taking place. The film is set amid the Great Depression in New York City in the 1930s. This announcement would have come as a god sent to the showbusiness veterans and young hopefuls alike in the time when work was scarce. At the audition the viewer is introduced to a host of showbiz characters: Ginger Rogers and Una Merkel playing the wise cracking chorines who will do anything for a part, Anytime Anne and Lorraine Flemming, the enthusiastic juvenile Billy Lawlor played by Dick Powell, the big-time Broadway producers Lee and Barry, the beautiful star Dorothy Brock, and the highly passionate, on the verge of a second breakdown stage director Julian Marsh. Among this group of theatre professionals is Abner Dillon, a wealthy man who chooses to endorse the show because of his own special interest in its star.

Fig 7. Abner Dillon (Guy Kibbee) and Dorothy Brook (Bebe Daniels) together in 42nd Street.

The relationship between Dorothy and Abner Dillon offers an insight into the complexities of the showgirl image and the role she plays as a commodity in a patriarchal system of exchange. Miss Brock finds herself trapped in a partnership with the grotesque Abner. At the beginning of the film, we see she has climbed to the top of the Broadway world through hard work and talent. Considering the background of The Great Depression in American in 1933, the film is underscored with the difficulties the Depression caused to the showbiz industry and the lack of finance for shows to be put on. Without these shows, there is no work for hundreds of showgirls and theatre professionals. Abner offers Dorothy finance for her show in which she would be the star. It is clear from the scene that she is ecstatic with the news until she realises it comes with a price. Although it is not spoken in the dialogue, the scene suggests that Dorothy must enter a sexual partnership with Abner for the show to be financed. Here, Dorothy is aware of her body as commodity and the exchange she must make in order to not only save her career, but also the careers of two hundred people who would be working on the production.

In the manner outlined by Goffman, Dorothy begins to play a role in her interactions with Abner, with him being her audience. Goffman talks of the actor's "front" and how it is an image or impression that she gives off to the audience. Ashleigh Crossman describes this idea of a "front" and how it applies to social situations:

> A social front can also be thought of like a script. Certain social scripts tend to become institutionalized in terms of the stereotyped expectations it contains. Certain situations or scenarios have social scripts that suggest how the actor should behave or interact in that situation (Crossman, 2020, pp.)

By the term ‘the actor,’ Goffman is simply referring to the person carrying out the performance, they are following the stereotypical expectations put before them by their audience so as to not shock or disrupt the audiences understanding of how that person should behave. In this scenario, Dorothy follows a social script of how she feels she should act. From this moment on she begins playing a character, the obedient starlet for Abner to play with in exchange for his finance of the production.

There is a metatheatrical element of this idea of Dorothy performing in her everyday life within the context of the film. In this performance she markets her own body for commodification. As Rubin states in relation to the heroines in a Berkeley musical, “When forced to rely on themselves, the heroines find that only their bodies are marketable. Each picture made evident the fact that no woman could perform work functions not directly related to sex” (Rubin, 1995, pp. 59-74). If this is the general ideal in film in the 1930s, particularly relating to showgirls, in the context of the film, Dorothy is offered little choice in the exchange.

On the other hand, the character of Dorothy Brock does also operate as figure of resistance in the film. Dorothy is portrayed as intelligent, head strong and, even considering the circumstances, in control of the situation. In contrast to this, Abner is portrayed as stupid, frivolous, and grotesque. At one point in the film, the night before the opening night of the show, Abner and others working on the show are in Dorothy’s apartment. Abner behaves drunkenly and Dorothy eventually kicks him and everyone else out and with this comes an end to her and Abner’s exchange. Through her performance with Abner and playing into her body as commodity, Dorothy gets the show to opening night, provides jobs for hundreds of people and when she has finally had enough of Abner, can cast him aside as she holds the power to end the agreement. The exchange is not perfect. The fact that Dorothy sees so little choice in her situation that she must enter the exchange with Abner in the first place, highlights the flawed system that she exists in. However, given the circumstances, Dorothy reveals herself as in some ways superior to Abner and she uses him for her own benefit. In these ways I think she can be seen to embody the showgirl as a figure of resistance in the film and to the viewers of the film.

Fig 8. Ruby Keeler as naïve showgirl Peggy Sawyer, performing the tap dance number 42nd Street.

The naïve newcomer of Peggy Sawyer, played by Ruby Keeler, acts as a foil to the veteran star Dorothy Brock in the film. From the very beginning of the film, it is suggested that the only way to make it in the showbiz industry is to sell your virtue. This can be seen played out in Dorothy's narrative as I described above. The opening few scenes seem to paint an image of the showgirl's world as one in which the only way to survive and 'make it' is to follow the rules of the patriarchal society in which they exist. In the case of the film, this appears to be sex and flirtation in exchange for jobs. In the Depression stricken society, where the alternative is starving on the street, perhaps that is a small price to pay. In BFI film Classics, J. Hoberman describes how this world or flirtation and sex for roles appears to contrast greatly with the virtues of Peggy, and makes the audience question how she will survive:

> This tawdry backdrop makes the ludicrous innocence of Peggy Sawyer (and Billy Lawler) all the more dramatically compelling –given the true nature of *Pretty Lady* (sic), the audience is left to wonder will Sawyer make it to the top with her virtue intact (Hoberman, 2003, p. 207)

However, she does make it, as seen in the image above of Peggy playing the leading role in the musical. In this way, although Peggy differs to Dorothy, she still manages to provide her own resistance to the patriarchal system.

That resistance comes in the form of Peggy eventually making it to "the top" with her "virtue intact." After Dorothy's resolution to end her involvement with Abner the night before the show, she twists her ankle and is unable to perform. The only way for the show to go ahead is to find a new leading lady, with only hours to go before the show. Abner, having lost his attachment to Dorothy, moves his attachment to Ginger Rogers' character "Anytime" Annie. Abner puts Annie forward to be the new star of the show; however, when the opportunity comes for Annie to be a star, she hesitates. Instead

of accepting the part, she passes the role to Peggy Sawyer, because she believes that Peggy is the best person for it. Annie is painted throughout the film as the stereotypical gold digger showgirl. This scene where it appears her 'gold digging' has paid off and she finally gets the dream role is significant as she passes the opportunity to the unworldly Peggy. In contrast to the other girls, Peggy appears always true to herself.

Drawing on what I have mentioned above in relation to Goffman's idea of a 'front,' and the idea that an actor must play the role of a stereotype in order to survive in set social scenarios. Dorothy used this idea to her advantage and played into it in her relationship with Abner. However, Peggy doesn't use fronts or follow the scripts of how she thinks she should act in particular social situations. Therefore, it is not an ability to control the use of her body in a patriarchal exchange, or the reliance on a man, or even having to apply any sort of superior intelligence in how to perform in situations that get her the part. It is simply a combination of talent, hard work and the support of another woman. This scene between Ginger Rogers and the producers provides a hopeful sense of community between women. Therefore, it can be noted that Peggy Sawyer's version of a showgirl can also be seen to act as a figure of resistance in the film, although in a different way to Dorothy. The support and solidarity among women ultimately acts as an element of resistance to the commodification of the showgirl figure in this scenario.

Overall, the character of Julien Marsh in his metatheatrical relation to one of the film's directors Busby Berkeley, acts as an instrument in painting the choreographer in a sympathetic light which serves to dilute any potential sympathy the audience would feel for the showgirls and how they are dehumanised and objectified throughout the film. On the other hand, the characters of Dorothy Brock and Peggy Sawyer in *42nd Street* manage to negotiate subtle acts of resistance to this commodification by playing into the system as is the case for Dorothy or finding solidarity and support in female friendship in the case of Peggy.

Chapter Three: Dance Girl Dance

This chapter focuses on the film *Dance Girl Dance* (1940) directed by Dorothy Arzner. Through a discussion of the narrative, with a focus on the characters of Bubbles and Judy and the scene where Judy addresses her audience, I plan to identify the tensions that exist between the showgirl as commodity in a patriarchal system of exchange and how they manage to act as figures of resistance to this commodification. To underscore this discussion, I look at metatheatre and performance in everyday life and how it can be used as an instrument in highlighting this resistance to the audience.

Fig 9. Maureen O'Hara as Judy O'Brien in the film Dance, Girl Dance (1940). Judy addresses her audience.

The image above is from the film *Dance Girl Dance* (1940) directed by Dorothy Arzner. The film follows two dancers Judy and Bubbles as they pursue careers in the opposite spectrums of show business, ballet and burlesque. In need of work and a chance to perform, Judy joins Bubbles in her burlesque show. Judy performs her ballet routine night after night to a jeering audience as they beg for the enticing Tiger Lily (Bubbles' stage name) to appear. The image above captures the moment when, in the middle of her performance, Judy finally has enough, and addresses her audience. In her monologue Judy states:

> Go on and laugh, get your money's worth. No-one's going to hurt you. I know you want me to tear my clothes off so you can look at your fifty cents worth. Fifty cents for the privilege of staring at a girl the way your wives won't let you. What do you suppose we think of you up here with your silly smirks your mothers would be ashamed of? We know it's the thing of the moment for the dress suits to come and laugh at us too. We'd laugh right back at the lot

of you, only we're paid to let you sit there and roll your eyes and make your screamingly clever remarks. What's it for? So, you can go home when the show's over, strut before your wives and sweethearts and play at being the stronger sex for a minute? I'm sure they see through you. I'm sure they see through you just like we do! (*Dance Girl Dance,* 1940)

In the image we can see the audience transfixed with Judy as they silently take in what she is saying. Her speech is an attack on the audience and what it represents.

This image of the audience is a key element in the self-reflectivity and metatheatre of this scene. By placing an audience in the scene, it is as if the viewer of the film is also placed in the scene. Both the audience on screen and the viewer of the film are abruptly taken out of the performance with Judy's speech. She is not only addressing the individuals in the audience but the patriarchal system to which they exist. She illuminates the exchange that is taking place, with herself as the commodity that she is selling to her audience. As Mary Anne Doane states in her study of female subjectivity, "women [are perceived] as commodity in a patriarchal system of exchange" (Doane, 1987, pp. 30-212).

Doane is referring here to the representation of women in the woman's picture, films that center on female narratives, contain female protagonists and are directed towards female audiences, popularized in the 1940s. This could be applied to the exchange women make for security in marriage in turn for their devoted role as wife. However, in this case, the exchange Judy makes with her audience is her sexuality and dignity for financial income and the chance to, in whatever way she can, perform her passion, ballet. Doane's statement is relevant to Judy's speech and the character's awareness of her own role in this exchange system. She is aware of what she is giving to the audience and what she gets in return. She is aware of what they think of her and that they believe that her performance is for the sole benefit of the voyeur. She uses this perspective to her advantage. The speech openly challenges the patriarchy's view of women and opens the possibility that women have more power as the exhibitionist than the male voyeurs might think.

There are not only male spectators in the audience; we can see from the image above that the wives and sweethearts of these men are also in attendance. Judy is addressing them too. In doing so, she is aligning herself with these women and highlighting to them the role they play (on and off stage) in their own patriarchal system of exchange. As Casella (2009, pp. 235-270) argues in *What Women Want: The Complex World of Dorothy Arzner*, "The women in the audience who squirm at her speech are not comfortable being reminded of their own complicity in these social constructs. Judy's speech reminds the spectator (male and female, in and outside the film text) how women's lives are carefully choreographed." Casella is again here highlighting the metatheatre evident in this display. This happens on two levels, firstly, through Judy's awareness of her performance and what it signifies to the audience, and secondly through the audiences' awakening (again both in and outside the text) to the revelation Judy makes. This use of metatheatre and the symbol of the showgirl as a foil for the role of woman becomes an act of resistance to the patriarchal system.

Erving Goffman's performance theory can be applied to this speech and the performance that women seem to play on and off stage. Ashley Crossman states that "According to Goffman, social interaction may be likened to a theater, and people in everyday life to actors on a stage, each playing a variety of roles. The audience consists of other individuals who observe the role-playing and react to the performances (Crossman, 2020). In the case of *Dance Girl Dance*, Judy is subconsciously highlighting this theory by using herself as the on-stage example. Judy performs for an audience every night; she is aware that she is performing and so is her audience. However, her

speech highlights that it is not only the performer who is playing a role. Judy suggests that the women who are watching her performance are also playing roles: á la Goffman's theory, they are performing in everyday life.

The audience in the film loves the character of Bubbles and jeers at the character of Judy when they are performing. According to Goffman, "manner refers to how the individual plays the role and functions to warn the audience of how the performer will act or seek to act in a role" (Goffman, 1964, pp.397-404). This is a key discussion point into why the audience applauds Bubbles and reacts so harshly towards Judy. In terms of visual narrative and metatheatre, Goffman talks about appearance and how it functions to portray to the audience the performer's social status. Judy's appearance is of a burlesque dancer, but her manner is of a ballet dancer; therefore, when her appearance and manner contradict each other, it confuses and upsets the audience. This does not only happen while the girls are performing. Bubbles continues to perform even when she is off stage.

Fig 10. Lucille Ball as Bubbles in Dance Girl Dance (1940).

Bubbles is a character who has mastered the art of performing in everyday life. Similar to the showgirls in *Gold Diggers of 1933,* and Bebe Daniels' character in *42nd Street,* Bubble's is aware of the patriarchal system in which she lives, she is aware of men's view of her as a commodity for voyeuristic pleasure and she is equally aware that she is not the best dancer but has great looks, and she uses this to her advantage. Metatheatre can be seen here in Bubbles awareness and how she plays up to it. This idea of the showgirl "front" is used by Bubbles as a tool for resistance rather than oppression. Although she uses her body as a commodity, she is in control of the exchange. Judy on the other hand, struggles to play the role as burlesque dancer in everyday life. Although she is also aware of the exchange that is taking place, she chooses to focus on her ballet dancing instead of

playing into the showgirl persona as Bubbles does. However, although it takes Judy a little longer to get there, she too reaches her goals in the film. The narrative of the film paints the view that by playing to their strengths and being in tune to the exchange between voyeurs and exhibitionists, both characters come out on top of the system. Therefore, although the patriarchal system is designed to make sure women don't get ahead without the help of a man, the showgirls are able to negotiate this system to their advantage, as such acting as figures of resistance by revealing the system as more pliable than it might seem.

The film paints an image of the characters as witty and resourceful women, who take the situation they are given and understand the complexity and potential flexibility of it, using their intelligence and inventiveness to play the patriarchy to their advantage. Referring to my discussion on the Hays Code in the introduction, reveals how the narrative of *Dance Girl Dance* would have been perceived as unusual in the context of the USA in the 1940s. It was rare, under the restrictions of the code for a female character to do anything morally corrosive and get away with it. On top of this is the fact that the film was directed by the only working female director in Hollywood at the time (Casella, 2009, pp. 235-270). This paints a whole new perspective onto the filmmaking in how it is told from a female perspective. This combination of the restrictions of Production Code Hollywood, the scarcity of female directors and films told from a woman's perspective and the pro masculine social politics of the time, make the resolution of the film all the rarer.

This is all relevant to how the film and this scene would have been perceived at the time of its release. Not only were the two women in the film behaving immorally according to the standards of the time by becoming burlesque dancers, but each of these female characters ends up happy without a man. Both Judy and Bubbles go after the same man, the hopeless and wealthy Jimmy, who turns out to still be in love with his ex-wife. In the end Bubbles tricks Jimmy into marriage, while Judy lets him go with the knowledge of his love for his ex-wife. It is implied by the end of the film that Jimmy and Bubbles will divorce leaving Bubbles with a huge lump sum of cash and Judy will end up succeeding in her dreams of becoming a ballet dancer. Both women end the film at the cusp of reaching their dreams, Bubbles receiving fame and wealth and Judy becoming a ballerina. Neither woman ends up with a man or even with the suggestion that they want to. Notably, the lead female character addresses the negative elements of the society in which she lives. On top of this, the film was directed by the only notable female director of the period. These are all rare elements to be seen in the films being produced in 1940s' Hollywood. For the two female protagonists to finish the film with their dreams in reach that in no way involve a man was rare, but for this film to also be directed by a woman was even rarer.

Perhaps, it is significant, in the context of the code, that this positive resolution for the film is implied and not shown. Women's liberation needs to be negotiated in subtle ways through sometimes subtle acts of resistance. I have discussed the subtlety of these acts of resistance in relation to the other two films in my previous chapters. However, what makes *Dance Girl Dane* significant is how Arzner managed to place a not-so-subtle act of resistance in the film, in the form of Judy's speech. Evidently the narrative of Dance Girl, Dance goes against the social norms of America in the 1940s. With all this in mind, it does not come as a surprise that the film was a box office failure, causing RKO to lose $400,000. This box office failure can be seen as a reflection of the broader political, social and cultural concerns of the time. This blatant rebellion against the cultural norms of the time could be a key factor in the film's commercial failure and the almost complete erasure of Arzner from film history up until the 1970s. In contrast to this, *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street* were both box office successes less than a decade earlier. Although all three films follow the narrative of the showgirl, and all three films have evidence of the showgirls somewhat playing into the show girl

front for their own benefit, *Dance Girl Dance* is the only one of the three films in which the female characters end up alone and successful without a man. Regardless of its commercial failure, however, *Dance Girl Dance* perhaps is the most successful of the three in representing show girls as figures of resistance in America in the 1930s/1940s. Through the dancers' awareness of being watched in a voyeurism/ exhibitionist exchange, they take control of their bodies as commodities and openly address the concerns that pervade the society in which they live.

Conclusion

I began this thesis with the idea that the showgirl's body as depicted in Hollywood film of the 1930s to the 1940s is a dehumanised symbol of commodity under the male gaze. However, I wanted to discern to what extent the showgirl could also be seen as a figure of resistance to this objectification in the form of self-reflective cinema, performance in everyday life and metatheatre drawing on the work of Brecht, Goffman and Able. Deeper analysis and research into this topic revealed the much more complex social, cultural and political concerns that play into this showgirl image. This shifted my view to expose that there is a tension between the showgirl as figure of patriarchal commodification and proto-feminist resistance, and that there is not a definitive argument for either side of the debate.

All three films that I have discussed contain elements in the narratives and the performances that appear to promote the idea of the showgirl's body as commodity. Berkeley's spectacles in *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street* appear to standardise the showgirls into dehumanised objects in a display of fetishized beauty for the male gaze, while Bubbles and Judy's performance in *Dance Girl Dance* appear to be a part of an exchange system between voyeur and exhibitionist solely for the pleasure of the male viewer. On the other hand, through this thesis I have discussed the awareness the showgirl characters have in all three films of the exchange they are a part of and how they use it for their advantage to enact forms of both subtle and not so subtle resistance.

Through the gaze of the modern viewer, the showgirls give the impression of being trapped in a patriarchal system of exchange in which the men have all the wealth and power. However, again on closer inspection of these films I have discovered that in all three films it is the female characters that are portrayed as witty, intelligent and resourceful and who find solidarity in female friendship, compared with their male counterparts such as Lawrence and Peabody in *Gold Diggers of 1933* or Abner Dillon in *42nd Street,* who are presented as dim-witted and foolish. When looking at these scenarios through the lens of the ideologies of the time, it divulges--how--although through the parameters of the films and the context of the place and period in which men control the money--it is the superior wit and intelligence of the female characters that allow them to take control of their bodies.

Through the metatheatrical and self-reflective qualities of the films I have discussed, the showgirl characters reveal to the audience their position in the exchange system between voyeur and exhibitionist and how they play it to their advantage. In a time when the Hays Code made it almost impossible for a female character to conclude a film happily without the support of a man, the showgirl characters of these films somehow manage to still negotiate a form of resistance against the patriarchal society and liberate themselves from the image of simply being commodified bodies for the pleasure of the male gaze, to intelligent individuals who are aware of the system they are in and manage to play it to their advantage.

Bringing this idea of the showgirl image into the modern day I would like to conclude by mentioning the 2022 film *Don't Worry Darling* directed by Olivia Wilde. The film centres on a dystopian world modelled on a 'perfect' 1950s' American town where the husbands go to work every day and their loving wives stay home and happily cook, clean and live as supposedly 'perfect' symbols of submission to their male counterparts. Interestingly the film contains references to Busby Berkeley

and has some unsettling sequences of synchronised showgirls with striking makeup and dancing in unison. The sequences even go as far as mimicking Berkeley's overhead camera shots in ways that disjoint the viewer from the narrative like the spectacles of 1930s' film. I think this film is interesting to note as it is a modern interpretation and reaction to the symbol of the showgirl. In my opinion, the film is trying to iterate the idea of the showgirl as a symbol of unified fetishisation for the male gaze. The jarring sequences are used as a tool to support the narrative of the film and underscore the idea that the female characters are just a mass collective of synchronised and adoring objects in exchange for the security their husband provide.

Fig 11. Synchronised showgirls from the 2022 film Don't Worry Darling.

It is interesting to see this modern reflection and interpretation on the symbolism of the showgirl image from the 1930s and 1940s film I have discussed. Before my research into this thesis, I think I would have agreed completely with this view of the showgirl and this portrayal. However, through this research I have discovered the deeper complexities of the showgirl in relation to factors such as the cultural, social and political concerns of the 1930s and 1940s. The theoretical lenses of metatheatre and performance in everyday life have also enabled me to see these figures anew (rather than taking them at face value, as the reference to them in Don't Worry Darling appears to do) -- as potential figures of resistance within an oppressive capitalist and patriarchal society. Therefore, I think the portrayal of the showgirl as simply a dehumanized cog in a fetishized machine for the benefit of the male gaze is too simplistic. Through all three films, the showgirls act as figures of resistance and not just submission to the male gaze. Their awareness of the exchange systems that pervade the society in which they live, their ability to perform roles in everyday life to benefit themselves and the way in which they reveal to the audience their superior wit and intelligence, reveals the showgirls as figures of resistance and not just symbols of commodification. Although there was not enough scope in this thesis, the complexities of the showgirl image in more recent film is an area I would like to explore more extensively in future writing.

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