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**The Aesthetic of *Les Misérables*: Tomorrow Comes!**

Introduction

When America’s most prominent film critics sat down to assess Tom Hooper’s film adaptation of the musical *Les Misérables*, one aspect of the production dominated the discourse. Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* called it “merciless” while David Edelstein of *Vulture* deemed it a “tasteless bombardment.” These unflattering terms refer to the film’s proclivity for close-ups, which Todd McCarthy of *The Hollywood Reporter* lamented as a “monotonous approach of shoving the camera right in the performer's face.” The discussion of Tom Hooper's overuse of close-ups, however, has precluded a conversation about his use of them in the first place and what it means for not only a movie but also for the future of the form. Hooper's utilization of the close-up in *Les Misérables* in the number “I Dreamed a Dream” finds a solution to long-disputed genre tensions between realism and formalism as well as between the stage and the screen, signaling the potential for a new phase in the evolution of the movie musical.

“The Dark of Ages Past”: The Early Days of Film

To understand how Hooper moved the medium forward, it is necessary to look backward to the birth of film itself. The existence of the close-up is not innate to cinema but rather a slow development over the course of decades. An urban legend states that when D.W. Griffith narrowed his camera’s gaze on the face of an actor in the early 1910s, his producer offered this dismissal of the technique: “We pay for the whole actor, Mr. Griffith. We want to see all of him” (Doane 90).

Like many “first” moments of cinema, scholars dispute who first employed the close-up and when. Some claim it started as early as Thomas Edison’s kinetoscope motion pictures with 1894’s *Fred Ott’s Sneeze*. Renowned film scholar David Bordwell cites the Brighton School of filmmakers in England as the pioneers of the shot around the year 1900 (41). Historian Mark Cousins traces its origins to George Albert Smith’s *The Sick Kitten* in 1903 (*The Story*). Some of this difficulty stems from different notions of camera proxemics and subsequently what truly constitutes a close-up. Nonetheless, these attempts towards developing a language and grammar of cinema were just primordial birth pangs that fell far short of harnessing the full expressive power of the close-up.

At this point in time, cinema was relegated to the status of a mere sideshow for vaudeville and theatrical acts. Film historians generally refer to the shorts produced in this period as belonging to the “cinema of attractions,” which “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle” (Gunning 73). Since it was so often merely an addition to a live show, the early makers of cinema developed “an inferiority complex in the presence of an older and more literary art” (Bazin 87).

As viewers were only just getting acquainted with the capabilities of the motion picture, filmmakers indulged their desire for cool tricks and magic. The great French filmmaker George Méliès, an early pioneer of cinematic narrative, is every bit as guilty in keeping movies in the realm of pleasant diversion in the early 1900s. He supposedly had the chance to innovate the close-up but opted to keep his camera at a distance in order to fully capture theatrically styled magic and effects show (Bordwell 122).

Despite the seemingly insatiable audience appetite for wondrous and strange content on screen, there was supposedly little tolerance for sensationalism in technique. Historian Rob Lewis explains, “Audiences didn’t know what to make of the fact a man was missing his legs, arms and torso. It sounds ridiculous today, but in the early 1900s, the close-up seemed like the very worst kind of technological witchcraft” (Luck, “Up Close”). Viewers had to gain a basic grasp of the cinema’s capabilities before filmmakers could begin to differentiate it from the theater. Paul Schrader attributes the first “true” close-up to D.W. Griffith in 1912 (“Game Changers”) because he found an emotional logic in allowing the face alone to dominate the screen. Griffith often gets erroneously credited as the inventor of many cinematic innovations, a myth likely perpetuated since he was the first person to apply earlier experimental techniques in a way that made sense to audiences of the time. His ambitions lay in making the cinema an equal to the stage. Yet in his application of continuity editing and close-ups developed by directors like Porter and Méliés, Griffith unlocked the artistry lying dormant in the cinema.

It hardly seems like an accident that cross-cutting and the close-up developed simultaneously. Viewers were not quite ready for something like Carl Th. Dreyer’s 1929 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, the action of which unfolds nearly entirely in close-up. But they also craved the alternation possible between scales; long shots could provide a theatrical sense of action as it unfolded while close-ups honed in on the emotional impact of such events. Only through Griffith did cinema fulfill its full potential described by theorist Andre Bazin: “The camera puts at the disposal of the director all the resources of the telescope and the microscope” (103).

Similarly, it is also not happenstance that the perfection of the close-up coincides with the first academic discourse about cinema that posited it was an art form rather than a middle-class amusement. In fact, some cite its development as *the* moment when cinema became art (Doane 91). The shot proved of particular scholarly interest to a group of French Impressionist writers, who praised the close-up for its emotional capabilities. Jean Epstein wrote, “The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach” (qtd. in Persson, “Towards”). Germaine Dulac thought the close-up provided access to the mind itself by laying bare “the very thought of the character projected onto screen” (qtd. in Cooper 44). German psychologist Hugo Münsterberg went the furthest, praising the close-up as a specific advantage the cinema possessed over the theater (Cooper 36). In his writings, some of the earliest in film theory, he commented, “The photoplay is an art in which not only the outer events but our own inner actions become effective” (14). This interiority and subjectivity these writers believed cinema possessed marked a radical break from preconceived notions about the medium, which many assumed was locked into objective representations of reality by its very photographic nature.

The widespread adoption of the close-up in the 1920s, however, was not necessarily linked to this scholarly acclaim. As Romantic critics praised the shot, the world was rejecting their guiding philosophy in the wake of World War I’s devastation. By the time of publication for Hungarian writer Bela Balázs’ seminal text *Theory of the Film*, the theorist remarked of its standard usage, “The simplified acting demanded by the close-up conformed to the new taste for the objective and unromantic and this circumstance did much to popularize the American style of acting” (77). The close-up became a tool of naturalism, exposing a richly detailed texture without necessarily implying the spiritual undercurrents beneath. And over time, it slowly evolved into just another tool in a filmmaker’s shed that a few visionaries knew how to employ expertly. Most recently, it has become the go-to shot in an era of platform agnostic viewing, following the lead of television (Schrader, “Game Changers”).

“Do You Hear the People Sing?”: Where the Musical Has Been

While filmed theater is practically as old as cinema itself, since synchronized sound is an obvious prerequisite for the movie musical’s very existence on screen, the genre could not arise until after 1927 (Grant 40). Though *The Jazz Singer*, generally considered the first talking picture, has some sung elements, the first acknowledged filmic musical was 1929’s *The Broadway Melody*. The film was such a huge success that it spawned fifty imitators within two years alone (Muir 21). As the advent of the talkies allowed for the homogenization of Hollywood products through reproducible genres, the musical became a staple of the early sound era. It was an audience favorite, largely due in part to the novelty of hearing their favorite performers, not merely watching them. It was also beloved by the studios because they were able to reap massive profits despite steep production costs (Kessler 1).

In regard to aesthetics, the art came out of the commerce. As mechanical reproducibility was the key virtue in a studio system that valued efficiency to create a large output of films, Broadway was a goldmine for Hollywood since the musicals were prepackaged products ripe for a quick and easy transfer from stage to screen. By pulling from this source, the aesthetics came baked in; Bazin noted, “In the course of its successful run, the text, as tried out, has become crystallized so to speak as to its essentials and it is this text that the film audience will be looking for” (83). It proved as simple and easy for the studios to produce as it was for audiences to consume.

Musical theatre also had a much more prominent and visible role in popular culture in the 1920s and 1930s, making the musicals much harder to alter even if the studios had really wanted to (Altman 120). As such, the established standard of the period was long shots and long takes with minimal camera movement (Muir 26). This technique had the effect of distancing the audience, not unlike if they were watching a show on a proscenium stage, allowing them to fully appreciate the performative quality of the song and dance. Close-ups would feel out of place in such a facsimile of a diversionary theatrical setting. The studios’ overall approach is essentially filmed theater, trying to capture a presence and ephemera created on stage – only with flickering beams of light instead of actual people.

Yet, as is true with all genres, this was merely a phase of the cycle. Beginning in the mid-1960s, the genre underwent its first major transformation as it responded to the upheavals of the time. Eschewing classical Hollywood conventions, musicals began to pull from emerging styles of European filmmaking like the French New Wave and Italian Neorealism (Kessler 60). As the influence of postmodernism had yet to really enter American cinema, this high art could not mingle well with the low art content of early movie musicals. According to Rick Altman, “Sound came to Hollywood at the low point of European operetta influence on the Broadway stage.  The majority of early musicals thus borrowed their materials from a more indigenous, lower-middle class urban theatrical model” (119). Rather than find a way to meld these two distinct influences, a new generation of musicals rejected the old storytelling.

The new musicals of 1966 to 1983 shifted generic form by reflecting social unrest and expressing conflicted community (Kessler 3). The change in form far outpaced the musical’s change in content, ultimately sowing the seeds of its own demise. In the movie musical’s prime, Hollywood and Broadway worked in a model of self-perpetuation. So when the movies stopped drawing on the Great White Way for inspiration, the Broadway pop single waned in prevalence and thus no longer became appealing source material for film (Kessler 17). The cinematic musical genre lived on in spite of these alterations, yet it was practically unrecognizable from the films of previous decades as it discarded most vestiges of traditional Broadway and musical theater style.

While it is tough to accurately pinpoint the features of an era without the benefit of hindsight, many believe that the movie musical is experiencing a rebirth after virtual obsolescence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Beginning with 1996’s *Evita*, Hollywood once again began drawing on musical theater for films to varying degrees of financial and critical success. Unlike the revisionist musicals of the 1960s and 1970s, many stage conventions were reintroduced into the genre, such as “grand production numbers, omnipresent song and dance, and joyous and rousing musical conclusions” (Kessler 184). These films are not a pure return to classicism, however. These films, although derived from the tradition of musical theatre, are undeniably also products of an MTV and music video culture. With their heavy emphasis on quick cutting and montage to disrupt performance (Kessler 184), the directors of these musicals use formalism to critique how unreal they perceive the classical musicals to be. In a society where reality TV made realism the expectation (Muir 6), the new musicals meet the audience of their time where they are rather than subjecting them to an outmoded form.

Moreover, embodying the postmodern era of American cinema ushered in by the New Hollywood of the 1960s and 1970s, where the lines between pastiche, parody, and embrace are blurred almost beyond the point of distinction, these films are difficult to classify within traditional genre schema. Kessler identifies these recent musicals as “almost an apologia for musical performance” in the way that they refashion traditional content in a product laced with irony (177). While films like *Chicago* have carved out a new audience for the movie musical, it is debatable as to whether they have actually revived the genre – or created a new subgenre – since these films engage in such heavy self-critique.

“A World About to Dawn:” *Les Misérables* and Where the Musical Is

Tom Hooper’s *Les Misérables* is uniquely situated in the context of a new glut of movie musicals – perhaps even at the tail end. The film had many questions to answer in regard to genre. Would it continue towards further fragmentation, favoring the new emphasis on realism over formalism? Would it ridicule the conventions of musical theater or embrace them? André Bazin deemed any sort of middle ground impossible, stating, “The text determines the mode and style of the production; it is already potentially the theater. There is no way at one and the same time of being faithful to it and of turning it aside from the direction it was supposed to go” (84-85). Yet against all odds, Hooper chose to resolve these profound aesthetic dilemmas by not exclusively favoring one style over the other, instead choosing to blend the successes of both the classical and the modern musical to create a fresh, distinct entry into the genre.

While the divide between these two generations of the movie musical are vast, Hooper found a simple bridge between them: the close-up. Such tight shots are largely absent from the film’s group and ensemble numbers, but they appear in some form in all of the soliloquies. The selective employment effectively creates a language for those intimate solos, one that expresses itself most clearly in Fantine’s song “I Dreamed a Dream,” performed by Anne Hathaway. A single close-up as she sings her primal cry to God, the number is the most effective example of Hooper’s faith in the ability of a single aesthetic device to marry theatrical expressionism with cinematic realism in a filmic musical. The shot makes for a brilliant connection between form and content, as both Bela Balázs and French philosopher Henri Bergson saw the facial close-up as “a visual correlative of musical melody” (Balázs and Carter xxx). Balázs even went as far as to declare the close-up as the modern soliloquy (Schrader, “Game Changers”).

A large prerequisite that enabled Hooper’s bold aesthetic choice was having technical advances at his disposal that allowed the actors to sing live. One of the last major attempts was Peter Bodganovich’s 1975 musical *At Long Last Love*, which used live singing so poorly that the director sent out letters to the press apologizing for his “personal folly” (Muir 58). The feat of *Les Misérables*, according to star Hugh Jackman, was only possible because "the quality of recording now [with radio mics] that you can do while you're walking around is unbelievably better.  This, five years ago, would not have been possible" (“Les Misérables: A Revolutionary Approach”). This device freed Hooper to fully break down the boundaries that would have limited him. In musicals both on screen and on stage, the artist was typically confined by the demands dictated by the music. In film, the actors would to make their performance conform to the emotions present in a pre-recorded track; in theater, the actors have to contend with an orchestra that must keep tempo. With live singing, according to on-set pianist Jennifer Whyte, “the songs, and, indeed, the scenes […] are able to be flexible right up until the last minute” (“Les Misérables: A Revolutionary Approach”). In making the songs malleable, the director and the performer are given full control of the product, not held in check by the music.

Hooper did not, as many have assumed, film the musical with the intention of relying on close-ups to carry the film’s most intimate moments. He describes the evolution of the soliloquies, particularly “I Dreamed a Dream,” from shooting to cutting:

I always give myself options. I didn't assume that the tight close-up was the best way to do a song. So in ‘I Dreamed A Dream,’ there was a close-up of Anne that we used but there were two other cameras shooting from other perspectives. The tight close-ups won out in the cutting room because, over and over again, the emotional intimacy was far more intense than when you go loose. (qtd. in DiGiacomo, “Tom Hooper”)

The muscle of the close-ups was a revelation in post-production; it ultimately came to define the entire production artistically, however.

Many who panned the film did not dismiss the power of this scene. Their rationale is that it worked in spite of the close-up, not because of it. Many have attributed the success of the number to Anne Hathaway’s virtuosic, Oscar-winning performance as Fantine. Some think the song itself “invites intimacy, detail, even subtlety” (Palmer, “Criterion Close-Up”). Still others believe it to be due to the film’s much-touted live singing. I argue that while the effect of "I Dreamed a Dream" is amplified by the addition of all these additional factors, the scene's effectiveness does not ultimately depend upon them.  The long-held close-up is the primary source of the number's power, and Hooper's wise direction uses all the other elements at his disposal to complement his bold artistic choice.

Indeed, Anne Hathaway’s performance was able to have the effect that it did largely because of what the close-up allowed. As Tom Hooper himself stated:

You can have people writing about the film where they talk about the close-ups and at the same time they talk about the fact that they're surrounded by people who are crying continuously. And it's as if people don't make the connection between why people are crying and the close-up. I do think the intimacy of the movie is the thing that you can never achieve when you watch it on stage. And it's the intimacy that is unlocking these extraordinary levels of emotion. (qtd. in Tapley, “Tom Hooper”)

The reaction to the scene is so strong precisely because the audience is able to get to know Fantine and her deepest, darkest emotions on the kind of personal scale only possible in cinema. In theater, the actor is but a speck on the stage, dwarfed by immense scenery. Connections are made on grand, broad scales as the majority of the viewer’s visual information is being absorbed through the décor of the stage, not through anything the performer is doing. In “I Dreamed a Dream,” Hooper does not use the edges of frame to box Fantine into a proscenium stage, instead using the close-up to limit the visual field and narrow the focus on the character. Hooper acknowledged this effect in the commentary track for *Les Misérables*, stating, “When you go wide […] the environment does not inform the song” (Hooper). In this tightly framed shot, all the meaning of the number comes from Anne Hathaway’s performance, further empowering her as a performer and giving her more control of the audience’s reaction.

The close-up also affects not only *what* the viewers sees but also *how* he or she sees it. In a stage show, the spectator is locked in long shot, unable to shift their distance from the action. For most who see *Les Misérables* in a theater, the contribution of a particular actress to the character of Fantine would be virtually unrecognizable as they would only be able to evaluate her interpretation from the way she sings the lyrics of “I Dreamed a Dream.” But, as director of photography Danny Cohen observed:

The beauty of film is that you can cut to a close-up.  It sounds really trite to say that’s a big jump, but compared to how people experience the musical on stage, it’s a completely new thing.  In a way, that’s all you really need.  All the emotion, all the power is in the face. (qtd. in “Danny Cohen”)

The close-up invites the viewer to experience the number on an entirely different level, able to see the gears turning in Fantine’s mind as she articulates the death of her hope. It unlocks the possibility for personal connection not just with the song, but also with the character, which could not be achieved merely watching from a stage.

Beyond affecting the viewer, the close-up also has a profound effect on the performer. Balázs noted a difference between the styles of acting between the two media, writing, “Both gestures and play of features had to be toned down in comparison with the technique of the live stage [...] The close-up puts the emphasis on the most delicate of nuances” (77). Hathaway was fully aware of this distinction in her process and preparation for the scene:

I wasn’t going to sing it like you would have to in a theater. I didn’t have to convey the message to the back of the house. I had to put the message in my eyes and let the emotion live in my voice, as opposed to trying to sing the song in a way that would be, um, aurally pleasing. (qtd. in Breznican, “’Les Misérables’”)

Given that many movie musicals often presume a stage as if filming theater, actors often perform in broad strokes as if they needed to reach the audience member in the last row of the mezzanine. In the film adaptation of *Les Misérables*, however, Hathaway can sing the number as the character would naturally be expressing these emotions within the diegesis – to herself. And non-diegetically, she can sing without the limitations of adhering to a different medium’s conventions of expression. The power of “I Dreamed a Dream” is thus derived not only from the fact that Hathaway is acting with an attention to nuance and detail but also from the audience’s ability to perceive it.

In the tightly framed close-up that Hooper chose in the final cut of the film, they are able to pick up on small movements in Hathaway’s that would be invisible in long shot – or from any position in a theater. They can see her palpable sense of longing being expressed when she sings the word “love” in the second stanza, observe the tears slowly welling up in her eyes and eventually cascade down her cheeks, and even discern the precise moment where her mentality switches from wistful longing for past idealism to bitter cynicism for the future. Though the words of “I Dreamed a Dream” speak to experiences beyond a single person, the close-up allows for the viewer to tap into the personal and human dimension of the song being conveyed by Hathaway.

While it might seem that Hooper’s use of the close-up utterly scorns theatrical modes of presentation, he simply has found a way to make the musical more cinematic but not at the expense of its staginess. With the exception of the opening verse, shot from a birds-eye view hovering over Fantine lying in a coffin bed, the entire song is contained in one single take in close-up. Formalistic editing would have made Hathaway’s performance disjointed; her process could easily change from shot to shot, disrupting the song’s continuous development. And according to Cohen, "one of the things Tom [Hooper] was trying to do was give the audience an experience in tact, which was the reason to do a lot of long takes and not cut into them” (qtd. in Tapley, “The Top 10”). The effect of keeping this shot uninterrupted in the theatrical tradition is that it gives Hathaway as grand a sense of presence as is possible in the medium of film. Though it is ultimately impossible to replicate the sense of rapport established by actual physical proximity, the unbroken take of Hathaway gives viewers the sense that they are occupying the same ephemeral moment with her. Along this shared temporal axis of emotional discovery, viewers are allowed the same sense of urgency and immediacy in exploration of the song’s journey as they would if they were watching the performance unfold in real time on stage. Yet even as it preserves actual time, the close-up suspends “narrative time in order to allow for a closer scrutiny of what is being presented” (Branigan and Buckland 93).

Somewhat paradoxically, by drawing attention to the performative quality of the song, it enhances the scene’s realism – a tough feat to achieve in the formalistic language of song. While the number is stage-like, it does not feel staged in the slightest. The single shot is unobtrusive, making it feel merely observed, not constructed. Combined with the constrictive framing of the shot, the audience is effectively trapped in the moment with Fantine, mirroring her journey as she is trapped in the frame, in the song, and in her life. She is unable to blink or escape until the painful and hopeless end, and the audience is given the choice to either follow her descent or look away entirely. As Tom Hooper observed, “So much of filmmaking today is avoidance basically. It’s distraction, avoidance, irresponsible fantasy.  *Les Misérables* is somehow not that” (qtd. in DiGiacomo, “Tom Hooper”). Though the word *somehow* might imply a sense that the film magically wound up having such a raw emotional power, such is hardly the case. Because of the long-held close-up in “I Dreamed a Dream,” Hooper is able to look a musical number square on and strip it bare with cinematic realism while also retaining a theatrical essence.

“The Night That Ends at Last”: Where the Musical Can Go Now

What Tom Hooper achieved with *Les Misérables* in his employment of close-ups as exemplified in “I Dreamed a Dream,” the shining musical paragon of the film, could open an entirely new era for the movie musical. The genre seems to have more or less turned its distinctions into a binary system: a movie is either unabashedly classical, or it falls somewhere along the revisionism and parody. The former favors the stage, while the latter prefers the screen. Hooper’s aesthetic shows that these two are not mutually exclusive.

“I Dreamed a Dream” alone collapses their sharp distinctions into one number that maximizes the strengths of both while eliminating their respective shortcomings. It captures all the majesty of stage performance but avoids the over-literalism of a direct stage-to-screen transfer. Similarly, the number manages to translate the song into purely cinematic terms, yet it does so without the slightest sense of irony or shame that might lead to distancing.

Future usage of the close-up in the genre is limited, admittedly. *Les Misérables* is unique in its somber tone as well as its lack of choreographed dance and scenes of dialogue. The close-up is the aesthetic tool of choice for Tom Hooper because it fit the particular musical he was directing. Other directors, however, might be able to achieve a similar effect of bridging the gap between film and theatre with a different artistic device; at the very least, they should employ live singing now that the technology is adequate enough to grant a new level of artistic freedom in the genre. Already, Rob Marshall’s *Into the Woods* has featured a number, “Stay With Me,” where singer Meryl Streep is shot in close-up for an extended portion of the number. As Broadway musicals such as *Wicked* and *Spring Awakening* sit in various stages of development in their screen adaptations, it will be interesting to see if they continue to respond to the gauntlet thrown down by Tom Hooper with *Les Misérables*.

While the epithet of “intimate epic” (Tynan, “Tom Hooper”) that Hooper used to describe *Les Misérables* might seem like an oxymoron, it is a classification that, at the very least, the number “I Dreamed a Dream” most certainly earns. The sequence is destined to become iconic because it transcends the reductive boundaries that have traditionally limited the genre.  He fulfills Bazin’s ideal type for an adaptation from stage to screen, which is that “the best translation is that which demonstrates a close intimacy with the genius of both languages and, likewise, a mastery of both” (117). The sequence is not totally cinematic, nor is it completely theatrical. Moreover, it is not real, nor is it fake; it is simply true.

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