
Reviewed by Carolina Rocha, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Richard Dyer’s most recent book, In the Space of a Song: the Uses of Song in Film, presents a comprehensive view of the use of songs in cinema. In a lengthy introduction, the author traces the importance of songs for human relationships and explores the pleasure and affect involved in the production and reception of songs. Dyer makes a very original case for the use of song in films’ narratives stressing the connection between music and cinematographic space and time: songs in films take up space in narratives, either accelerating or delaying a film’s rhythm and pace. Thus, the author’s central argument is that “song is an art of space and time” (21). This statement allows him to assert that musical numbers are utopian as they present ideal moments of happiness. From this assumption, Dyer also moves to the receptors of the utopia encapsulated in songs and deploys the metaphor of expansion which serves to link individual and community through music, an unequivocal sign of humanity. To illustrate this point, songs in films are analyzed from a comparative perspective contrasting Hollywood practices that rely on the relationship between singer and actor with the uses of dubbing in Italian and Hindu cinema—as evident in the careful examination of Carosello napolitano (1954) and Mother India (1957). This examination judiciously relates singing to broader cultural aspects of Italian and Hindu society.

Chapter one deals with the use of music and song in Meet Me in Saint Louis (1944), considered a perfect musical for its integration of song into the narrative which deals with Ester and John’s romance as well as family numbers that reinforce the cohesiveness of the fictional characters. The songs selected from the time period in which the film is set discreetly blend with the film’s narrative. Music and dance also relate to other creative expressions such as photography and painting. In the next chapter, the author analyzes both the use of songs and the process of authentication in A Star is Born (1956), where musical numbers are used to convince viewers of the main character’s star quality.

Chapter 4 concerns itself with heterosexuality and dance in musicals that portray the utopia of stable heterosexual relationships by displaying two bodies in relation to each other. This chapter provides examples from Hollywood musicals of the 1940s and 1950s. The topic of musicals linked with happiness is analyzed in chapter 5, through the examination of On the Town (1949). The next chapter surveys the performances of Lena Horne, a performer of African American ancestry, in white musicals. Closely related to the topic of race in musicals, chapter 7 discusses Car Wash (1976) as a musical. The final chapter examines films from the early 1970s in which the male black protagonists move to the rhythm of funk music as they traverse the city and star in blaxploitation thrillers.

The chapters—many of which have been commissioned and previously published—differ in quality and some lack relation to the author’s main topic of space and song. Nonetheless, Dyer impresses with his thorough knowledge of film techniques and succeeds in conveying his enthusiasm for musicals and aural techniques in film.