

Issue 12: Book Reviews

Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and The MGM Musical

By Steven Cohan

Durham and London: Durham University Press, 2005. ISBN: 978-0-82233-595-5 (pbk). 103 illustrations, viii + 368 pages. £14.99

A Review by Nadine Wills, Bielefeld University, Germany

Incongruous Entertainment is an incredibly ambitious work, one that resembles an MGM musical in many ways: it entertains you with a cavalcade of stars, glorious details and impressive skill. Cohan's book presents an astounding amount of information, and is an inter-disciplinary triumph rooted in film and gay and lesbian studies, but not limited to these areas. It brings together Hollywood industry history, audience reception and fandom analysis, queer studies, musical/genre studies, masculinity studies, star studies, cultural studies, alongside the overall argument about camp.

What is clear is that the research behind this book is impeccable and builds upon past work on masculinity and musicals (like Cohan's earlier classic essay on Fred Astaire). However, Cohan does not simply reproduce past work here. Some of his main focuses are: detailing the gay workforce in the Freed Unit, Judy Garland and her fans, Gene Kelly and his dance style, *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952), the *That's Entertainment* series (1974-1994), and the emphasis on whiteness in the MGM style.

Cohan's main approach stems from the idea that "camp situates the films in their industrial production, marketing, and ongoing consumption on home video, and it raises still additional questions about the presumed heterosexualization of the studio-era audience and the homosexualization of contemporary fandom" (40). What he ends up concluding is that, despite its no longer simply being a gay domain camp is ironically more queer than ever: it now goes both ways. Camp was much more institutionalised at MGM in its production and original reception than most previous historians and theorists have previously allowed for. Camp appreciation is also no longer only a queer viewing practice. Heterosexual "friends of Dorothy" abound in his discussion of Garland's contemporary fandom. While his multivalent approach works, I found that his argument about camp was not the strongest contribution that his book has to offer. Instead, it seemed most useful as a starting point for developing a fascinating inter-disciplinary approach which opens up an analysis of the musical and stars on a whole series of levels.

In this book, the most successful chapters were Chapter Three, 'Dancing with Balls: Sissies, Sailors, and the Camp Masculinity of Gene Kelly' and Chapter Six, 'Judy on the Net: Garland, Camp, and Contemporary Fandom.' All of Cohan's strengths come together in these two sections, offering new

perspectives and ways of thinking about musicals and preconceptions about sexuality and fandom.

In his chapter on Kelly in particular, Cohan re-thinks and challenges what have long been accepted truisms by analysing extra- and intra-diegetic commentaries. Cohan's analysis of Kelly and his dance style is his strongest textual analysis in the book. His title for Illustration 64 "Gene Kelly dances macho but in cut-offs" (178), is an example of the sort of dry commentary that accompanies his analyses. Cohan points out that although there was continual insistence that Kelly was an excessively macho star, in fact on-screen he was often sexually indeterminate at best. Cohan makes an important point that Kelly's identity was constructed very differently as a star throughout his career and as a performer *inside* the MGM musical: "[T]he camp dialectic of his screen presence as a dancer 'with balls' at the height of his film career stands in bold contrast with what he came to symbolize decades afterward as the MGM poster boy" (198).

Cohan excels at contextualizing stars and their reception. Tracing Garland's relation to camp and its importance in her early career (and in her personal life), Cohan underlines that Garland is no longer as important a figure for gay culture as she once was, in the context of his argument about camp, and then says:

Deemed irrelevant to explanations of Garland's historic gay following, young female fans have traditionally been absent in accounts of her star text, yet they seem equally attracted to its marginalizing stance toward mainstream culture; moreover, they are now making their presence evident on the Internet. (308-309)

Cohan goes on to analyse the negotiation of fan hierarchies based not just on gender and sexuality, but also on their amateur versus professional status. This is a nuanced and interesting interdisciplinary cultural studies research. Cohan spends a lot of time considering Garland's star persona, her performances and her fans in this book (as is appropriate based on the subject matter) and provides a thorough consideration of her appeal and role in camp culture.

In Chapter Five, Cohan gives some long overdue attention to the *That's Entertainment* (1974-1994) series of musical clip compilation films. Long ignored by other theorists because of their incongruity, they fit perfectly into this book and Cohan's approach. Indeed, this is where the book really seems to come together. This chapter leads seamlessly on from Chapter Four -- where *Singin' in the Rain* is situated as "the first camp picture" -- bringing in these compilation films which are arguably the campiest of films. Providing a fascinating history of the marketing and reception of the series alongside his textual analysis, points from previous chapters, about Esther Williams and Debbie Reynolds, are drawn upon by Cohan to good effect.

However, some of the chapters do get bogged down by the sheer weight of what Cohan is trying to accomplish, especially at the beginning of the book: all the information he is trying to convey can begin to feel disjointed at times. This happens particularly in Chapter Two, 'The Lady Is a Camp: Glamour, Star Turns, and the Boys in the Chorus.' Here Cohan traces "The Great Lady Has 'an Interview'" number through a number of texts and stars from Greer Garson, to Judy Garland, Debbie Reynolds and finally Lana Turner. He also looks at racial marking in MGM films and the chorus boy trope. It is too much for one chapter. In fact, my favourite part of this chapter is arguably a relatively unimportant tangent on tap-dancer Eleanor Powell's in-between-ness. It reminds me of watching an over-produced musical number and getting caught up in how the sequins move on a

chorus girl's headdress.

The metaphor seems imminently appropriate. If one was to compare this book to a musical number, perhaps it would be most like one of the Gene Kelly ballet numbers. "Broadway Ballet" in *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951): entertaining and excessive, perhaps a bit too long and complicated at times, yet still impressive and undeniably skilled. This book is, in another way, like an extended DVD version with all the outtakes and extras right there for you just in case you wanted to know. *Incongruous Entertainment* is certainly worth reading in all its extravagant camp glory. I am definitely a fan.

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