Female Sexuality as a Spectacle in Cinema:
Depictions of Gender Roles and Sexuality in Bob Fosse Films

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"It's showtime, folks!"

Joe Gideon, *All That Jazz* (1979)

Content Warning: Reader discretion is advised. Themes of sexual abuse, rape, partner violence, murder, and drug abuse are depicted/discussed.
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Abstract

Bob Fosse is one of the most influential directors and choreographers of the 20th Century, with his iconic aesthetic still effecting the industry and pop culture today. He has only made a few movies, yet they are rich with material and artistry that makes each of them a masterpiece in their own right. This thesis analyzes how Fosse has used his film oeuvre to illustrate society’s rigid opinions of sex and gender roles, highlighting the hypocrisy of our heteronormative culture that is simultaneously a voyeur of the sexual, while also punishing women for their sexuality. Fosse uses his personal experiences to incorporate autobiographical elements into each of his films, allowing him the space to confess to his own complicity in society’s abhorrent, sexist treatment of women. Through his work, he acutely acknowledges the connotations between sex and violence, depicting the ways in which our culture uses the institution of marriage to coerce women to adhere to the heteronormative gender expectations.
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Introduction

As a movie fan and student of film I have always been drawn to the musical genre because of its suspension of disbelief and its capacity to transport us to fantastical worlds and whimsical situations. The movie version of *Chicago* (2002), however, was instrumental in cementing my interest in the genre. Directed by Rob Marshall, *Chicago* was based on the iconic stage musical originally directed and choreographed on Broadway by Bob Fosse in 1975, and the film's dance style is credited to be “in the style of Bob Fosse.” Bob Fosse’s name is also behind such works as the film versions of *Sweet Charity* (1969) and *Cabaret* (1972) which he also directed on Broadway, and the original film *All That Jazz* (1979). Fosse’s choreographic style is distinctively characterized as “sexual” with skimpy outfits, suggestive hip thrusting, angular poses and movements, risqué play with props such as chairs and canes, all of which can be seen in most of his better-known works.

Furthermore, as a feminist, I have been consistently intrigued by Fosse’s sexual style of dance and choreography, as well as observant of the gendered patterns that emerge in his works. This raises the question: What is there in Fosse's body of films—potentially exploitative of women’s bodies and sexuality—that is so intriguing? In what ways does Fosse’s attention to the female body reflect on certain interests and obsessions of our society, and how can these provoke a more inquisitive look at his overall film oeuvre?

Having learned of Fosse’s sordid personal life of drinking, drugs, and work-addiction, as well as his womanizing ways (a long list of lovers and a history of sexual relations with his dancers), I began to wonder how I allowed myself to not ask these important thematic questions of sex and gender earlier. Thus, I am curious how the lines have blurred between Fosse’s work and life, and how his views of women, gender, and sex, are exemplified in his filmography. I am
taking this opportunity to turn to the movies I love with a critical and investigative eye. Using Fosse’s filmography, along with biographical research, and the ways in which Fosse himself has been portrayed in fiction (All That Jazz) I will analyze gender relations in both his work and personal life, arguing that there is a blurred line between the two, while assessing the artistic achievements of his career.

“Sex, sex, sex...! Is that all he ever thinks about?”

Bob Fosse was known for being a serial womanizer. The epigraph to this section is from words spoken by a collaborator-character in All That Jazz, a film well-known for being a thinly disguised autobiographical account set during the productions of Chicago (1975) and Lenny (1974). Thus, I want to look at the implications of sex and gender that his personal life has on his films and the stories he chose to tell. I am interested in exploring the ways in which Fosse depicted societal expectations of women, gender, and sex, and how his films were often a reflection of his life experiences. While Fosse’s choreography can easily be characterized as sexual, I am also interested in the movies Fosse directed that are not about dancing or dancers, but dramatic features in which gender relations play a central, if not the central, role.

Specifically, I will look closely at Lenny (1974), a film about the tumultuous relationship of comedian Lenny Bruce with his wife Honey, and Star 80 (1983), Fosse’s take on the death of Playboy Playmate Dorothy Stratten who was murdered at the hands of her husband Paul Snider in 1980. These are films in which Fosse went even further, directly linking women’s sexuality to violence and relationships with men, but which are not typically seen as part of the Fosse canon as they are not dance films.

Chapter One gives the background of Fosse as a choreographer, as well as providing some context to his personal and work history. In this chapter I outline some key moments in
Fosse’s childhood that are important autobiographical elements and themes that will recur throughout his films. I will also discuss his iconic sexual dance style, how he got started as a choreographer, and how he is still influencing art and pop culture. For research sources I frequently reference *Fosse* by Sam Wasson (2013) for the biographical elements, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* by Raymond Knapp (2010), *Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity and Mayhem* by Kelly Kessler (2010), and "Popular Dance as Archive: Re-imagining Keeps the Fosse Aesthetic Preserved" by Dara Milovanović (2020) for describing Fosse’s dance style and legacy. Throughout the thesis I also cite "Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome: The Emcee and the Master of Metaphors in Bob Fosse's Cabaret" by Gerrard Carter (2019) when discussing his influential film *Cabaret*. As well as the Village Voice article "Death of a Playmate" by Teresa Carpenter, the basis for *Star 80*.

Chapter Two will analyze Fosse’s musical films *Sweet Charity* and *Cabaret*, looking at Fosse as both a director and choreographer. The films in this chapter are some of Fosse’s most iconic works, and they are great for establishing the themes of sex and gender that are persistent throughout his career. Fosse uses his dance style to convey the sexuality of his leading ladies Charity Hope Valentine and Sally Bowles. In both of these films Fosse illustrates the hypocrisy of our society that enjoys being voyeurs of women’s sexuality, but will simultaneously demand that women stop being sexual and conform to the heteronormative institution of marriage. Both Charity and Sally are sex workers that perform for men, an aspect that Fosse uses to make his audience become complicit in seeing these women as a spectacle.

Chapter Three takes a deeper look into gender, sex, and violence in *Lenny* and *Star 80*. These are Fosse’s non-musical, non-dance films, giving us a chance to see how he can convey sexuality without the razzle dazzle and his sensual dance style. Both films are biopics, and he
uses the element of reality to highlight the fact that the mistreatment of women is far too common in our society. Fosse uses *Lenny* to incorporate his own autobiographical elements into the film, because the two men were very similar, essentially using the film as a precursor to his autobiographical piece *All That Jazz*. Fosse also incorporates his own experiences into *Star 80*, allowing Fosse to take accountability for the ways he was complicit in society’s treatment of women. Fosse uses *Star 80* to make explicit connections between sex, gender roles, and violence.

The thesis will end with Chapter Four, which is entirely dedicated to *All That Jazz*. This film needs its own chapter because it details Fosse’s life and career in the industry, meaning so much of the film can relate to the themes and topics that we are discussing throughout this thesis. This film is rich with material. Fosse returns to his musical roots for this film, using his razzle dazzle to make a spectacle and performance of death. *All That Jazz* illustrates Fosse’s experiences with women, and the ways in which he too has sexualized and mistreated them, but the film primarily focuses on his death. This allows us to make the connection between death and sex, and how death has worked as a means for Fosse to find the strength to apologize for his past indiscretions.

By analyzing Fosse’s oeuvre, we can make concrete connections between each film, highlighting common threads that weave throughout his work. Most of these commonalities are rooted in his depiction of sexuality in our society, while also using film to work out his own repression and past traumas. Through his films we can see Fosse’s growth as an artist, as well as his increasing willingness to acknowledge his place in the patriarchy and the ways in which he has contributed to the rigid gender roles of society.
Chapter One

Background

This chapter focuses on the childhood and adolescence of a young Bob Fosse, depicting how he got his start in the industry as a dancer and eventually a choreographer. This introductory chapter looks at his first film *Kiss Me Kate* (George Sidney, 1953), where he was simply an ensemble dancer, before looking at the film *Damn Yankees* (George Abbott, Stanley Donen, 1958) in which he was the sole choreographer for the entire production. Chapter One gives insight into Fosse’s personal experiences as a performer, as well as his relationships with wives Joan McCraken and Gwen Verdon. This chapter highlights themes that are important throughout his life and eventually make their way into his later films.

In 1927, Bob Fosse was born into a poor family. Although his family was initially supportive of his dancing aspirations, he did feel immense pressure from his parents to succeed; they decided “he was the boy that was going to make it for them” (Wasson 8), a weight he carried with him throughout his life. Although Fosse was a naturally great dancer, and had the drive for perfection, he hid his skill from the world. As a young kid “he danced away from [the audience] … as if he were ashamed to be seen. Which he was” (Wasson 12). If his peers had known of his love for dance “they would have called Bobby girls’ names and laughed him out of recess…. He felt sissy” (Wasson 12). Moreover, young Bobby “was afraid of what his father would think of his son’s sissy-flitting” (Wasson 13) forming the connotation between dance, perceived masculinity, shame, and fear. Bob would spend the rest of his life attempting to prove that he was masculine enough. Cy Fosse, Bob’s father, felt that paying for dance classes was “a lavish indulgence” (Wasson 13) in the Depression years, an indulgence they could not afford as their large family continued to grow.
Fred Weaver was Fosse’s dance teacher and surrogate father (Wasson 18). Fred had Bob performing in clubs at eleven years old, allowing Bob to make enough money “to cover the tuition Cy Fosse owed him…. [And] after Weaver was paid off, Bobby’s share of the profits would go to his father” (Wasson 14). As Bob grew up in the Depression, he became the family’s most consistent financial provider. Now that Fosse was the primary “earner for his family, his intensity increased” (Wasson 16), meaning that in 1940 Bobby was no more, instead he would henceforth be Bob Fosse. As Fosse entered the industry, still as a young teenager, he performed in vaudeville, an industry that was dying; a poor omen for his career as an entertainer.

While in high school Fosse separated his normal life from his nightclub life, being sure to hide any connection to showbiz, making him “a showman in more ways than they knew” (Wasson 23). In 1943, so many men were drafted for World War II that Fosse was able to perform in every burlesque house at just sixteen years old, but it’s important to note that this scene “was pure entertainment, tits and laughs and that’s about it” (Wasson 23). The environment was not conducive to high art. Moreover, the strippers in these joints would molest and abuse Fosse as he waited to perform, “twirling his perfect hair and the cock in his tuxedo pants. Scared and alone, he did as he was told” (Wasson 26). The constant sexual abuse from older women planted a sense of shame within young Bob, because “despite everything he should have run from -- the fondling, the sinning, the heckling, the shirking -- to him, having the strippers’ attention felt a little like being a star” (Wasson 27). The trauma that Fosse endured as a child and young adult fostered a nuanced connection between sex, dance, and shame because “he was drawn to the girls, then hurt by them” (Wasson 27).

Fosse’s confusion of sex, sexuality, and masculinity, as well as how dance fit into these ideas, plagued him for the rest of his life. Throughout school, many people thought he was gay
because “any boy who was a dancer was not right,” so he went “out of his way to be a
womanizer to prove to people that he wasn’t [gay]” (Wasson 22). Fosse’s fear of being perceived
as a homosexual man continued into adulthood as he attempted to assert both his heterosexual
masculinity, as well as his impeccable dance skill. Fosse married his dance partner Mary Ann
Niles in 1947, and they both worked as specialty dancers in the 1949 comedy musical Dance Me
a Song (James Shelton), where Fosse met star Joan McCraken. Fosse was immediately smitten
with McCracken because “in ability, looks, class, fame, and achievement [she] was simply next
level, an artist and a star” (Wasson 57); everything Fosse wanted to be. McCraken soon became
“lover and mentor” to an impressionable Fosse. He ended his marriage to Niles, marrying
McCraken in 1952. Later in life, Fosse credited Joan for being “the one who encouraged me to
be a choreographer” (Wasson 61). She is the one who took a young, green ensemble dancer and
gave him all the industry opportunities to become the star choreographer Fosse was. Although
the pair eventually divorced, McCraken had always been “more than a wife, more even than a
friend, [she] had been a sort of angel to him… Joan had been the one to change Fosse” (Wasson
177). She was the only person “ever able to enhance Fosse's life and career” (Wasson 117).
Throughout his lifetime Fosse arguably used the women he
loved, and more specifically his
marriages, to assert his heterosexual, macho masculinity while simultaneously leveraging his
partner’s success on Broadway to propel his own career.

Fosse had always dreamed of being the next Fred Astaire (Wasson 23), but instead he
became a revolutionary choreographer; the first Bob Fosse. In 1951 The Colgate Comedy Hour,
a variety program on NBC, offered a feature spot for Fosse, making it the first time he staged an
entire ensemble. To “downplay his lack of experience in the production department, Fosse broke
the ensemble into pairs” (Wasson 61). Breaking a large group into smaller, more manageable
pairs was the beginning of a stylistic, and practical, method that Fosse used to choreograph most ensemble casts. What is most important from Fosse’s experience on *The Colgate Hour* was that “the group number showcased Fosse’s details” (Wasson 61). The magic of Fosse’s choreography style is the small, isolated movements, such as wrist rotations, snapping, limp hands, all of which are seen in the beginnings of his career. Fosse always “considered the work of the choreographer, paradoxically, both out of his creative range and a loser’s plan B” (Wasson 61), a sentiment that is evident later in his career as he yearned to be an artist in film, instead of merely a choreographer.

Fosse found success as a choreographer because he created a unique style for himself that defined generations of Broadway and film dancers. A style that is still quintessential in the industry and popular culture today. A few examples of Fosse’s enduring influence is Paula Abdul’s “Cold Hearted” music video. Abdul’s plot and choreography for the video is directly taken from Fosse’s “Airotica” scene in *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979). Both Fosse and Abdul were later referenced in the show *Glee* (Ryan Murphy, 2009) as the cast performs Abdul’s “Cold Hearted.” More recently, the singers Jennifer Lopez and Maluma recreate the “Cell Block Tango” number from *Chicago* (Bob Fosse, Fred Ebb, 1975) in their “Pa Ti” music video, which was only released in 2020. Fosse’s grip on contemporary pop culture is as steadfast as ever.

What distinguished Fosse from the rest was the method with which he approached choreography, because he had intention behind every movement that every dancer performed. Nothing was done merely because it looked good, but rather because it helped define the characters and the story; they “aren’t merely dancing, but dancing about something” (Wasson 80). Often, Fosse’s dance numbers included props such as chairs or derby hats, and they are recognized by flicks of the wrist, a pop of the hip, rolling of the ankle, and most famously,
snapping. (Milovanović 255). The posturing of his dancers is a Fosse trait, as he often had them hold harsh, angular poses in which they had turned in pigeon toes and a “hyper-extended position of the neck and head” (Milovanović 255). Fosse emphasized detailed, isolated movements forcing his dancers to silence every part of their body, so that when they focus their energy in stillness, they can hook the audience with the slightest move of a finger. His style stems from his “roots in vaudeville [and] burlesque houses”, combining “explosive use of limbs and jumps, sharp turns of the head, complex musicality, and isolations, combined with a slinky, understated attitude” (Milovanović 256). Fosse movement is the “architectural relationship” (Milovanović 256) between the dancer’s body and the performing space. Fosse had such a mastery of how and why a body should move, which is evident from the intention and detail he put into his choreography, creating a style that has influenced artists and performers to this day.

Although Fosse is best known as a director-choreographer, he began his career in entertainment as a chorus dancer in a variety of films. Kiss Me Kate was one of Fosse’s first experiences with film. The story follows an ex-husband and wife that come back together to star in a stage production of The Taming of the Shrew, to which Fosse plays Hortensio, an ensemble dancer in the play. Although Hortensio dances throughout the play, Fosse only choreographed one scene towards the end of the film. The style of Fosse’s dance number is clearly distinct from the rest of the film, giving an indication as to where his dance style and career would someday go. Fosse’s section was “only forty-five seconds, but it showed… what would become known as the Fosse style” (Wasson 79). Not only do the dance moves change, but so does the music. Prior to Fosse, the score in Kiss Me Kate is an “MGM-friendly bouquet of bells and strings,” yet for his sequence the audience suddenly hears “a fat swagger of brass -- a stripper’s vamp” (Wasson 79). This drastic change in score and dance style highlights the dichotomy between Fosse and the
conventional Hollywood industry, signaling Fosse’s departure from the mainstream forms of dancing and eventual departure from mainstream filmmaking.

Fosse’s dance scene in *Kiss Me Kate* includes iconic movements that one can discern throughout his later body of work. These movements include flicking arms into the air, slowly slithering in syncopation, shoulders hunched, and knees bent (Wasson 79). In this scene, Fosse and his dance partner Carol Haney snap to beat as if they are in a trance. Later, Haney crouches in a fetal position, eventually crawling towards Fosse in a desperate manner “until the music chills and they each hit what looks like a scarecrow pose” (Wasson 80). Fosse’s most recognizable moves involve holding poses with one’s limbs jutting out at awkward angles, uniquely demonstrated by Haney in *Kiss Me Kate*. Although this is the genesis of Fosse developing his style as a choreographer, it is not without homage to the previous greats. “His taste for showbiz symbolism and convention [is seen] in the burlesque vamp, Astaire-tilted hat, and outstretched Al Jolson arms” (Wasson 81). Fosse grew up in vaudeville, witnessing the minstrel tradition of face-open palms, a move that he inherited. Simply said, the dancing seen in *Kiss Me Kate* and the rest of Fosse’s work is “not de Mille-fluid, nor Robbins-robust; it’s not American ballet and it’s not American colloquial. It’s Fosse.” (Wasson 81) Fosse eventually left Hollywood because “they weren’t making musicals the way they used to and he was tired of hanging around Culver City, waiting for another disappointment” (Wasson 81). The change in production and industry methods in Hollywood altered the trajectory of Fosse’s career as he abandoned his dreams of dancing in the movies, and made his way East to Broadway. After working on *Kiss Me Kate*, Fosse famously said, “I thought choreographers were all rock bottom” (Wasson 81), only to make a career of revolutionizing dance.
Fosse’s big break on Broadway was choreographing the musical comedy *Damn Yankees* (George Abbott, Douglass Wallop, 1955) starring Gwen Verdon, his future wife and creative partner. By 1955 Verdon was already considered “the princess of Broadway” (Wasson 102), whereas Fosse was just making a name for himself. He had recently won his first Tony Award for Best Choreographer, at twenty-seven years old, for his work on the Broadway show *The Pajama Game* (George Abbott, Richard Pike Bissell, 1954). Riding the success of his previous show, Fosse was given final approval of Verdon starring in *Damn Yankees*, forcing her to audition. The pair had an instantaneous, creative connection with Verdon saying, “I get a much bigger kick out of pleasing him in rehearsal than I do an entire audience in a performance” and with that Fosse, “who was never impressed, was impressed” (Wasson 104). The two saw each other as creative equals, making them the perfect team. Although Fosse was still married to Joan McCracken at the time, he and Verdon began an affair, resulting in Gwen leaving her boyfriend and demanding that Fosse do the same for her. He eventually did, although “in a sense he never would [leave Joan]. For the rest of his life, he felt Joan following him” (Wasson 114) because of the hand she had in shaping his career. Verdon and Fosse married in 1960, never divorcing. Thus continued the cycle of Fosse arguably marrying women he loved, who could also propel his career forward.

*Damn Yankees* was made into a movie of the same title retaining Fosse as the choreographer and Verdon as Lola. The group number “Shoeless Joe from Hannibal, Mo.” epitomizes Fosse’s style in the Abbott years, “big and lusty” (Wasson 128). It is the opposite of the “micromanaging detail work that would really come to define his style” (Wasson 128). In *Damn Yankees* he was still very specific, as always, “but at first it was more acrobatic, like Gene Kelly with flashes of Fosse” (Wasson 128), demonstrating the ways in which Fosse paid homage
to the dancing masters, learned from them, and eventually developed his own style. This dance is different from his more iconic work because most of it is filmed in a long shot, allowing the audience to see the dozens of men jumping and flipping across the field, highlighting the large, athletic movements Fosse choreographed.

The dance scene “Whatever Lola Wants” defines this film, as it is recognizably the iconic Bob Fosse style. This is Verdon’s big number in the film, so Fosse purposely “filled it with all sorts of burlesque moves, moves she recognized from her early days playing clubs on Hollywood Boulevard at the age of fifteen” (Wasson 103). This dance is essentially a strip tease, and Fosse is using choreography to imitate the act of seduction; dance as sex. Throughout the scene, Lola slowly removes her gloves, takes off her skirt to reveal lace pants, wiggles out of her pants while sitting on the ground, and strategically places herself on the locker room bench posing for Joe, inviting him to sleep with her. “Every wink, every blink, every finger curl was quite obviously the product of weeks of careful experimentation. [Fosse] told her when to breathe, when to laugh, when to smile and how much” (Wasson 103). “Whatever Lola Wants” is the perfect demonstration of Fosse’s control and perfection of his dance moves, resulting in one of the most sexually charged dances he had choreographed to date. Although it was Fosse’s genius moves, it was Verdon executing them with such enthusiasm and commitment. As a team they were unstoppable, but “it took Verdon, a comedienne, to make sex safe for the American musical” (Wasson 111), opening the door for Fosse to make a career of dance and sex.

This introduction to Fosse’s professional rise gives insight into not only his aesthetic, style, and movements, but also some of the recurring themes that are persistent throughout his life and work. As discussed, at a young age masculinity, shame, sex, and fear became connotated with dance, because of the torment he endured from his peers for being a male dancer, as well as
the sexual abuse inflicted on him as a kid in the burlesque houses. Even later in his career, many people in the industry felt Fosse could possibly be queer (Wasson 434), which he took great insult to, arguably fueling his womanizing character and obsession with sex. Moreover, Fosse arguably used the multiple women in his life to propel his career forward, as seen when he married his dance partner Mary Ann Niles, when he married Joan McCracken after she helped launch his choreography career, and when he married Gwen Verdon as he was finding success on Broadway. Another defining characteristic of Fosse’s life was his fear of failure, “Fosse had to fail his way to success and feel safe and unpressured while he did” (Wasson 111), but he would repeatedly self-sabotage his life and work. As Robert Linden, a Fox executive who worked with Fosse, noted Fosse’s “pleas to remove himself from every advantageous opportunity shocked [Linden]” (Wasson 212). Nothing could come easy to Fosse, and he made sure of that himself. These patterns in Fosse’s life are important to understand as they repeatedly define the films he made. He was drawn to stories and characters that he identified with, making most of his work somewhat autobiographical. *All That Jazz* is the only true autobiographical film which follows Fosse’s life events, but most of his other works also have themes and ideas that reflect Fosse’s personal life. Reviewing Fosse’s films are useful in analyzing his ideas of sex, gender, and violence in both his work and personal life.
Chapter 2

Fosse’s Musical Films

This chapter focuses on first the films in which Fosse worked as both the director and choreographer, *Sweet Charity* (Bob Fosse, 1969) and *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972). These works are great examples of the recurring themes of sex and gender that are present in Fosse’s work and personal life, as they present women as objects that are obsessed with being loved and wanted. This chapter will also demonstrate the patterns of dance style and cinematic techniques that are familiar amongst Fosse productions, while also highlighting the ways his film style has evolved throughout his career. *Sweet Charity* was Fosse’s first film, and *Cabaret* is perhaps his most famous musical film, giving us a large breadth to discuss how sex and gender roles appear in Fosse’s works.

Before it was a film, *Sweet Charity* was originally a musical that was directed and choreographed for Broadway by Bob Fosse (Neil Simon, 1966), marking Gwen Verdon’s triumphant return to Broadway as Charity (Knapp 228). When *Sweet Charity* became a film, Shirley MacLaine was cast as Charity instead of Gwen Verdon. It was insulting and heartbreaking to watch someone else perform Verdon’s character and moves, but she remained loyal to Fosse (Wasson 233), resolving to help Fosse stage and choreograph the film. “She did her job. That was Gwen’s point of view on work and love” (Wasson 233), demonstrating that to be a Bob Fosse dancer and lover, Verdon had to make painful sacrifices to make it work. Verdon’s sacrifices represent the gendered roles of work and success that were present for the women in Fosse’s personal life, a theme that also occurs in his work.

*Sweet Charity* follows the story of a young woman, Charity Hope Valentine (Shirley MacLaine), as she tries to find love in New York City. The film begins with Charlie (Dante DiPaolo), Charity’s boyfriend, robbing and abandoning her. Despite this act of cruelty, Charity
continues to hope that Charlie will come back for her. And if not Charlie, then another man will save her. Charity believes that love can drag her out of her sad life of failed relationships and working in a run-down dance hall, and after meeting Oscar Lindquist (John McMartin) it looks like her luck might finally change. The theme of marriage saving women is central to the film’s plot, with Fosse echoing society’s assertion that women’s only desire is to be wanted by a man.

The title sequence and credits at the beginning of Sweet Charity consist of brightly saturated freeze frames as the camera follows Charity around the city, capturing small snippets of her everyday life. Not only does this function to characterize Charity as a bubbly, energetic, kind young woman, but it also highlights the formal aspects of film that Fosse loved. Fosse was drawn to film because of its unique ability for “close-ups he couldn’t get onstage” (Wasson 236), which the audience immediately sees in the opening of Sweet Charity, as Fosse favors the freeze frame technique throughout the film. The plot begins with Charlie stealing every cent that Charity has to her name, and then pushing her off the bridge into the Central Park Pond. Every bystander in the park merely watches as Charity drowns, and they are simply unbothered by her inability to swim. Their lack of care for Charity is a commentary on how society perceives women who are manipulated by men, as this is such a frequent occurrence that we have become conditioned to no longer bat an eye at the exploitation of women in relationships. Moreover, the park go-ers are snacking on popcorn as the drama unfolds because the misery of women is entertainment in contemporary society.

Following the incident in the park, Charity goes to work as a dance hall hostess, a polite term for a female dancer whose time can be bought by male clientele. Charity’s character follows the trope of a “prostitute with a heart of gold” (Knapp 229). In Sweet Charity, the dingy dance hall that is Charity’s livelihood represents sex work and the sordid clubs that Fosse grew up in, allowing for pointed commentary on sex and gender. The mise-en-scene of the dance hall’s
dressing room is important because it establishes Charity’s life as dismal and hopeless. The lighting in this scene is dark, as the vanity lights on the mirrors are the only practical lighting in the shot. This causes most of the casts’ faces to be covered in shadow. Moreover, the props hung across the room emphasize that these are working class women, just trying to get by. An example being the pantyhose hanging in the bathroom, obscuring Charity’s face, foreshadowing that it will be her career that inhibits Oscar from fully accepting all of her. Red is the primary color used in this scene, as it is the color of the walls, many of the dresses hanging up, and Nickie’s (Chita Rivera) jacket. In cinema red often represents desire and passion, which is the theme of *Sweet Charity* since all Charity wants is to be wanted by a man. In popular culture, red is also associated with sin, allowing the color to also work as a commentary on how society sees sex work as a morally bad occupation. In the dance hall, the women perform on stage for an all-male audience, illustrating that women are objects to merely be looked at. In a voyeuristic society such as ours, both the men in the diegesis and the film’s audience are complicit in viewing women as sexual devices, reinforcing the idea that women perform for men in the hopes of being wanted within the patriarchy.

The song “Big Spender” makes it clear that the women in this dance hall are sex workers looking for the highest bidder. This dance sequence is recognizably Fosse, incorporating all of his iconic moves. The sequence starts with the women posing as a man walks in, emphasizing their hips, long legs, and buttocks. The camera movement works to emphasize the male customers as voyeurs to women’s movements, as the camera quickly zooms in on a man smoking a cigarette as the cymbals crash together. Many of the dance scenes in *Sweet Charity* operate as seductions. Fosse’s “kind of sexy had to be got at indirectly; he didn’t tell [his dancers] to seduce but to *expect* the seduction” (Wasson 533), make the men come to you. “Big Spender” is a great example of how Fosse’s subtle movements are used to create palpable sexual
tension. The female dancers are seen popping their hips and rolling their shoulders as they are washed in a saturated red lighting, forcing the audience to look at their buttocks. The one male client in this scene is shown in a silhouette, making the fat cigar in his mouth the primary characterization of this man, a phallic image further illustrating the sexual nature of this dance and Charity’s work. This song is about the dancers asking the man to buy their time, and their desperation is shown by leaning over the railing to get to him.

The dance hall sequence is followed by a montage of photographs depicting Charity as lonely since Charlie abandoned her. Then, as she is walking alone in the pouring rain, she meets Vittorio (Ricardo Montalban), the famous Italian movie star. When the two bump into each other, Fosse uses a freeze frame to highlight the importance of their meeting. The specific attention to this scene makes the audience believe this man must be her true love. Vittorio takes Charity to the Pompeii Club, where it is obvious that he is in a different social class than Charity. As Charity enters the club, she is starkly under dressed in just a simple trench coat, whereas everyone else is wearing black and white cocktail attire, with ornate decorative head dresses, and ostentatious diamond jewelry. The scene in the Pompeii Club elucidates that Charity can never be with Vittorio romantically because they are from completely different socio-economic classes, and her class status is directly related to her career as a dance hall hostess. Upon her arrival, Charity even remarks, “I’m the only person here I never heard of.” This scene is important as Fosse is highlighting the exclusive nature of our classist society that shuns sex workers.

At Vittorio’s home, Charity tells him that she is a dance hall hostess. When asked why she would ever take a job like that, she replies with, “the fickle finger of fate.” Charity believes these horrible things just seem to happen to her and she never knows why. This is an important sentiment for Fosse’s personal life and oeuvre, as he has also experienced his fair share of ill-favored dealings from fate, as discussed in Chapter One. The idea that bad things happen to
relatively good people is present throughout the rest of his work, and it is a theme that is evident in his life. But in *Sweet Charity*, and many of his other films, one could argue that Charity’s bad luck isn’t completely arbitrary, but in fact is morally driven. It is because she is a sex worker that she has such a poor station in life. The message that Fosse is creating in this film is that sexual women are often punished by society for their sexuality, which is evident by the end of the film.

When Charity meets Oscar, the only truly nice man that she has dated, her friends Nicki and Helene (Paula Kelly) ask her what Oscar thinks of her dance hall profession. Helene says, “have you told him you’re in the rent-a-body business?” demonstrating that their sex-oriented careers have always been a deal-breaker in relationships. Charity replies by claiming that Oscar knows she is a dancer and that he is fine with it, when really she lied to him, saying that she was a bank teller in Brooklyn. This conversation between the three women highlights the shame that society expect sex workers to feel, as they pass moral judgement on their profession. The fact that Charity lies about her life, functions as a moral take-away for the audience that being sexual, while also commodifying your body, is morally unacceptable. This is a theme that society perpetually sells women, and one that Fosse addresses throughout his works.

The musical number “Rhythm of Life” operates as a religious communion, providing salvation for the moral sinners and misfits. For one of their dates, Oscar asks Charity, “would you like to go to church?” which is Fosse’s way of ensuring that the audience understands, in no uncertain terms, that the Rhythm of Life Tabernacle is to represent organized church and religion. The first member of the congregation we see exceedingly resembles Jesus Christ, with his long hair that brushes his shoulder, the brown facial hair covering his cheeks, his crown (which is made of flowers instead of thorns), and most importantly the geometric painting on his palm that rests exactly where nails were used to hang Christ on the crucifix. The characterization of this church to resemble that of a Christian church is to encourage the audience to see the
Rhythm of Life Tabernacle as a new incarnation of a religious institution. Big Daddy (Sammy Davis Jr.), the flock’s pastor, says “let there be light” an obvious allusion to the Bible. Fosse uses this cue to demonstrate his unique film and editing style, by making a collage of yellow, red, and white vehicle headlights on the screen. Eventually so many lights emerge on screen that it looks like a flashing, somewhat chaotic, mosaic akin to what one would expect of a stained-glass window in a cathedral. This is a powerful way to use imagery to further demonstrate the spirituality of this dance number.

The Rhythm of Life religion preaches love for all, which is evident from the word “love” written all over their car, as well as the fact that Big Daddy is welcoming every type of person to his congregation. Earlier in the film when Charity is with Vittorio, she claims that her religion is love, essentially professing that love gives her hope that one day her life will be better. Fosse uses Charity’s personal faith in the power of love, combined with the Rhythm of Life sermon to highlight that society often uses organized religion to save the morally inept of our society, Charity. This sentiment is further emphasized when Charity quits her job after Oscar proposes. Charity leaving the dance hall functions as a moral take-away for the audience, that sex work is a transgression from normal society, and that it is only marriage and faith that can save women from immoral behavior. Fosse uses this scene to show the hypocrisy of society as its religion claims to welcome anyone, while simultaneously judging Charity as a woman that needs to be saved.

When Oscar proposes to Charity he finally admits, “I need you and I love you.” The camera movement and score play a particularly important role in this sequence, because after Oscar professes his love for Charity, the camera angle changes to place Charity in the center of the frame. This shot coincides with musical chimes that ring through the scene. The change in music and camera angle indicate to the viewer that these are important words to Charity, they are
the three words that she has been wanting to hear throughout the entire film. The camera zooms into Charity's face as the lighting changes, now illuminating her so she is basking in the warmth of Oscar’s love. Oscar continues to speak, but it becomes inaudible for the audience as the music grows in volume, and everything goes dark behind Charity so that her face is the only thing left in the frame. To end the scene, Charity whispers to herself and the audience, “someone loves me.” This line is her final admission of truth, that all she desires in life is to be wanted by someone. This, coupled with the fact that the audience can no longer hear or see Oscar, makes it evident that Charity does not care who loves her, she just wants to be wanted. Charity’s story is an allegory for how society assumes all women feel in our heteronormative marriages. Fosse does a great job at highlighting society’s small, trivial view of women through Charity’s story. But he does little to refute and invalidate these opinions, making him an ambivalent bystander in the treatment of women.

It is important to note that throughout the entire film Charity has only worn black and white clothing with accents of red accessories (red nails, lipstick, jewelry). The only time she changes out of the monochromatic attire is when she is performing as a dancer, for these scenes she wears a vibrant red dress. Her red dresses represent her perceived sinful behavior as a sex worker. In life outside of the dance hall, she wears minimal red to show that despite being a good, kind, thoughtful woman, she is still often seen as immoral because of her profession. But, when she is ready to marry Oscar in the courthouse, her wardrobe has completely changed into a color scheme not seen before in the film. In this scene she is wearing a blue dress with white cartoon daisies printed all over the fabric. She even has a fake flower in her hair, but still has touches of red with her lipstick and earrings. The costuming here depicts that by marrying Oscar and conforming to heteronormative societal expectations of marriage, she is being saved from her sinful life as a woman who sells her body. She has some red left in her characterization
because her past will always follow her. Oscar decides that he cannot forgive her for her past indiscretions, so he calls off the wedding. In a swift second, he ruins Charity’s salvation. Fosse has Charity end up alone to highlight the fact that we are conditioned by society to believe that love fixes everything. This is validated by the audience’s identification with Charity, but in reality, love will always end in pain and destruction according to Fosse.

The film ends with Charity alone in her solitude once again. In most of his films, and for Sweet Charity in particular, Fosse was obsessed with having a realistic ending (Wasson 236), which to him meant “it should be grittier, darker… Charity should be devastated” (Wasson 215). Fosse’s somber outlook on life directly relates to his upbringing and life experience discussed in Chapter One. He finds it unbelievable for a story to end happily. Charity ending up alone is Fosse telling his audience that to him, love will always mean isolation and loneliness. “However acceptable it might have been to build a story around a fully and frankly sexualized woman, it was far less acceptable to show her succeeding in the world” (Knapp 236). The ending title credit simply says, “and she lived hopefully ever after.” Even though Fosse has a woeful view on love and marriage, he leaves his audience with a sliver of hope, because perhaps it is hope and not love that can save us all.

In 1969, Sweet Charity “opened and bombed at the box office” (Wasson 238), with the box-office numbers only getting worse. This affected Fosse as he took each negative review personally, “if words were spoken against his movie, they were spoken against him” (Wasson 238). At this point in his career, Fosse had already won five Tony Awards, yet his first foray in directing film was a complete failure both critically and commercially. He was lost at what his next career move should be because “returning to the stage, Fosse knew, would underline his defeat. He wanted to be in movies. In movies, the director was the king. Maybe even the star” (Wasson 239). Cabaret would be his attempt at cinematic redemption following Sweet Charity.
In *Cabaret*, the musical number “Willkommen” sets the context of the Kit Kat Klub as a dark and despondent setting, where the audience looks unamused during Emcee’s (Joel Grey) opening song. While Emcee is introducing the show for the evening he says, “the girls are beautiful,” as the audience sees a medium shot of a man dressed in drag, putting on a blonde wig. The man in drag is the first woman that the audience sees in the film, making the viewers question their notions of womanhood and gender roles. The presentation of femininity becomes exceedingly important throughout *Cabaret*, with Sally Bowles (Liza Minnelli) at the center of the discussion.

Still during “Willkommen,” the cabaret dancers come out onstage, standing in a line akin to “Big Spender” in *Sweet Charity*, highlighting that *Cabaret* is a companion film in theme and choreography to Fosse’s previous film. The Emcee mockingly describes the dancers as “each and every one a virgin,” to which the club’s audience within the diegesis roar with laughter, none of them believing his claim. From the very beginning of the film, Fosse is making it clear that the women performing at the Kit Kat Klub, including Sally Bowles, are meant to be seen as sex workers that society objectifies. During production of *Cabaret*, Fosse even went to German brothels casting real sex workers as extras in the Kit Kat Klub scenes, demonstrating his dedication to authenticity (Carter 2). The realistic grittiness of the club can be seen in this opening number, with the dark lighting, smoky atmosphere, and garish make up on the women. It was Fosse’s intention to make the club look as realistic to 1930s Germany as possible, saying “if you see me doing that show-offy stuff I did in *Sweet Charity*, stop me. This isn’t going to be a movie. This is real” (Wasson 258). With *Cabaret* Fosse subordinated Hollywood conventions and expectations, one light-reducing filter at a time (Wasson 258).

When Sally and Brian (Michael York) meet, Sally asks him for a cigarette. Cigarettes are a phallic symbol, often representing male power and domination. In the twentieth century of
first-wave feminism, the time period in which *Cabaret* takes place, women reclaimed the cigarette calling it “Torches of Freedom” as a means to emancipate themselves from men and the patriarchy. Sally asking Brian for a cigarette works on both levels. The sexual, phallic nature of the cigarette signifies that this pair will be the primary heterosexual couple that the audience follows throughout the film. But Sally’s habit of smoking also relates to her inability to commit to a man as she is a free woman. Sally’s nature of having casual sex with multiple male partners, combined with her being a dancer and sex worker, are traits that society considers immoral, leading to her downfall at the end of the film.

The song “Mein Herr” is the first time the audience sees Sally performing in the Kit Kat Klub, but it is evident that she has been performing in the club for a long time as she has Emcee’s introduction memorized. “Mein Herr” is the quintessential Fosse number with chairs as props, hyperextended ankles, stiff posing, and snapping. From his previous work it is evident that Fosse loves to shoot through legs, highlighting the female form, and “Mein Herr” is no exception. Sally’s wardrobe for this scene is also important to note because despite being very sexual, there is also something androgynous about it. Sally is wearing a men’s suit vest that cuts down her torso, exposing bare skin. To complete the outfit, she is wearing shorts with a garter clip connected to thigh high stockings, and a bowler hat. Although this outfit is very sexual, the suit vest and hat make it appear masculine as well. Combined with her short haircut, Sally could be seen as an androgynous character, further emphasizing her role as the non-traditional woman, aiding in her struggle of being wanted by men. This costuming also goes to highlight how the Kit Kat Klub has become a safe space for non-traditional sexualities and queer performers and audience members that do not adhere to the heteronormative society of the outside world (Carter 1).
When Brian visits Sally at the Kit Kat Klub, he describes it as “a rather unusual place.” The audience hears this as Fosse cuts to the drag queen peeing next to Brian in the urinal, leaving him a bit unsettled by the encounter. The sequence depicts drag queens, another example of a non-traditional woman in heteronormative culture, as something to be seen as weird and unusual in mainstream society. Fosse depicts in this scene the notion that society often sees any women that do not adhere to the strict gender roles as strange. To Brian’s remark, Sally says “I am a most strange and extraordinary person.” This one line summarizes Sally’s purpose in the film and as a woman, to be extraordinary so that she will be desired by men and society. The theme of *Cabaret*, and much of Fosse’s other work, is the need to be exceptional. “The main act of a trashy, rundown nightclub, Sally ‘needed to be special.’ So she spotlighted herself with press-on eyelashes and green-painted fingernails. Fosse understood why: failure was the province of glitz” (Wasson 253). For Fosse, women want to be desired by men, the same way he wants to be desired by the industry.

As Brian and Sally walk by the train station, Sally leans against the wall and screams at the top of her lungs as the train thunders past. She is left ginning and panting as Bryan walks up to her. Fosse cuts to Brian in a close up, staring at Sally with such unblinking attention, and then cuts back to Sally as she laughs and moans. She blushes and turns her face away from Brian, covering it with her hand so he cannot see her fully as she licks her lips. This scene is Sally orgasming, essentially simulating sex. Sally encourages Brian to try screaming at the next train that passes, but he sheepishly denies it, looking embarrassed at the thought. Sally wears him down and the pair get ready to scream, but before they can Fosse cuts to members of the Nazi party beating up a civilian. Brain agreeing to scream with Sally is him agreeing to have sex with her. But the fact that the two get interrupted with shots of Nazis before they can achieve climax, is Fosse demonstrating to his audience the connotation between sex and violence through editing.
As a closeted gay man, Brian lives in fear of being punished by society for participating in any form of sex.

The scene of Nazi members bludgeoning a man is then intercut with Emcee performing at the Kit Kat Klub. The man that the Nazi’s are beating is the proprietor of the Kit Kat Klub that removed a Nazi member from his club in the previous scene. The Nazis are getting revenge. The dance moves of the Emcee slapping his knees and women’s bottoms is mirrored in the punching movements of the Nazis. The music from the club continues in the violent Nazi shots, demonstrating that politics and performance are one in the same; they cannot be distinguished. The violent intercuts of a bloodied man also works to further highlight that sex and violence will always go together. Fosse is showing his audience that women will be punished for their sexual indiscretions. In his attempt to keep the Kit Kat Klub a safe space for non-traditional peoples, the proprietor is murdered for this. By having the Nazi violence seep into the liberal club, Fosse is showing that society will always attempt exact its revenge on people that refuse to adhere to the heteronormative status quo.

Later in the film Brian is teaching English to a German woman named Natalia (Marisa Berenson), who comes from a wealthy Jewish family. This scene of Sally and Natalia in the same room highlights the stark contrast between the two women, demonstrating that socio-economic and societal class standings are related to a woman’s sexuality. Natalia is dressed modestly in a stunning emerald dress. Her outfit is accented with white cuffs, a white scarf, and a matching white hat. The whiteness of her outfit represents her virginity. She has shoulder length brown hair that is curled and styled to frame her face. She is wearing makeup, but not too much. Only enough to highlight her natural beauty. Sally on the other hand exudes a tacky appearance. Her blue eyeshadow is garish, and much like what the performers wear as stage makeup at the Kit Kat Klub. Her fake eyelashes look like spider legs coming off her eyeballs, matching the
spikes of black hair peeking from under her hat. Moreover, she is wearing a bright yellow scarf that is threatening to envelop her at any moment. And finally, the most iconic element of Sally’s character: her emerald green nails, which are kept long and manicured. As Sally extends her hand to greet Natalia, Fosse uses a rack focus and close up shot to emphasize Sally’s tasteless nails, because Sally’s entire characterization can be summarized in this one shot.

Later in the film Natalia invites Sally to her home, asking for advice about sex. Natalia confides in Sally because, “I know no other young woman who is giving her body frequently to men.” Sex is not something to be talked about openly, instead Natalia discusses her sexuality with a relative stranger, because most women in her class status are still virgins if they are unwed. Natalia describes to Sally her first sexual encounter with Fritz (Fritz Wepper), with such shame and embarrassment that she allowed it to happen, as well as the fact that she also felt fire and passion. Natalia is distraught because she cannot decipher if her feelings for Fritz are “love or mere fatuation of the body,” and because Sally has had “so many screwings” she is asking for Sally’s help. With this Sally responds, “does it really matter as long as you are having fun,” signaling the distinction between her and Natalia. For Natalia sex is a matter of love, it is an act she does not take lightly. For Sally, sex is merely an everyday activity that is meant to be for fun, regardless of whether she loves the man or not. Although the two women view and experience their sexuality differently, they are both having pre-marital sex, which society punishes them for. Later in the film, as the Nazi party grows in power, Natalia’s beloved dog is murdered as a result of her being a Jewish woman. The Nazi men mark her house with “Juden” to let everyone know that she is a social outcast (both in sexuality and religion). This horrific punishment inflicted upon Natalia as a result of her becoming a sexual being, relates to her sexual and religious repression. She is forced to live in many closets, and Fosse uses her characterization to conflate violence with non-traditional identities.
Early in the film Sally attempts to sleep with Brian by seductively lying in front of him and saying, “doesn’t my body drive you wild with desire.” This line encapsulates Sally’s goal in the film, to be desired. Brian rejects her, claiming to be gay. Despite being a gay man, the pair eventually sleep together later in the movie. The scene of them in bed together is intercut with Sally singing “Maybe This Time” at the Kit Kat Klub. Sally’s performance is shot in close up, giving the audience an intimate look at her profile, noticing that she cannot help but smile as she thinks of Brian. Moreover, she is alone on stage. This is the one song at the Kit Kat Klub that is not a complete spectacle, rather it is a simple ballad that allows Sally to profess her dreams. She is hoping she has found love, not just another fling with a man. The heteronormative coupling between Sally and Brian operates to save the two characters. By being with Brian Sally is conforming to society’s expectations of women and is no longer a social outcast. For Brian, being with Sally saves him from being homosexual, a digression from hetero society.

About halfway through the film, Maximilian (Helmut Griem) is introduced, playing an important role in Sally and Brian’s sexuality. Sally is taking Brian’s clothes to the dry cleaner, which represents her conforming to the domestic gender roles that are expected of her in her relationship. It is here that she meets Maximilian, asking him for a cigarette just as she did when she met Brian. For Sally, smoking a cigarette, the phallic symbol of power, is a way for her to get the attention of men. She is constantly attempting to be desirable to the men around her. Sally introduces Brian to Maximilian and the three of them begin socializing together in a unique threesome. Sally and Brian are still a couple, but Sally and Maximilian have palpable sexual tension, demonstrated by Maximilian buying her anything she desires. In one scene, the three of them are at lunch together, and it is evident that Brian feels left out as it appears that Maximilian and Sally are the couple instead. At the restaurant Sally orders dry caviar. This scene of such extravagance is interrupted by a shot of a murdered body lying in the middle of the street, a
result of the Nazi party’s violence. As the threesome drives by the corpse, Sally asks Max to go
to the Bristol Bar, completely ignoring the violence around her. This scene clearly highlights
Sally’s vanity. She is so self-obsessed that she doesn’t even acknowledge the political reality
around her. Sally is more interested in her desires than the world around her.

As Sally, Brian, and Max are vacationing in the German countryside, it becomes
increasingly obvious that there is sexual tension between Maximilian and Brian. The two men
are at lunch, and this is the first time that they are alone together without Sally. It is here, without
a woman present, that the heteronormative expectations can be thwarted. Brian offers
Maximilian a cigarette. Placing the phallic object in his mouth is homoerotic, but it is when the
two men’s hands touch as Brian is lighting the cigarette, that is overtly sexual. The two share
unbreaking eye contact as they begin to sip their wine. This moment is interrupted by a Nazi
Youth as he begins to sing a Nazi anthem, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me.” Having homoerotic
tension interrupted by this song works on multiple levels. Firstly, it depicts homosexual behavior
as a deviation from the norm. Their sexuality is viewed as dangerous in the heteronormative
society that is represented by the Nazi party, so much so that Brian and Max could be killed for
their orientation. This sequence also works to make the connection between homosexuality to
violence. Everyone at the beer garden joins in the Nazi anthem, forcing Brian and Maximilian to
leave. As gay men, they are literally being exiled from society. This scene is important as it
depicts Jews and homosexuals as equal victims of violence. Fosse uses this scene to be anti-Nazi,
also functioning to be anti-heteronormative society.

The connection between violence and homosexuality comes to a climax when Brian is
beat by Nazis so severely that he is hospitalized. After confessing to Sally that he slept with
Maximilian, Brian takes a walk through the city where he encounters a Nazi member distributing
party flyers. Brian calls the Nazi party “pure crap,” throwing their papers on the ground. Fosse
then cuts to Brian immobile in a hospital bed. Brian being beaten is a direct result for confessing that he had homosexual sex, further cementing the notion that sex that is perceived as immoral by society will result in punishment. For Fosse, sex and violence are always conflated, but he also uses this scene to call out those who refuse digressive forms of sexuality as intolerable.

After their vacation to the countryside with Maximilian, Sally and Brian fight as their relationship is crumbling. In a heated moment Brian yells “screw Maximilian,” to which Sally proudly says, “I do.” Although it was insinuated earlier that Sally was cheating on Brian, it is here that she finally admits it. To Sally’s surprise, Brian responds with “so do I,” admitting to a homosexual relationship. Following Brian’s confession, the camera zooms into Sally’s face, showing her stunned silence. She is in such shock that she backs away from Brian, out of the light. This casts her face in a dark shadow, demonstrating that she was blind-sided by their affair. Although her response is initially simmering and quiet, she eventually screams, “you two bastards.” To this Brian responds “two? Shouldn’t that be three,” reminding Sally and the audience that they both cheated on each other.

Sally’s reaction to Brian’s infidelity mirrors Fosse’s personal life. When it came to relationships, it was understood that Fosse could have affairs, but would get jealous if Verdon or Reinking went out with other men. There were rules to loving Fosse. In his marriage with Verdon, he took care “in New York to shield his wife from his latest flings” (Wasson 261), but this care “evaporated in Germany” (Wasson 261) while filming Cabaret. It was known but never acknowledge that Fosse was perpetually unfaithful to Verdon, and while filming in Germany he took up many sex partners. The women in his life had to accept his infidelity, as Reinking understood “she could not ask him to apologize [for cheating]. This was him and she loved him, so she had to love this” (Wasson 355). Fosse expected understanding of his sexual desires but would react much like Sally if Verdon or Reinking entertained other men, placing the blame on
them and negating his own indiscretions. It is evident that Fosse places much of his own voice and opinions in *Cabaret*. But perhaps by acknowledging his personal indiscretions in his relationships, he was able to use his films to admit the hypocrisy in his own views of women and sex. Although he does not directly apologize for his mistreatment of his partners, confessing to his misgivings is the first step.

The climax of the film is when Sally discovers that she is pregnant, but she does not know if the father is Brian or Maximilian. The fact that Sally is unsure of who is fathering her child perpetuates the idea that she is a whore, as it is a social taboo to have a child out of wedlock. This pregnancy could also be seen as a punishment for her casual sex. If she is willing to have wanton sex, then she will have to pay the price. Although getting an abortion is her first choice in dealing with the pregnancy, she changes her mind when Brian proposes. To Sally he simply says, “I would like to marry you.” Once again, Fosse depicts marriage as a solution to a problem. Brian and Sally love one another, but they are only getting married because Sally is pregnant. Much like Fosse’s personal life. Fosse loved McCracken and Verdon, but it was also beneficial for his career to marry these successful Broadway performers. Just like in *Sweet Charity*, marriage saves Sally from her immoral behavior as a sex worker.

Sally’s pregnancy also functions to give her a purpose in life, fulfilling her dreams of being adored and desired. To Brian she says, “I guess babies love you automatically, don’t they?” To which he replies, “they don’t have much of a choice.” This exchange demonstrates that becoming a mother is the only way that Sally will achieve her goal of being loved. Once again, it is the heteronormative institution of marriage and the nuclear family that will give Sally salvation. In the end though, Sally goes through with the abortion. Upon finding out this news, Brian is hurt and upset that she made this decision, wishing that she had kept the baby. While watching this scene, the audience is forced to identify with Brian’s anger towards Sally. When he
asks her why she had the abortion, she shrugs and says, “one of my whims.” It is difficult for the audience to sympathize with Sally when she is portrayed as flighty and insensitive to such an emotional, heavy topic. Both Brian and the audience are passing judgement on Sally and her inappropriate behavior, which is Fosse forcing his viewer to acknowledge their complicity in society’s appalling treatment of women. Perhaps the purpose of *Cabaret* is to help the viewers understand our involvement in the rampant sexism of our society, and hopefully create change.

*Cabaret* ends with Brian returning to England. When Sally drops him off at the train station she says, “I’d love to come down onto the platform with you and wave a tiny white handkerchief, etc. But there is that interview.” As she is saying this, she is hyper fixated on fixing Brian’s tie. Fosse does not show us her idle hands moving across Brian’s shirt, but rather he focuses on Sally’s face with a close up shot. Here the audience can see that she is unable to make eye contact with Brian. At this moment she must choose between seeing Brian off and a job interview. She is essentially deciding between the domestic life that Brain could offer her, with the traditional role of a woman as a wife. Or continuing the lifestyle that she has always had as a single, sexual woman. By not going on the train platform, she has made her decision to stay.

The film ends with Sally back at the Kit Kat Klub performing “Cabaret.” The song is a story of a woman named Elsie who is a prostitute, selling her body by the hour. After she dies, society judges Elsie for her sinful habits of drinking, sex, and drugs. The portion of the song that details Elsie’s life is really depicting Sally’s life. This moment of sadness and introspection is distinguished from the rest of the performance by being filmed with minimal lighting. For most of the song, Sally has a warm-toned spotlight, but for this sequence the light is diffused and very cool. Fosse uses high key lighting, making it difficult to distinguish between where the background ends and Sally begins. She is blending into this performance, illustrating that this song is about her. The song ends with the sentiment that life is short so we should all make the
most of it, “life is a cabaret,” to which Sally loudly belts “I love a cabaret.” It appears that Sally is happy with her life decisions, of not choosing marriage or motherhood, but this happiness is questionable as she is still stuck singing at the filthy Kit Kat Klub. In getting the abortion Sally hoped that she would be able to follow her dreams as a performer, but her life is no different than it was at the beginning of the film. Sally’s perpetual station in life functions to illustrate and critique the social repression of women, gay and queer people, Jews, and all the other non-conforming folks seen as outcasts of society. Because Sally is oppressed in our society for being a sexual woman, she will never be able to find success unless she conforms to the gender roles that society expects of her.

In *Cabaret*, “no one knew Bob Fosse was telling his own story. A film about bejeweling horror, *Cabaret* coruscated with Fosse’s private sequins, the flash he feared made him Fosse” (Wasson 287). Fosse and Sally can be described as mirror images. Much like Sally, Fosse feared failure and all he wanted was to be accepted and praised by the industry. He masked his fear and shortcomings with razzle dazzle, much like Sally Bowles. Perhaps it is the honesty of *Cabaret* that garnered it so much critical and commercial success. *Cabaret* received more than ten Oscar nominations beating out *The Godfather* with most wins that year. With such success, Fosse won Best Director. He was finally the star in the movies. It was also this year, 1973, that Fosse received the Triple Crown, winning an Oscar for *Cabaret*, a Tony for *Pippin*, and an Emmy for *Liza with a Z*. The victory of the Triple Crown deeply affected Fosse’s mental health. “Success for Bob Fosse was harder than failure” (Wasson 344), because he felt unattainable pressure to keep being the best. He followed “that victory with the most terrible depression of his life” (Wasson 344). For Fosse, depression and pain will always be conflated with his work as an artist, fueling his cynical view of the world and sexuality.
Chapter Two Reference Images:

*Sweet Charity*

Classic Fosse poses showing the importance of hands.

Iconic line formation that is seen repeatedly in Fosse choreography.

Mosaic of lights in Rhythm of Life church.
Sally Bowels’ androgynous presentation and costuming in “Mein Herr.”

Fosse’s camera framing to highlight the female body, emphasizing the legs and the buttck. This also shows the importance of props (chairs) and hyper-extended posing.

The lighting in “Cabaret” performance when Sally realizes that she is just like Elsie.
Chapter Three

Fosse’s Non-Musical Films

After Fosse’s Triple Crown success, he spiraled into a deep depression, eventually admitting himself to Manhattan’s Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic. He only stayed a few days before checking himself out and getting back to work. Fosse’s professional success and deepening depression had forced him to confront his own mortality, as he’d become suicidal. While discussing his hospitalization, Ann Reinking, his girlfriend at the time, said “he was afraid he was going to kill himself. And this time he came near to believing it” (Wasson 344). It was in this environment that Fosse departed from the musical comedy, opting to create biographic dramas that highlight real stories. This chapter explores Fosse’s non-dance films and how they touch on gender relations, sex, violence, and death. The films Lenny (Bob Fosse, 1974) and Star 80 (Bob Fosse, 1983) follow the true stories of Lenny Bruce and Dorothy Stratten respectively, giving Fosse the opportunity explore themes of sex and gender in a new genre.

Lenny follows the life and death of comedian Lenny Bruce, played by Dustin Hoffman. The film depicts his rise in comedic fame, his marriage to Hot Honey Harlow, later known as Honey Bruce (Valerie Perrine), and the decline of it all. Many comparisons can be made between Bob Fosse and Lenny Bruce, giving insight as to why Fosse chose this project. Both men were filthy, self-destructive, drug addicted, and crusaders “against bullshit [who] broke entertainment taboos” (Wasson 307). The film gave Fosse the “possibility for autobiography in biography, a chance for Fosse to continue his ongoing effort to tell his own story, from strip clubs to self-destruction” (Wasson 307). Lenny is shot in black and white, dispensing with the theatrics seen in his previous works. It is “a colorless film whose main characters live in a world of encroaching darkness” (Grubb 181). Moreover, the structure of the film gives the sense of a documentary, with interviews of the main characters intercut with action. Although Fosse had
scripted the interview scenes, they intentionally gave the audience a sense of reality, giving the film a “true-to-life tone” (Grubb 187). Fosse also uses these scenes to insert himself into the film. Although we never see his face, “the hands operating the reel-to-reel tape used to interview [people]... belong to Fosse. So does the voice asking the questions” (Grubb 187). An example of this is when Fosse is interviewing Honey, and she is talking about the collapse of their family. Fosse interrupts her to say, “Sorry the tape has run out, I don’t think I got all of that down. Just give me a second, and then maybe repeat that for me.” He is saying this as he removes one reel from the recorder, replacing it with a fresh reel. This abrupt break in Honey’s interview is a shock to the audience, highlighting the reality and self-reflexivity of making this film, and reminding the viewers that these stories are real. The structure of Lenny is also unique because it is not exactly linear. Instead, Fosse intercuts Bruce’s stand-up routines from over the years with the action that is unfolding in the characters’ lives. The stand-up generally relates to the other scenes, giving context to the plot and characterization of the film.

Lenny starts with a slow fade from black, revealing an extreme close up of a woman’s lips. The audience gets no context of who this woman is or how she is related to Lenny Bruce. We know that the two are connected because she is detailing how many times Bruce has been arrested for his stand up. With the camera still on her lips, a voice over says, “ladies and gentlemen, Lenny Bruce,” with an abrupt cut to Bruce on stage soaking up the applause of the diegetic audience. The first shot the audience gets of Lenny Bruce is angelic. He is leaning on his microphone stand, facing his fans with the spotlight on him. For the film’s viewers, the spotlight functions to make Bruce backlit, creating a dramatic silhouette of a dark figure, Bruce, towering over an even darker nightclub. The drastic difference between Fosse’s introduction of the leading woman of this film, Honey Bruce, and the leading man, Lenny Bruce, is important to understanding Fosse’s view of gender. Although the audience gets no real glimpse of either
character’s face, Lenny is portrayed as a god overseeing his flock, whereas Honey has yet to be characterized. Honey’s face is finally revealed when she is performing her strip tease, she stares straight into the camera. Much like Sally Bowles from *Cabaret* and Charity Hope Valentine from *Sweet Charity*, Honey Bruce’s identity is tied to her profession as a sexualized object.

When Honey is first introduced as a stripper, Fosse cuts to the men in the audience watching her performance. The sequence is filled with close ups of men with unblinking eyes and open mouths. Although the shots are quick with Fosse returning our attention to Honey, the sequence functions to highlight the voyeuristic nature of this kind of sex work. The hypocrisy of society is noted in this scene as they love to watch women perform as sexual beings, demonstrated with Honey’s striptease, but also punish women for their sexuality, as discussed with Sally and Charity in the previous chapters. The more clothes that Honey takes off, the more men Fosse shows, creating a rhythm of seduction through quick editing. Eventually, Honey begins to stroke her own breasts, teasing the audience that she might remove her nipple tassels. Fosse shows Honey touching herself, but instead of for self-pleasure her touching is now intended for the audience watching her. In this scene, Fosse highlights the voyeuristic nature of sex in our society; women are to be looked at as a spectacle.

Lenny and Honey quickly marry. At first, Lenny enjoys Honey’s sexuality because he is the one that gets to sleep with her. After they get married, he asks Honey to quit stripping because he doesn’t like how other men look at her “with newspapers and hats in their laps.” Lenny’s jealousy further illustrates the hypocrisy of how women are treated in society. Lenny married Honey for her sexuality, but now he is forcing her to become a modest woman after marriage. Much like Fosse’s previous works, *Lenny* peddles the idea that marriage can save women by making them acceptable to society. Fosse then abruptly cuts to one of Lenny’s stand-up routines. Here, Lenny describes a sexy woman that he claims every man would want to be
with. He then makes the joke that no man would let their wives dress like this sexual woman he had just described. The punchline of the joke is essentially Lenny judging this woman, claiming that she is not fit to be a wife because of her sexuality, while also pointing out that the expectation society has of married women to be non-sexual beings is ridiculous. Fosse uses Lenny’s stand up to be reflective of Lenny and Honey’s marriage, pointing out the irony in their relationship. Fosse’s commentary on society’s hypocritical standards for women is poignant, as it demonstrates his ambivalence to the plight of womanhood. In this scene he is not attempting to change women’s place in society, but he is keenly pointing out the misjudgment of women that is rampant in our society.

As Honey is in the hospital healing from injuries sustained from a car accident, Lenny has an affair with one of her nurses. The affair is just sex, nothing romantic, but it does speak to his character that he would do this while his wife is attempting to cope with her trauma. This is a characteristic of Lenny that is seen in Fosse’s personal life. He cheated on Joan McCracken while she struggled with a diabetes diagnosis. He also cheated on Gwen Verdon repeatedly while she was pregnant and then a stay-at-home mother. And he eventually cheated on Ann Reinking as she tried to build her career. While Honey is in the hospital, Fosse cuts to Lenny’s stand-up routine about cheating. Lenny says that men and women are different, because men do not have to like someone to have an affair with them. His point of the routine is that women should not be offended if men cheat on them, because emotions are not involved when they sleep with someone else. When looking at Fosse’s personal life, it could be argued that he felt this way too. As discussed in earlier chapters, there were rules to loving Fosse, meaning the women in his life had to accept that he would cheat on them but that it did not mean anything. Fosse is using Lenny’s stand-up routines as a means of confessing his own behavior, inserting his autobiographical experiences.
Later in the film, Lenny convinces Honey to have a threesome with another woman. The two are having marital problems, primarily financial stress and heroin use, and Lenny thinks the threesome will bring the couple back together. Honey is very resistant to the threesome because she does not think the couple can handle it. Lenny manipulates her into doing it by saying, “don’t you love me,” insinuating that if Honey truly loved him, then she would participate in this “exciting” sexual endeavor for him. The threesome sequence primarily focuses on the two women, with close up shots of Honey’s nail stroking the other woman’s lips, and later her nipple. Fosse also captures close ups of Lenny’s eyes observing their interaction, the spectacle, as an onlooker instead of participant. The concept of eyes and looking is very important in *Lenny* because Fosse is making the connection between voyeurism and sex in our society.

The threesome is followed by Lenny accusing Honey of being a “dyke.” Lenny’s jealousy over the threesome is introduced with a stand up of him saying “I love dykes,” only to cut to Honey crying because of Lenny’s cruelty. With heavy tears streaming down her face, Honey says “you’re the one who talked me into these freak scenes” with Lenny replying, “well I didn’t know you’d love it so much.” Much like society, Lenny too is now passing judgement on a sexual woman, because he feels that her sexuality has emasculated him. Honey was the center of the threesome, not Lenny. This once again relates to Fosse’s personal life, because “however frequently Fosse may have committed indiscretions with his numerous wives and girlfriends, he could not condone the same treatment from them” (Grubb 219). For Fosse, jealous and sex were always connected.

What is interesting about this threesome sequence is that it was completely invented by Fosse and did not actually happen between Honey and Lenny in real life (Wasson 347). Upon first viewing, it seems that Fosse created this scene as an excuse to shame women for being sexual. Through Lenny, Fosse can judge Honey and other women for having sex outside the
heteronormative marriage conventions. While this could be true on the surface, it seems there is also a deeper reason as to why Fosse included this threesome. Perhaps it was another chance for Fosse to incorporate autobiographical elements into *Lenny*, to acknowledge the ways that he has hurt women in his personal life. This scene, and essentially the entirety of *Lenny*, is Fosse owning up to the poor ways he has treated his partners. Dustin Hoffman once asked Fosse why he thought Lenny Bruce was funny. Fosse replied, “I don’t think Lenny Bruce is funny.” Shocked, Hoffman asked, “then why do you want to make this movie?” To which Fosse said, “I am interested in the menage a trois” (Wasson 359). While it seems that Fosse is using *Lenny* to apologize for his womanizing ways, he is still very sex obsessed, demonstrating that he is merely ambivalent towards women, sex, and gender roles.

In another stand up sequence later in the film, Lenny unintentionally highlights the dichotomy of being a woman in this society. He starts the joke by saying, “married guys have to jack off more than anybody else… because the wife doesn't want to touch it anymore.” This routine shows that married women are meant to be pious and respectable, not sexual, but they are also supposed to please their husbands sexually. According to Lenny, if women cannot function as sexual objects for their husbands, then they are otherwise useless. Women cannot win in this society; they are either too sexual or not sexual enough. Lenny quickly moves onto another joke that is unrelated to masturbation, demonstrating that he is not attempting to point out the injustice of being a sexual woman in the society, he is merely complaining about the fact that his wife will not satisfy him anymore. Arguably, Fosse is aware of this dichotomy of women, and it is why he cheats on his wives and girlfriends. The women that he falls in love with are talented, respectable dancers and actresses. They have careers and success in their own right. The women that Fosse sleeps with are people that he does not have any vested interest in. Perhaps Fosse knows that women cannot be both sexual and respectable in this world, so he has a woman to fit each need.
Lenny Bruce is best known for his comedic routines that resulted in being arrested for obscenity. Eventually Lenny is charged with violating section 311.6 of the California penal code for knowingly speaking of obscenity. While the judge is reading the verdict, he describes obscenity as “arousing a shameful interest in nudity, sex, or excretion.” Lenny and Fosse are similar artists. They push boundaries and societal taboos, often resulting in their work being seen as too sexual or arousing for society. This scene functions to show that along with Lenny, Fosse is also being condemned and persecuted by society for his discussion of sex. Essentially, Fosse is sentencing himself, acknowledging his own misdoings in his personal life. *Lenny* is the beginning of Fosse’s apology for his behavior, an apology that is later fulfilled in his next film, the autobiographical film, *All That Jazz*.

*Lenny* ends with Lenny Bruce dying naked and alone in his home. The last shot is a slow zoom out, starting with a close up of Lenny’s head and eventually revealing his naked, lifeless body lying on the ground. Soft instrumental music plays over the image, and the film fades to black. The slow camera movement allows the viewer ample time to really grasp how alone Lenny was at the end of his life. This is the realistic ending that both Lenny and Fosse were obsessed with capturing in their respective works. Loneliness and death were ever present in Fosse’s life and work. Fosse used to always say that he never wanted to live past sixty, a relatively young age, “because then [he’d] be too old to choreograph” (Wasson 578). Like Lenny, Fosse’s career was his life’s purpose. At his sixtieth birthday party, Fosse asked that every party guest “stand up, one after the next, and say something nice about him” (Wasson 579). These toasts began to feel like a eulogy, with one guest remarking that Fosse “was staging his own funeral” (Wasson 570). Only Fosse, the morbid, cynical perfectionist that he was, would stage his own funeral. And it appears that filming Lenny Bruce’s death in *Lenny* was merely practice for what Fosse envisioned for himself, drug addled and alone.
Star 80 is Bob Fosse’s other non-musical film, and it is the last film he made before his death in 1987. It is a biographical film about Dorothy Stratten, Playboy’s 1980 Playmate of the Year, and her grisly murder at the hands of her husband. Star 80 is based on the Village Voice article “Death of a Playmate” by Teresa Carpenter. The film starts with Stratten’s (Mariel Hemmingway) humble beginnings in Vancouver, Canada, where she is discovered by Paul Snider (Eric Roberts). Star 80 then follows her meteoric rise to success as a Playmate, while also telling the story of Snider’s increasing jealousy and obsession with success. The film also details the infamous murder-suicide, in which Snider kills Dorothy Stratten before killing himself. Star 80 is Fosse’s most violent film, in which he explicitly makes connections between sex, violence, and jealousy.

The structure of Star 80 is similar to Lenny in that it also incorporates interviews of Dorothy Stratten to give the narrative a form. The interview scenes in Star 80 are scripted sequences that Fosse wrote for Mariel Hemmingway to perform for the camera as Stratten. Fosse uses these interviews much like he did in Lenny, to give the audience context as to what is happening in the plot. The stand-up routines in Lenny are replaced in Star 80 with shots of the murder scene. Within the first three minutes of the film, Fosse shows Snider covered in blood at the scene of the crime. Fosse introduces death in the beginning of the film, making it apparent that death will play a formative role in this story. This scene of Snider wiping Dorothy’s blood on his face is intercut with Stratten’s Playmate of the Year photos. This is accompanied by Stratten’s voice over, talking about the process of shooting for Playboy. Fosse quickly cuts between Stratten’s Playboy photos and Snider at the murder scene, making an obvious connection between success, sex, death, and violence. Star 80 “has an edgy, nervous quality to it due to the restlessness of the camera. Its hyperactivity and the abruptness of the editing captures the manic energy of Snider” (Grubb 232).
Photography is a very important formal element in *Star 80* because it touches on the idea of voyeurism and the importance of looking. As a Playmate, it is Stratten’s career to be a sexual fantasy that is consumed through the male gaze, and this is achieved through photography. Fosse also uses photographs of Stratten to convey Snider’s increasing obsession with her. Snider often surrounds himself with pictures of Stratten, both in and out of the *Playboy* spreads. As the film goes on and Snider’s obsession over Stratten and her success increases, the pictures of Dorothy become larger and larger, until they tower over Snider. Dorothy’s success quite literally minimizes Snider, making him feel emasculated. By intercutting Stratten’s *Playboy* images into the film, Fosse is forcing his viewers to take the time to look at Dorothy as a sexual object. He is making his viewers complicit in looking at her, and subsequently objectifying her just as Snider does. Through our voyeurism, Fosse is condemning society for its role in Stratten’s murder.

Fosse introduces Snider to the audience with a montage of him working out in front of a wall that is covered in pictures of naked women from *Playboy*. Snider’s apartment appears to be a shrine to attractive, sexual women with Fosse quickly establishing Snider’s obsession with beauty and sex. The audience’s first glimpse into Paul Snider’s life is an example of the importance of looking in this film. Not only is Snider watching the images of naked women as he works out, but he has made it so the images are looking back at him in a self-reflexive manner. It becomes clear throughout the film that voyeurism and the obsession with looking at women, particularly Dorothy, is an important characterization of Snider. Later in the scene, Snider is staring at himself in the mirror, posing and flexing in various positions. He is wearing only a speedo, allowing the audience to see his chiseled physique. The sequence of Paul being consumed by his own reflection in the mirror illustrates how image obsessed he is. It also functions to show that Snider wants to be the object of someone’s gaze, instead of always being the one to look at other’s beauty. An important characterization of Snider is that he is an outsider.
that will do anything to get inside the exclusive industry. He wants to be famous, and he will do anything to achieve it. As he is staring at himself in the mirror, he repeatedly says, “hi, I’m Paul Snider.” He says this phrase over and over, with minor variations each time, making it sound like a mantra. This mirror sequence is very familiar, as it is similar to Joe Gideon’s morning routine in *All That Jazz*. This will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter, but Joe Gideon is Fosse’s autobiographical persona that starts everyday by looking in the mirror and saying, “it’s showtime, folks.” Snider’s characterization in this sequence is akin to Gideon, alluding to the autobiographical elements of Fosse’s life that are present in *Star 80*.

Fosse characterizes Snider as a lowlife by showing that he is a pimp that spends most of his time in sleazy night clubs. To further round out Snider, Fosse shows him being threatened by a loan shark, Charlie, for not being able to pay off his debts. In this scene, the loan shark’s men are dangling Snider out of a high-rise hotel window, with Snider screaming that he’s going to be sick. When they pull Snider back through the window, he is covered in his own vomit. Although he feared that he might have died hanging out of that window, Snider was more focused on how humiliating the incident was. While Snider cleans the puke off his $400 suit, he tells the loan shark, “that was dangerous and humiliating.” Charlie simply laughs at him. Snider then gets very emotional, this time yelling “you shouldn’t humiliate me, Charlie!” Humiliation plays a key role in this film, as it eventually becomes a motivating factor in Stratten’s murder.

After the loan shark sequence, Fosse immediately cuts to the present-day murder scene. Snider is covered in blood and sweat, talking to himself. In this monologue he says, “Smug bastards. Everybody kissing your ass, everybody down on their fucking knees. Well, not me, I don’t kiss ass for nobody. You’re not gonna forget me.” By having this monologue follow the loan shark sequence, Fosse unmistakably connects Snider’s humiliation to Dorothy’s murder, as well as his obsession with fame. When Snider says, “you’re not gonna forget me” as he wipes
Dorothy’s blood off his face, Fosse is showing his viewer that death and fame are inherently connected. Moreover, throughout Snider’s speech, Fosse intercuts pictures of Stratten from *Playboy*, including the sound of a camera shutter clicking. These sexual images of Stratten are also used to connect fame and death to sex and voyeurism. While Fosse shows these images, the audience can hear Snider saying, “I found her, you didn’t.” From this sequence, it is evident that Snider has a sense of possession of Stratten, essentially because he saw her first. This possession manifests itself in not only photographs of Stratten, which he has hanging on his walls, but also in controlling her sexuality and eventually her death.

As Paul and Dorothy begin dating, she initially had no interest in being a model, much less a nude one in *Playboy*. The two eventually began a sexual relationship, even though Stratten was only eighteen years old, and Snider was twenty-six. In one of their encounters, Snider convinces Dorothy to remove her shirt and let him take nude photos of her with his Polaroid camera. Photographs and the camera play an important role in this film, as it becomes the apparatus from which Snider discovers her, as well as what brings her fame and success as a Playmate. The camera is also what makes Stratten become merely a sexual object to Snider and society, because her nude images are printed for the world to see. Society’s voyeurism of Stratten’s image aids in making her merely an object to be looked at, rather than a person who is truly seen.

When Snider realizes that he can make money off Stratten’s images, he convinces her to submit photographs to *Playboy*. Here he says to Stratten, “together we could be somebody.” Although he may have loved Stratten at some time in their relationship, this scene is the turning point in the film because Snider starts to see Stratten as an object that can be monetized. It is his relationship to Stratten that will make him famous. This is very similar to Fosse’s personal life, as he was able to use the women he loved, Joan McCracken and Gwen Verdon, to find success.
Snider is merely marrying Stratten to become rich and famous. Fosse at least had skill and drive to make his career, it just happened to be beneficial that the women he loved could help establish him in the industry. Although Fosse and Snider are similar in some regards, Fosse is a saint compared to Snider because he does not monetize his partner’s sexuality. Perhaps this autobiographical comparison of Fosse’s personal relationships with Snider in *Star 80* is intentionally scathing, as a means for Fosse to show contrition for his past treatment of the women in his life. Although Fosse cannot change his past behavior, he is using *Star 80* to show remorse.

As Dorothy’s fame increases as a *Playboy* bunny, Snider says that they should get married. Stratten is on the phone with Snider because she is in Los Angeles for a *Playboy* shoot, but he is still in Vancouver. She is excitedly telling Snider that she is paid $10,000 just for having her picture taken. At this news, Snider is more excited than Stratten and he says he’s coming down to California to see her. He follows this up with, “we’ll just run over to Vegas and do it.” At the proposition of marriage, Dorothy’s face completely drops, making it clear to the audience that she does not want to marry Snider. Marriage has a different function in *Star 80* than it does in Fosse’s other films. In his other work, marriage is often a means to save a woman from her moral and sexual indiscretions. In *Star 80*, Snider wants to marry Stratten as a way to lock her down, making her obligated to him forever. This way, if Stratten finds success as a *Playboy* bunny, then he can subsequently find fame too. Perhaps this version of marriage reflects Fosse’s personal view on the institution as well, that heteronormative marriage is a way to bind people together, locking them down forever. When Hugh Hefner (Cliff Robertson) finds out that Snider proposed to Stratten, he encourages her to decline the proposal. To Stratten, Hefner says, “frankly we think it’s better for the image if [Playmates] are not [married].” This is Fosse’s first film where both the characters in the diegesis and the film’s audience do not want the main
female character to be married. Fosse is questioning the heteronormative status quo of marriage. But he is also reinforcing the idea that married women cannot be sexual, as it can threaten Dorothy’s Playmate career. As seen in his other works, only to be reiterated in *Star 80*, that sexualized women will lose their sexuality in marriage.

After Snider proposes to Dorothy over the phone, Fosse superimposes Snider over the shot of Dorothy holding the phone to her ear. Stratten is holding the phone and is looking off screen left, while Snider fades in and is looking off screen right. This makes it appear as if the two are conversing with each other, but, the image of Snider is from the murder scene (the future). While superimposed and looking at Dorothy, Snider says “we had everything going for us, but you fucks wouldn’t let me in.” When Snider says, “you fucks,” he is referring to those in the industry that kept him on the outside, which is personified by Hefner in this film. Dorothy’s image eventually fades out and the audience is placed in the crime scene. Fosse cuts to a medium long shot of Stratten’s naked, dead body lying on the floor covered in blood. The connection between the violent imagery and Snider’s dialogue is important because Fosse uses it to indict Hollywood, and the exclusive industry it represents, as an accomplice in Stratten’s murder.

Snider officially relocates to Los Angeles to be with Stratten, and the two get married. While hosting a large barbecue at their house, their friend Nick pulls out a contraption he found in the garage. Everyone at the party immediately realizes that it’s a sex contraption intended for bondage. Fosse shows Snider’s point of view shot, looking down to see all the guests crowd around the chair. Snider is immediately embarrassed. Fosse cuts between close ups of their friend’s faces, all saying they know what it’s used for, giving a dizzying feeling of judgement. Stratten is portrayed as the naive girl who has no idea what the chair is used for, and a friend must explain it to her. This characterization of Stratten as the innocent woman is important, because it shows the audience that although she is sexualized in her career, she is not
experienced when it comes to sex. This scene also characterizes Snider as perhaps a sadomasochist, as someone who likes sex to be violent. Once again, Snider’s sexuality is used to humiliate him. Fosse intercuts partygoers examining the chair, with shots from the murder sequence. In these quick cuts, Fosse shows Snider setting up the chair with his blood covered hands. Snider opening the legs of the chair and undoing the belt strap are all shot in close up, so the audience is not given the whole picture. This is extremely frightening to the viewers, because one can guess that Snider is going to place Dorothy’s dead body on the chair. This is a pivotal scene in the film because it illustrates how Snider’s humiliation is connected to sex and violence. This indication of violence and sex is another nod to Fosse’s autobiographical filmmaking, as Fosse “was himself uncomfortable, even afraid, of the sexual excesses he was drawn to” (Wasson 270). Fosse channeled his shame into Snider’s character, giving him the space to make sense of his own confusion over sex, violence, and death.

Dorothy goes to New York to act in a film for Aram Nicholas (Roger Rees), a character that is based on Peter Bogdanovich (Carpenter 17), leaving Snider in California. While the couple is apart, Snider becomes increasingly possessive over Stratten, calling her incessantly. Stratten confides in Nicholas about her horrible marriage to Snider, confessing “I don’t know why I feel this loyalty to him… He’s got other women, he always has.” Fosse cuts to an interview with a female bartender from the strip in Los Angeles. It is a medium close up shot in a dark bar, making it impossible to read her face. The lighting creates the dark, dreadful atmosphere of the sleazy nightclubs that Snider is drawn to. Fosse uses a long shot to show Snider hitting on the bartender, slowly zooming in on the pair. The camera looks past other people in the foreground, to see Snider and the woman in the midground. The staging makes it feel as if the camera is hiding from Snider, catching him in his act of deceit and infidelity. The loyalty that Stratten feels despite Snider’s affairs is very similar to Gwen Verdon and Bob
Fosse’s marriage. Although Fosse had many extramarital affairs that were not a secret from Verdon, she continued to stay with him. Verdon was often hurt by Fosse’s infidelity, but she stayed loyal to him and their work, because she knew they made great creative partners, and that is what mattered more than Fosse’s cheating. Fosse is using *Star 80* to acknowledge his misdoings, by once again comparing himself to Snider, a harsh comparison that arguably signals Fosse’s regrets over his behavior.

Snider hires a private investigator to follow Stratten while she is filming in New York with Nicholas. Snider believes the two have begun an affair, making him increasingly possessive of Stratten. He repeatedly tells the investigator, “I discovered her,” as if that gives him the right to control every aspect of her life. The investigator finds that Stratten and Nicholas are having an affair. When the investigator breaks the news to Snider that his wife is cheating on him with Nicholas, the camera starts on the investigator and pans right to reveal Snider with a stone cold, expressionless face. The camera movement mimics the wave of information washing over Snider, and he can do nothing but sit there and take it. Snider then goes to the bathroom where he vomits into the sink, reminding the audience of the first time that he vomited after being humiliated by the loan shark. Snider’s physical reaction to Dorothy’s infidelity demonstrates to the viewer that he has been humiliated by his wife, signaling that he will become violent.

Throughout the film, Fosse has done a great job at connecting Snider’s humiliation to violence, and this connotation becomes vital in this scene of the film, because his emasculation from Dorothy leads directly to her murder. After Snider throws up in the bathroom, Fosse abruptly cuts to a gun firing. Snider is buying the shotgun that he will use in his murder-suicide. Editing allows Fosse to directly link sex and humiliation with death.

Nicholas convinces Stratten to leave Snider for her own safety. Stratten moves in with Nicholas but decides to visit Snider at their old home one last time to divide their assets. It is
here that Stratten is raped and murdered by Snider. Most of Fosse’s previous films have made a connotation between sex and violence, often achieved through editing. *Star 80*, however, is Fosse’s most explicit depiction of the violence that accompanies sex. The scene of Stratten’s murder takes place in Snider’s bedroom, and despite it being broad daylight outside, the curtains are drawn to make the room appear completely dark and hard to read. Snider gets upset that she is sleeping with Nicholas saying, “I’m too small-time for you now,” alluding to the fact that he is emasculated by successful women. Instead, he would rather be in complete control of Stratten, her *Playboy* career, and her sexuality. Snider truly believes that he owns Stratten because he helped her get her start. Snider threatens to rape her, pushing her on the bed and ripping off her white shirt, tainting Stratten’s purity. In a move of self-defense, Stratten undresses herself, exposing her naked body. Fosse cuts to a close up of Stratten crying, breathing shakily, and unable to make eye contact with Snider, making it clear in no uncertain terms that she does not want to have sex with Snider. Instead, we can only hope that sleeping with him will be enough to save her life. Snider aggressively throws her on the bed, and while he is pinning her down and forcing himself inside of her, he repeatedly says, “they are trying to kill me.” This line of dialogue is Fosse clearly “implicating Hollywood as the murderer” (Grubb 237). It was the industry (“they”) that tainted Stratten.

After Snider rapes Stratten and she is lying helpless on the floor, Fosse intercuts photos of the couple with shots of Stratten quietly sobbing to herself. The inserts of the photographs are accompanied with the shutter click sound, reminding the audience of the importance of voyeurism in this film. After about eleven photographs of Snider and Stratten as a couple, Fosse reveals the wall where these pictures hang in Snider’s bedroom. Although the shot is quick, it reminds the audience of the Snider working out in front of a *Playboy* picture collage shrine in the beginning of the film. Now, his shrine is entirely devoted to Dorothy, he is obsessed with
looking at her. Fosse’s choice to insert photos of the couple make it evident to the audience that Snider’s voyeurism has led to his violent behavior, and eventually to murder. Snider then grabs his gun, pointing it at Dorothy’s head saying, “they did this.” Fosse cuts to an extreme close up of Snider’s finger pulling the trigger, and we hear the deafening sound of a gunshot. “One of the tacit tenets of Playboy philosophy—that women can be possessed—had found a fervent adherent in Paul Snider…. Instead of fondling himself in private, instead of wreaking abstract violence upon a centerfold, he ravaged a playmate in the flesh” (Carpenter 29). Fosse fills the frame with a photograph of Dorothy covered in her blood. The photograph is an extreme close up of her face, with only her eyes, nose and lips in the frame. Her eyes are looking directly into the camera, looking past the apparatus, and making eye contact with Fosse’s audience. Dorothy’s direct eye contact with the camera is Fosse further indicting Hollywood for its role in her mistreatment and murder. Moreover, Stratten looking at Fosse’s audience also functions to highlight our complicity in her death, as society was also voyeurs to all that she endured. We consumed her sexuality, while simultaneously murdering her for it.

After Snider murders Dorothy, he sets up the sex contraption that he was mocked for earlier in the film, and places Dorothy’s corpse in the chair, tightening the straps so her body will not move. From this action alone, it is insinuated that Snider rapes Dorothy again before killing himself, but Fosse does not explicitly show this as it is too graphic. In the true story of Dorothy Stratten and Paul Snider, “he strapped her into a bondage bench he had made expressly for the occasion” (Grubb 237), raping her once again. “He raped and sodomized her so brutally she was, according to Bogdanovich’s account, disfigured” (Grub 237). It was then that Snider pulled the trigger on himself, but just before doing so he says, “you won’t forget Paul Snider.” Not only are sex and death obviously conflated in this scene, but Fosse also relates death to fame. Snider has wanted nothing other than to be famous, to no longer be an outsider. And it is through Stratten’s
death and his own suicide that he can achieve this. Fosse also saw death as entertainment, a way to grab people’s attention and finally find success. For Fosse, “death is the biggest showstopper of them all” (Grubb 226), and he believed death to be our last great performance.

Fosse was drawn to *Star 80* because he was able to identify with Snider. The most evident comparison between the two was Fosse’s own career goals and Snider’s “sniffed out dreams” (Grub 233). Fosse had spent most of his earlier years doing anything to become famous, including changing his dream of becoming a famous dancer in the movies to becoming the best choreographer in both Broadway and eventually cinema. Referring to Snider, Fosse once said, “I somehow identified with him because he was trying to get in” (Grub 235), demonstrating that both men have been outsiders to the industry. Moreover, Fosse was clear about his opinions of Hollywood saying, “I suppose there is a bit of anger in me about Hollywood that I have to get out” (Grub 233). It is no surprise that Hollywood is depicted as the murderer in *Star 80*, because he used the film and Snider’s character to process his own frustrations with the business. Once when Eric Roberts, who plays Paul Snider, was having a challenging time getting into character, Fosse directed him by commanding “look at me, look at me! If I were not successful, this is what you’re playing. Show me!” (Grubb 240). It is abundantly clear that Fosse felt akin to Snider for various reasons, further highlighting his autobiographical touch in *Star 80* and how Fosse was able to use the film to hold himself accountable for the parts of himself that he did not like. In Snider, Fosse “had found a character that might have been the ugly stepson of Fosse’s autobiographic Joe Gideon” from *All That Jazz* (Grubb 240).

*Star 80* is Fosse’s last film before his death in 1987, and it is a great book end to his film career. *Star 80* shows immense growth throughout his oeuvre, as it is his most explicitly sexual and violent film. He is making no apologies for the themes he chooses to discuss, unlike his other films that are more subversive and quieter in their opinions. Through his negative
characterization of Snider and Hollywood, Fosse can overtly highlight the hypocrisy of a society that worships sex, while simultaneously shunning and killing any woman that is sexual. This is perhaps Fosse’s most progressive film, because instead of merely observing the plight of womanhood in our society, he is showing remorse for his past treatment of women in his personal life. By identifying with Snider and incorporating his own autobiographical elements into the film, he can claim responsibility for his poor behavior which is the first step to apologizing. Although Fosse can admit his wrong doings, he never stops womanizing women and using them in his career, as he had various girlfriends and affairs up to his death. The fact that Fosse can never change his behavior towards women, shows that he is merely ambivalent of the treatment of sex and gender in our society.
Chapter Three Reference Images:

*Lenny*

The first shot of Lenny Bruce in the film with lighting makes him appear as a god.

The importance of eyes and voyeurism in this film, everything is a spectacle. Lenny and Honey making eye contact during the threesome.

The self-reflexivity of the film shows the reel-to-reel deck.
An intercut of the murder scene in the beginning of the film. Dorothy’s *Playboy* photos tower of Snider as her image is all consuming.

Snider looking into the mirror repeating his mantra, showing the self-reflexive nature of cinema.

Photos of Dorothy covered in her own blood. This shows the importance of eyes and voyeurism in the film. Fosse shows Stratten’s image making eye contact with his viewers.
Chapter Four

Fosse’s Final Apology

Fosse spent years mastering his creative voice, which culminated in *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979), his pièce de résistance. *All That Jazz* is Fosse’s true autobiographical picture, where he uses film to acknowledge his past transgressions, while also apologizing to those he has hurt along the way. The film follows the story of director and choreographer Joe Gideon (Roy Scheider) as he directs the Broadway musical “NY/LA,” as well as editing his Hollywood film “The Stand-Up.” He is a workaholic on the brink of death as his health rapidly declines due to drugs, sex, and alcohol, resulting in a heart attack. Gideon is Bob Fosse’s character, as this film is set when Fosse was directing the Broadway hit *Chicago* and editing his film, *Lenny*. *All That Jazz* is “a haltingly autobiographic, expensive, studio-produced home movie” (Grubb 215) of Fosse’s professional and personal life. Between Gideon’s wanton womanizing and hectic work schedule, *All That Jazz* emphasizes his relationships with the leading ladies in his life, Audrey (Leland Palmer) and Michelle (Erzsébet Földi). They “bear an uncanny likeness to Gwen Verdon and Nicole Fosse” (Grubb 216), who they each play respectively. And Katie (Ann Reinking), his committed girlfriend who represents Fosse’s ex-partner Ann Reinking. Yes, Reinking plays “herself” in *All That Jazz*, making this film that much more authentic.

The structure of this film is unique as it functions to emphasize Gideon’s internal mental subjectivity, allowing for the audience to understand who Gideon truly is. Much of the film is built around Gideon’s relationship with Angelique (Jessica Lange), an angel that represents Death. The scenes between Gideon and Angelique are in a liminal space that is assumed to be Gideon’s mind. Throughout the film, Gideon is seducing Angelique, literally flirting with Death, which functions to constantly bring the audience back to the theme of death, mortality, and their relationship to show business. “To a hedonist/death-monger like Joe Gideon, the sexual appeal of Angelique is ultimately irresistible” (Grubb 218), her allure bringing him closer to death. Gideon’s morning routine also gives this film structure, as it gives the audience insight into the drugs and medication Gideon is abusing, while also illustrating his
declining health and mental state. Gideon’s routine of taking his drugs, brushing his teeth, and smoking a cigarette is topped off with his catchphrase, “it’s showtime, folks.” As the film progresses, Gideon performing his catchphrase in the mirror gives an indication to the audience of his decreasing mental and physical stability. The final structural element of this film is inspired by the form he used in Lenny. In Lenny, Fosse uses Bruce’s standup routines as a guideline for the narrative, often having Bruce perform a routine that would comment on the action unfolding in the film. In All That Jazz Fosse shows Gideon editing standup routines from his film “The Stand Up.” Fosse uses these routines like he did in Lenny, to remark on themes that are appearing throughout All That Jazz.

The film opens with Gideon coughing uncontrollably as he places a tape of Antonio Vivaldi’s “Concerto Alla Rustica” in his stereo. Fosse depicts Gideon’s morning routine in a montage of close ups with the diegetic concerto underscoring the images, establishing that everything Gideon does is a performance. The extreme close ups of his everyday routine allows Fosse to emphasize Gideon’s poor health, before revealing the entire character. Gideon places an alka-seltzer tablet in a glass of water, which Fosse zooms into an extreme close up of his glass, showing that even the bubbles from his medicine are dancing to the concerto. Everything in Gideon’s life caters to showbiz. Fosse cuts to Gideon smoking in the shower, which is then followed by an extreme close up of his medicine bottle of Dexedrine, which Fosse personally used to keep himself awake and energized. Fosse then shows Gideon in the liminal space with Angelique, the first time the audience sees Fosse’s depiction of death. Gideon is walking a tightrope in this liminal, black, dark space, his voice over saying, “to be on the wire is life. The rest is waiting.” He then jumps off the tightrope, continuously falling before he hits the net that finally catches him. Fosse edits this tightrope scene into Gideon’s morning routine, to illustrate that All That Jazz will focus on the eventual downfall of Joe Gideon. The editing here also works to demonstrate that death, and the tightrope of life, is an everyday thought to Joe Gideon; it is an important characterization. Just as the net catches Gideon, Fosse cuts to Gideon looking at himself in the mirror, eyes wide open, hands extended, saying “it’s showtime, folks.” This is Gideon’s iconic catchphrase that he uses to start every
morning, and the fact that he says it to himself in the mirror each day underscores the idea that this is a self-reflexive and autobiographical film about Fosse’s time in the industry.

Fosse finally gives the audience a good look at Angelique when she and Gideon discuss his poor lifestyle choices. The mise-en-scene of the scenes between Gideon and Angelique is dark and dirty. The pair appear to be on a theater stage, but it is cluttered with old costumes, liquor bottles, music sheets, and neon lights. Gideon sits in front of a vanity mirror that would normally be found in a dressing room backstage, highlighting his obsession with himself, a self-reflexive commentary on Fosse. The stage is so cluttered that it is hard to distinguish what some props are. The mise-en-scene in these scenes highlights that death, and his flirtation with Angelique, is a performance in itself. Angelique wears all white clothing, covered in purity from head to toe. She is wearing a floor-length white gown, lace gloves, and a wide brimmed hat with a lace veil that covers her face. Angelique is always backlit with a bright light, making it appear as if she has a glow that emanates from within. It is a classic depiction of an angel. It is important that Fosse depicts death, Angelique, as an angel rather than something scary, because it allows the audience to understand why death is desirable to Gideon and not something that he fears. Angelique is seducing Gideon with her beauty, therefore seducing the viewers as well.

In one scene Gideon tells Katie, his serious girlfriend, that he will not be able to see her tonight because he is editing “The Stand Up,” but instead he invites one of his dancers over to his apartment. His affair with Victoria (Deborah Geffner), the dancer from his show “NY/LA,” characterizes Gideon as a serial cheater early in the film. Katie comes home to find Gideon and Victoria asleep in bed. When Gideon wakes up and sees Katie standing over him, Katie simply says, “I’m sorry, I should have called first,” as she runs out of the apartment crying. Although she is clearly hurt that Gideon had an affair, the pair do not break up, because it is understood that Gideon often sleeps with other women whenever he pleases. Later in the film in front of Gideon, Katie calls a dancer from her ballet class asking him to go on a date sometime. This is retaliation for Victoria, making Gideon jealous. He says, “how dare you use my telephone to call somebody who’s not gay!” To which Katie replies, “you can go out with any girl in town,” but Gideon cuts her off, “that’s right, I can go out with any girl in town! But I stay in with you.”
Katie does not want to see other men while she is dating Gideon, and it is clear from his jealous outburst that he does not want her to be with other people either. But they both know that he is going to sleep around. This scene is the first time Fosse has acknowledged the arbitrary and hypocritical rules that he had in his relationships with Verdon and Reinking. Although he recognizes his poor treatment of his partners, neither he nor Gideon ever apologize for their behavior. Instead, the women in their lives are to be consoled with the fact that he is willing to “stay in” with them. It’s this lack of apology that highlights his ambivalence towards women.

Fosse also uses *All That Jazz* to depict the sexual abuse that he endured as a young kid in burlesque clubs, making a connection between this trauma and his fondness of death. Gideon’s mother is in the liminal space with death, which essentially functions as the afterworld. Here, she is talking directly to Angelique saying, “he has always had such a crush on you,” making it evident that Gideon, and therefore Fosse, have always been obsessed with death. His mother goes on to explain how Gideon grew up working in the “cheap burlesque houses,” and that he was constantly surrounded by “stark naked girls.” The mother asserts that this sexual environment did not bother Gideon, saying “he never even looked at them.” As discussed in Chapter 1, Fosse experienced repeated abuse at these burlesque houses, so this scene highlights the parental neglect from his mother. No one was protecting young Gideon or Fosse. While the mother is naively discussing Gideon’s childhood, Fosse places a young Gideon dancing on stage behind his mother in the afterworld. This represents the death of Fosse’s innocence at the hands of the strippers that he grew up with.

Following this scene, Fosse shows young Gideon (Keith Gordon) getting ready to perform in a sleazy nightclub. The wing of the stage where Gideon is waiting is washed in a red light, setting the sinister, sexual tone of the scene. Three burlesque dancers approach him, and one begins to stroke his penis saying, “something is growing,” while the other two women forcefully rub his face in their breasts. Gideon then runs out on stage to perform his tap routine. Fosse only shows the routine through various long shots, so the audience can see the dance moves but not the detail of Gideon’s costuming. Fosse then shows medium and close up shots of the diegetic audience members laughing, similar to his editing style.
in *Cabaret*, followed by a long shot of Gideon looking down at his pants before he stops dancing. Fosse then creates a chaotic, almost fun house-like montage of Gideon crying and the diegetic audience laughing at him. Fosse finally uses close up shots of Gideon, showing his stunned face and wet eyes. He then zooms in on close up shots of the diegetic audience members howling with laughter, while the burlesque band in film plays circus music, giving the sequence a dizzying feeling. The viewers of *All That Jazz* still do not know why young Gideon is being mocked. Finally, Fosse pans down from Gideon’s face to an ejaculation stain on his pants. It is a heart wrenching scene that clearly illustrates Fosse’s (and Gideon’s) connotation between sex, public humiliation, and performance.

Throughout *All That Jazz*, Gideon is repeatedly attempting to choreograph a difficult number for “NY/LA” but is not finding any success. Gideon eventually reaches a breaking point and turns to Audrey, his ex-wife, for comfort. This scene takes place in a studio, as Audrey is rehearsing a number for the show. While Audrey continues to dance across the floor, Gideon becomes more fed up with his lack of creativity for the number, and blames her for his troubles saying, “I’m only doing this goddamn show because you wanted to play that stupid twenty-four-year-old girl.” Audrey is unfazed by this remark as she continues to dance around Gideon. She simply replies, “don’t kid yourself that you’re doing this show for any other reason except guilt about me.” And there it is, Bob Fosse finally admits that he feels guilty for his infidelity to Gwen Verdon. Fosse uses *All That Jazz* to repent for his sins. It is an autobiographical piece that allows him to name all his misdoings, and finally ask the people in his life for forgiveness. The fact that this conversation takes place during Audrey’s dance rehearsal points to the idea that marriage itself is a performance, two people merely dancing around each other. Not only that, but Audrey and Gideon are bound to each other by their work; show business is what kept them together all these years.

The “NY/LA” plotline of *All That Jazz* culminates in the number “Airotica,” which represents *Chicago*’s iconic and sexy “Cell Block Tango.” “Airotica” employs the iconic Fosse dance moves, emphasizing the isolated joint movements. This is further highlighted by the camera, as Fosse uses close up shots of a single hand in the frame, snapping to the beat of the song. The performers punctuate the lyrics by hissing at the end of each line as they slide through various legs, immediately giving the dance
an overtly sexual tone. The first half of the performance is upbeat as they introduce the airline motif. The cast members are wearing pilot hats and gloves as the song tells the audience that they will be flying from New York to LA. In this section the sexuality is relatively minor for Fosse, “for example, a male flight attendant slides through the legs of a female flight attendant while thrusting a tray in front of her crotch as he offers the passengers snacks” (Kessler 121). Moreover, Fosse creates heteronormative coupling in this routine, a tried Fosse method, with syncopated movements and snapping (Kessler 121). Fosse highlights these movements with rapid cutting, often between close ups of wrists flicking, jazz hands, ankle rotations and hip thrusts. The fast editing and varied camera angles make for an upbeat visual rhythm that matches the beat of the diegetic music.

The second half of “Airotica” becomes more explicitly sexual, in both choreography and mise-en-scene. This section “transforms the plane into a locale for sexual exploits. As they undress, the dancers announce their names as they reach out to their new partners…. The number displays heterosexual, gay, lesbian, same race, and interracial couples, as well as groups engaging in simulated sex” (Kessler 121). The tone change between the first and second half of the performance is distinguished by the lights of the studio being turned off. Within the film, the only source of light in the performance comes from the flashlights that the dancers are using as props. As the scene goes dark, Fosse shows close ups of hands pulling down zippers and dancers taking off their tights. Moreover, this scene uses dry smoke to create a dark, if not unsettling, atmosphere. From the mise-en-scene alone, it is clear that something unusual is about to happen; Joe Gideon is pushing the boundaries of theater. The male-female coupling in the previous half of the performance is now disrupted, as some couples are heterosexual partners, while many are same sex. In “Airotica” Fosse creates a safe space for people who do not conform to the heteronormative expectations of society, functioning the same way as the Kit Kat Klub in Cabaret. Eventually the choreography simulates group sex scenes, that climaxes with Sandahl Bergman, a regular Fosse dancer, taking off her top and exposing her bare breasts. The number ends in a “group assault on a piece of upstage scaffolding that holds a topless female dancer thrashing against it as would a stripper against her pole” (Kessler 122). The producers of “NY/LA” love the first half of the performance, but
they despise the more sexual portion because they worried about showing it to the public. It is too explicit. By making the producers appear as prude, Fosse is illustrating his personal dislike of bureaucratic figures in showbiz. The producer’s reaction also mirrors the threat that the outside world has on the Kit Kat Klub in Cabaret. “Airotica” presents “the body as a vessel for lurid and faceless sex” (Kessler 121), and in this instance Gideon is being shunned for his sexuality much like the women in Fosse’s previous films. It is through cinema that Fosse is attempting to create safe spaces for non-traditional expressions of sexuality.

After choreographing “Airotica,” Gideon then releases a preview of his film “The Stand Up.” Michelle tells her father that she likes the film, saying “that was the first R rated movie I ever saw, and I loved it.” Although she loves the film, she says that she understood everything “except that the part of the two girls in the bed together kissing.” Michelle is referring to the infamous threesome scene in Lenny between Lenny, Honey, and a third unnamed woman. To her father she simply asks, “what was that supposed to mean?” This is an important question because many viewers of Lenny were left wondering the same thing, especially after learning that Fosse fabricated the entire incident. What are we supposed to make of Fosse further sensationalizing the spectacle of lesbian sex? As discussed in the previous chapter, it works to highlight the voyeurism of society on women’s sexuality, but it is still exploitative of these same sex relationships. As Gideon starts to explain to Michelle what lesbian sex is, she interrupts him to say, “I think lesbian scenes are a big turn off.” To which Gideon replies, “you’re right, I should have cut it.” It is a quick scene, but here Fosse admits to exploiting female sexuality, particularly lesbian sex, in his work. Although his films have had a social commentary on the hypocrisy towards women, he finally confesses in All That Jazz that he too is guilty of perpetuating these harmful views. This shows that he has never been an advocate for women’s rights, merely an ambivalent observer.

Later in the film, Gideon suffers his first heart attack. The heart attack is conveyed to the audience cinematically, primarily using sounds. Gideon is at a table read for “NY/LA,” and as all of the cast and crew are laughing, their laughter begins to fade out until there is only silence. Instead, for the rest of the scene all that is heard are the minor movements of Gideon standing up to walk around,
extinguishing and lighting another cigarette, and tapping his fingers on the table. Fosse cuts to close ups of the “NY/LA” cast laughing or speaking only to highlight that his audience cannot hear them. Instead, every labored breath from Gideon becomes more noticeable as he struggles to grab his left arm, making a fist. The heart attack ends with a quick cut to Angelique as she takes off her hat and veil. By undressing, she is seducing Gideon to his death. Fosse is attracted to death because for him, “Death has been a beautiful woman” (Grubb 219). According to Fosse, death “is like the Final Fuck” (Grub 219), so it is no surprise that he portrays Angelique, the angel of Death, as a sexually attractive figure for Gideon. All That Jazz repeatedly works to connect death and sex, a theme that is further discussed in Fosse’s following film, Star 80.

It is clear that death is inevitable for Gideon, because his most recent morning routine sequence before his heart attack was a bit different. Fosse intercut shots of Gideon in a hospital bed with a breathing tube, followed by a shot of Angelique smiling directly into the camera. He then cuts back to Gideon looking in the mirror saying, “it’s showtime folks.” But now, instead of it being showtime for his work on “The Stand Up” or “NY/LA,” it is now time for him to die, which is made clear to the audience through Fosse’s editing of the sequence. Fosse incorporates shots of Gideon’s heart attack between him showering and taking his alka-seltzer tablets, which functions to show that death is as much a part of Gideon’s everyday life as his medicine; it is inescapable. The intercutting also works to show that it is Gideon’s unhealthy lifestyle that is killing him. By incorporating a shot of Angelique into the morning routine, Fosse is foreshadowing that Angelique will be successful in seducing Gideon. Throughout the film, the audience has learned that Gideon is a womanizer that cannot avoid an attractive woman, and this will be his downfall because he will not be able to resist Angelique.

While the nurses are taking Gideon to his heart surgery, he hallucinates that two of the nurses are Audrey and Katie. As Gideon lies in the hospital bed, too weak to move with a ventilator over his mouth, he turns to Audrey and says, “if I die, I'm sorry for all the bad things I did to you. Fosse shows this apology from Gideon’s point of view, with Audrey standing over his bed, walking with him to surgery. By having the camera angled up at Audrey, Fosse is able to show how small and vulnerable Gideon is at
this moment. It is poignant that just as Gideon recognizes his mortality, Fosse also uses the scene to explicitly apologize to Verdon for the ways that he has treated her. Both Gideon and Fosse are emotionally exposed in this moment, perhaps making it the most raw and honest scene in the film. After apologizing to Audrey, Gideon looks to Katie and says, “if I live, I am sorry for all the bad things I am going to do to you.” Once again, he is acknowledging his mistreatment of women. Fosse’s films up to this point have avoided making an overt apology, never saying the word “sorry,” but it is here that Fosse finally gives the women what they deserve. That being said, he knows that he can never change his ways if he survives the surgery and will continue to ruin his relationships with women.

As Gideon lies in the hospital awaiting his heart surgery, he hallucinates that he is directing his own death scene. Gideon opens his eyes only to see another version of himself asking, “you want to shoot it now?” This scene is self-reflexive of cinema and Fosse’s autobiographical role in directing All That Jazz, while also working to show that death is a form of entertainment that needs to be choreographed. In this sequence, Fosse shows his audience the behind the scenes of making a film. A slate appears in the frame that says, “Scene: Audrey, Director: Joe Gideon,” and a crew member says, “hospital hallucination scene, take one.” Here, Audrey is performing with Katie and Michelle as her backup dancers, while a version of Gideon lies intubated in a hospital bed. The other version of Gideon in this scene, Director Gideon, choreographs Audrey’s final words to Joe. Her song, "After You've Gone,” is about realizing how much he will miss Audrey when he’s dead, because she was his only true confidante. As Audrey is singing, Fosse pans up to show Gideon’s heart surgery that is concurrently happening, demonstrating that this goodbye is Gideon’s own hallucination that he is having on the operating table. The next hallucination is “Katie, Take 2.” The women are in different costumes, this time with Katie taking the lead on the performance of “There'll Be Some Changes Made.” This hallucination is the iconic Fosse choreography with the bowler hats, shoulder rolls, and snapping, working to be reflexive of Fosse’s own choreography career. This song is Katie imploring Gideon to change his way of life if he survives the surgery. No more drugs, booze, or women; “you better stop, you better change.”
The final hallucination is Michelle’s last song and plea to her father. In this scene, Michelle is dressed much older than her age in a floor length sequin gown, a feather boa, high heels, and she is smoking a cigarette. Her makeup is gaudy, with too much blush, lipstick, and eyeshadow, oversexualizing her and making it appear as if she is playing dress up. Michelle’s performance of “Some Of These Days” describes how much Gideon will miss his daughter, as she begs “please don’t die, daddy.” Michelle’s costuming is important because it is hinting at the fact that she was forced to grow up too fast because of her father’s lifestyle. Michelle is also mimicking the many sexual women that Fosse has portrayed in his films, showing how life mirrors art. For the first time Fosse is acknowledging how his past mistakes have negatively affected his daughter, and the other two women in his life. The sequence of Michelle singing is intercut with Gideon’s doctors playing the tambourine and clapping the film slate. By incorporating his doctors into this sequence, Fosse is reiterating that not only is death a form of entertainment, but that doctors are just like dancers because they too have their role in the show.

Although Gideon survives his heart surgery, he has another heart attack. His weakening heart is depicted by a montage of nurses tucking him into a hospital bed and hooking him up to IVs and various machines. This sequence is intercut with Angelique doing the same thing, except she is making sure that he is performance ready by getting him in costume and putting on his stage make up. “It’s showtime folks,” Gideon is ready for his final performance and Angelique is preparing him for death. Fosse pans up and zooms into Gideon’s heart monitor. The heart beats are superimposed by a late-night entertainment show hosted by O’Connor Flood (Ben Vereen). While introducing Gideon, Flood says, “this cat allowed himself to be adored, but not loved. And his success in show business was matched by failure in his personal relationship bag.” This is possibly the most honest that Fosse has been because he is definitively owning up to the fact that his work affected his personal life, just as it did for Charity Hope Valentine, Sally Bowles, and Dorothy Stratten.

This last performance, “Bye Bye Life,” is one of Fosse’s most praised numbers because of its grandiosity, making it an absolute spectacle. It is in this sequence that Gideon can apologize to the women in his life, and therefore so can Fosse. Gideon is forced to confront his mortality knowing that he
is about to die, so he uses this song to say goodbye to all his friends and family. The diegetic audience members are old co-workers, dancers, friends, and most importantly, Katie, Audrey, and Michelle are there to see him off. When the camera cuts to Katie in the audience, she is with a new man, hopefully finding the love she deserves. Young Gideon is also in the audience, excitedly watching his future self’s last show. Angelique is overseeing the performance with a watchful eye. As the song climaxes, Gideon runs into the audience shaking hands with all of his adoring fans. He hugs Katie and her new boyfriend, essentially giving them his blessing to be together because at the end of the day, he loves Katie and wants the best for her. Better than he could ever give her. Gideon hugs the “NY/LA” playwright and producers, showing that he is putting his animosity towards the industry behind him. Gideon even shakes hands with the topless burlesque women from his youth. Through *All That Jazz*, Fosse able to come to terms with his childhood trauma and his confusion about sex and shame, and witnessing this character growth is powerful as a viewer.

Perhaps most important of all, he says goodbye to Michelle and Audrey. As Michelle hugs him tightly, not wanting to let go, Fosse cuts to a close up of Angelique watching their interaction. Although Gideon has always welcomed death, it is evident that these two are the hardest goodbye. But they are not enough to make him stay. Gideon gently touches Audrey’s cheek and says, “at least I won’t have to lie to you anymore.” With one line, Gideon/Fosse is able to apologize to the true love of his life, Audrey/Verdon. This is the most poignant part of the film, because it is clear to the viewer that Fosse genuinely regrets the pain he caused these women. “As poorly as Joe Gideon treats women, the movie is most sympathetic to them. Gideon’s ex-wife Audrey becomes his confidante…. Michelle confronts him with his ineptitude as a father.” (Grubb 217). Arguably, the entire purpose of *All That Jazz* is to say sorry to Nicole Fosse, Gwen Verdon, and Ann Reinking. While filming this sequence, Fosse took one take with him running through the crowd instead of Roy Scheider. After hugging the crowd Fosse said to Scheider, “And you know, Roy, the best part of it is that they forgive me, too” (Grubb 227). This film, and this sequence in particular, worked as a type of catharsis for Fosse.
The song ends with uproarious applause from the diegetic audience, demonstrating that it’s not only Gideon that finds pleasure in death. Society also finds death as a form of entertainment because it is sensational, allowing for Fosse (via Gideon) to feel redeemed for his death. Gideon gravitates towards Angelique. She is standing, backlit and looking more like an angel than ever, waiting for him to join her in death. It is an aesthetically beautiful moment, because even to Fosse’s viewers, Angelique is undeniably gorgeous. The serene moment between Gideon and Angelique abruptly ends as Fosse cuts to Gideon’s cold, dead body being zipped into a body bag. It is important that Fosse ends it on a bleak note because it shows that he has finally learned the reality of death, that it is more than just a final performance. There is a sense of pain and sadness that comes with death, and the grim shot of his mortal body reminds his viewers of that fact as it is accompanied by Ethel Merman belting, ironically, “there’s no business like show business.” And with that, Fosse fades to black on his last musical film before his own death. *All That Jazz* is perhaps Fosse’s most personal and honest film because he lays out all of his sins and past faults, letting his audience decide if he should be forgiven. Although his work has been generally ambivalent towards the treatment of women in our society, he uses *All That Jazz* to acknowledge his complicity in their treatment.
Chapter Four Reference Images:

*All That Jazz*

Gideon saying his reoccurring mantra, “it’s showtime, folks” into the mirror.

The first half of “Airotica” shows the importance of snapping and hands.

The second half of “Airotica.” This shows the change in lighting and tone, as well as how Fosse continues to use coupled partners in his choreography.
This is Gideon’s hallucination scene. Here Director Joe Gideon is talking to another version of himself that is on the operating table. This shows the self-reflexive aspect of Fosse directing his own autobiography.

The final shot of Angelique in the film after she has seduced Gideon to his death.
Conclusion

When looking at the surface of Fosse’s films, it can be easy to misconstrue the systemic treatment of women, gender, and sexuality in these films as Fosse’s personal opinions. This was certainly the case for me before I started my research. I am a longtime lover of Fosse films, mainly drawn to the theatrics and spectacle, but I was not taking the time to look at the deeper themes present throughout his oeuvre, therefore misunderstanding Fosse's works. Because of this, I came into my thesis research expecting to reaffirm my beliefs that Fosse was a raging womanizer and sexist. I had previously learned about his personal history with women and his serial cheating, so I was not surprised that the women in his films are often punished. Simply put, I thought he was a cog in the patriarchy machine, regurgitating and reshaping the same old gender roles and expectations.

My preconceived notions of Bob Fosse could not have been more wrong. It is clear from my previous chapters that Fosse is not depicting his own misogynistic opinions of women in his films, but rather highlighting the hypocritical treatment and expectations that society places on sexual women (and other non-heteronormative conforming peoples). I would like to take this time to apologize to Bob Fosse. I had a low opinion of the man because of the little that I knew of him, but after completing my research I’ve learned just how vocal he has been about the plight of the contemporary woman. When we dig deeper into his films, and look at the recurring themes throughout his works, it is evident to any viewer that he has repeatedly expressed his discontent with our society’s treatment of sexuality.

Chapter 1 outlined Fosse’s childhood, establishing the personal moments that would later become the important autobiographical elements in each of his films. Fosse’s childhood as a dancer in sleazy clubs, where he was sexually abused, plays a formative role in his understanding
of sex and gender. It also helped shape his understanding of class, and the ways in which class affects one’s perception in society. These formative moments in his younger years repeatedly appear throughout his work, further demonstrating that he is not merely flippant about the themes of sex and gender. Rather, these topics resonate with him because of his own past traumas.

In both *Sweet Charity* and *Cabaret*, Fosse tells the story of lower-class women who are sex workers trying to make a better life for themselves. Charity Hope Valentine and Sally Bowles spend their lives performing for men, both on and off the stage. Charity is so eager to be loved that she is willing to do whatever it takes to be married, as this will save her from the condemnation of society. Sally so desperately wishes to be desired that she will use her sexuality to sleep with men to reaffirm her value in society. But in the end, she is punished for her sexuality as she is left in the same situation at the end of the film, not having made her dreams come true.

I had originally believed that Fosse himself was condemning women for their wanton sexuality, but in reality he was working to do the opposite. Fosse used cinema to create safe spaces for women and other transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality. In *Cabaret* Fosse makes the Kit Kat Klub a haven for those that are unwelcome to the outside world. The safety of the club is why Sally never leaves because she is not welcomed within the status quo. He creates the same safety in *All That Jazz* with the “Airotica” sequence. Here Fosse depicts homosexual and group sex as a welcome activity, directly contrasting the cold and shrewd opinions of the show’s producers which function to represent mainstream society. During his career, Fosse used his films to highlight the irony of our society, while also actively trying to make the medium a safe and welcoming environment to the characters he depicted in his work.
While *Sweet Charity* and *Cabaret* work to show society’s hypocrisy, his later films *Lenny* and *Star 80* function to hold Fosse accountable for his own indiscretions. These biopics are the beginning of his long-awaited apology. Fosse relies on his autobiographical elements and likeness to Lenny Bruce to allow *Lenny* to tell Fosse’s own story. Both men were addicted to drugs, both men loved their wives but ended up separated, and both men pushed the boundaries and the taboo in their art. *Star 80* is much more indicting of Fosse’s complicit treatment of women in society. Fosse’s personal identification with Paul Snider, the film’s villain, speaks volumes to how he saw himself as he neared the end of his life. Fosse used Snider’s mistreatment and violence towards Dorothy Stratten to acknowledge his own mistreatment of the women in his life. This apology was taken to a deeper level in his autobiographical film *All That Jazz*. It is here that he explicitly apologizes to Gwen Verdon, Ann Reinking, and Nicole Fosse.

When analyzing films from the beginning of his cinematic career, *Sweet Charity* and *Cabaret*, I am inclined to label Fosse as merely an ambivalent bystander in the female treatment. He acknowledges the ways in which society mistreats those with conspicuous and transgressive sexualities, but he does not do anything to change this narrative. But as Fosse and his works mature, he begins to use cinema to take accountability for his actions. This is an important change in the themes of his work that cannot be ignored, and it is because of this that I am willing to claim that Fosse was more than ambivalent to women in our society. Instead, it seems he gained the clarity to understand his complicit behavior, demonstrating immense growth as both a human and artist. Fosse lays out all his sins on the table, particularly in *All That Jazz*, letting his audience decide if he should be forgiven. After spending many months in intimate conversation with Fosse’s work, this viewer has chosen to forgive him, and I implore all my readers to decide for themselves whether Fosse is merely an observer or ally.
Bibliography


