

## **Cats, Postdramatic Blockbuster Aesthetics and the Triumph of the Megamusical**

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**Abstract (E):** Despite its popularity, the megamusical is the most critically maligned and academically neglected form of theatre. Focusing on *Cats* (1981), the show that announced the megamusical's global dominance, this article will try to provide a culturally informed analysis of megamusical aesthetics that explains the popularity of the genre in postmodern culture. Particular attention will be paid to the megamusical's development of a commodified postdramatic, predominantly visual aesthetic, which informs other postmodern mass-cultural artifacts, like blockbuster films. To make possible the theorization of a commodified postdramatic aesthetic, the article will provide an intertextual reading of Hans-Thies Lehmann's seminal work, *Postdramatic Theatre*, with the theories of the *Tel Quel* group (Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva) as well as cultural theory, from Walter Benjamin to Fredric Jameson.

**Abstract (F):** En dépit de sa popularité, la grande comédie musicale (« megamusical ») reste mal vue de la critique et totalement négligée par la recherche universitaire. Le présent article, qui porte sur *Cats* (1981), le show qui a lancé l'actuelle hégémonie de ce type de spectacle, offre une analyse culturelle du genre qui explique son succès en le rattachant à la culture postmoderne. Il s'intéresse tout d'abord à la manière dont la grande comédie musicale élabore une certaine esthétique visuelle très commercialisée et postdramatique, qui caractérise aussi d'autres produits de la culture de masse postmoderne comme les films à gros budget. Dans ce but, cet article s'appuie surtout sur une lecture croisée du livre capital de Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, ce certaines idées clé des membres du groupe *Tel Quel* (Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva) ainsi que de certaines théories culturelles empruntées à Walter Benjamin et à Fredric Jameson.

**Keywords:** Megamusical, Postdramatic Theatre, Blockbuster Films, Textuality, Semiotic, Modernism/ Postmodernism

The megamusical is the most successful kind of musical theatre. Mainly associated with the works of the British composer/ producer Andrew Lloyd Webber,

the megamusical came to prominence in the 1980s, as a string of bewilderingly successful musicals, originating in London, took New York and the whole of the U.S. by storm, becoming the biggest money-makers in the history of Broadway and using their American triumph as a ticket for their exportation all over the globe. However, the megamusical is also the most critically maligned and academically neglected form of theatre. As Jessica Sternfeld points out, “critics ... dislike megamusicals by virtue of their popularity” and “theater scholars develop an arrogant, even disgusted tone when mentioning the megamusical, if they mention it at all” (5). Indeed, most historical works on the Broadway musical barely mention the megamusical, stopping somewhere in the 1970s, when every trace of the so-called “golden” era of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein vanishes, as Stephen Sondheim, the last link to this era, proves to be both unwilling and unable to gain mass audience approval. Focusing on *Cats* (1981), the show that announced the megamusical’s global dominance, this article will try to provide a culturally informed analysis of megamusical aesthetics that explains the popularity of the genre in postmodern culture. Particular attention will be paid to the megamusical’s development of a commodified postdramatic, predominantly visual aesthetic, which informs other postmodern mass-cultural artifacts, like the equally maligned and neglected blockbuster films.

### **The Road to *Cats***

*Cats* had humble origins. It started as a song cycle based on T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939), a collection of poems for children. The poems provided excellent material for musicalization, as Eliot’s style in this collection is reminiscent of a popular lyricist. The poet uses repeated catch phrases, strong hooks, steady rhythm and outrageous, attention-grabbing, witty rhymes, which are the ingredients of every well-crafted popular lyric. Eliot’s poems present us with a parade of cat characterizations, which establish the similarities of various cat types with recognizable human types, creating, thus, a universe of anthropomorphic felines. For the musicalization of the poems, Lloyd Webber used pastiches of recognizable musical styles that create some sort of quickly grasped musical characterization for each cat type, a musical image that communicates directly to the audience each character’s defining features. Thus, the Old Gumbie Cat’s midnight transformation into an energetic housekeeper is conceived as an exhilarating tap dance; the Rum Tum Tugger’s anarchic nature is conveyed through the pulsating rhythms of an energetic

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rock number, vaguely alluding to Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones; the allure and danger of Macavity, the villainous Mystery Cat, is captured in a sensual bluesy number; the emotional recollections of Gus, the Theatre Cat, of glorious days in the theatre under Victoria's reign are communicated through a sentimental old music hall ballad; the grace and grandeur of Old Deuteronomy, the wise patriarch of cats, is delivered through a serene lullaby that gradually builds into a dramatic anthem; and the tragedy of Grizabella, the former glamour queen that is now a shadow of her glorious past, lost forever in the decadent urban underworld, is conceived as a ravishingly romantic Puccini-like aria.

Director Trevor Nunn, who was the artistic director of the culturally prestigious RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company), was assigned the difficult task of transforming Lloyd Webber's musicalizations of Eliot's verses into a piece of musical theatre in its own right. Nunn came up with the narrative premise of *Cats* - all cats gather in order to decide which one will be reincarnated - that would constitute a tenuous plot frame, able to sustain the revue-like succession of self-contained cat characterizations as a part of the ritual: every cat should exhibit the reason why it deserves to be given another chance in life. Moreover, Nunn realized from the very beginning that *Cats* would be a piece of physical theatre: a corporeal spectacle, in which characters are reduced to their bodily attitudes and their essence is communicated basically through movement. For this reason, he worked in close collaboration with his choreographer, Gillian Lynne, who combined feline movement with ballet, modern dance, jazz and acrobatics in order to achieve the anthropomorphic illusion and convey through bodily movement the varied characteristics attributed to cats: mysterious, seductive, playful and dangerous.

The contribution of John Napier, the stage designer of most of Nunn's productions at the RSC, was equally important, as he came up with the visual concept that would transform the theatrical space into a cat's universe. Quite appropriately (and playfully) for a production based on Eliot's poems, Napier proposed the creation of a waste land: an urban rubbish dump, where all the detritus of human civilization are gathered, that serves as the cats' playground. Such a design could provide new and exciting places in which cats could be discovered throughout the performance and it could be constantly modified through the introduction of new stage elements that would interact with the anthropomorphic feline's restless movement. The touch of brilliance in this concept lay in the possibilities it offered for the manipulation of the

audience's perspective. Everything on stage would be designed according to a cat's scale, so that ordinary objects would take on a magical life, as they would suddenly be four, five or six times bigger than in everyday life. The idea that everything would be scaled differently revealed for the first time how spectacular *Cats* could really be. Everything could literally be larger-than-life, from a wrecked car to an old gas stove or a boot that is thrown at the caterwauling cats in the middle of the night. At the same time, many possibilities for special effects were opened up, since the human world had to be reconceived in order to become as extraordinary as it would probably appear to be from a cat's point of view. Most memorably, for Grizabella's final apotheosis and ascent to the Heaviside Layer, the cats' heaven, a levitating truck tire was almost transformed into a spaceship, as it gracefully took off from the stage and floated up to a vast starry sky.

*Cats'* abandonment of realism and verisimilitude in favour of fantasy enabled a groundbreaking and most powerful use of automated lighting. David Hersey's sumptuous colour palette could now capture the changing dynamics, moods and rhythms of the score, even within the same number, creating ever-changing ethereal optical landscapes, that multiplied the affective potential of the musical landscapes. At the same time, light was also used in a more architectural manner, reconfiguring the playing area and providing rapidly shifting locations for the performers, who could now move through constantly modified lit spaces. In this way, the light changes constituted an intricate lighting plot and choreography, which interacted dynamically with the musical score and the on-stage movement in order to provide rapid shifts of perspective that approximated the quick video editing.

Sound was employed in an equally groundbreaking manner in order to match the sweeping stage images and make the ride that *Cats* provided as dynamic aurally as it was visually. As Michael Walsh points out, no one can deny that what Lloyd Webber does have, in spades, is a grasp of contemporary musical technology: he is familiar with synthesizers, body mikes and bass amplifiers, and he can run a sound-mixing board with the best of them; he knows exactly the kind of sound quality he wants and exactly how to get it (126). Collaborating with Abe Jacob in London and with Martin Levan in New York, Lloyd Webber made *Cats* not only the best-sounding musical of its age, with a studio-quality sound, but also mixed the show in such a way as to achieve a dynamic sound framing. He created two distinct soundscapes for the show, alternating according to the dramatic moment: an acoustic,

traditionally theatrical, and sometimes intimate one, and a more cinematic, heavily synthesized and amplified one, with an in-your-face, kick-in-the-chest quality. In this way, the audience could feel the very presence of the aural images and be enveloped in them in the same way they were enveloped, or even overwhelmed, by the cascading visual images.

Obviously, the production team's goal was to make *Cats* a highly immersive experience. For this reason they experimented with a more environmental staging that would make the theatre an all-encompassing environment, in which these curious singing and dancing anthropomorphic felines, with their punk-like haircuts, new wave make ups and their characteristically 1980s trendy leg-warmers and arm-warmers, would climb down the walls, crawl along the floor, clamber out of dustbins and leap up, down and across the aisles and into the startled audience (Richmond 76). Thus, in New York, the set design was extended to the entire auditorium, so that the Winter Garden Theatre could become an oversized junkyard; while in London, Napier took advantage of the New London Theatre's huge revolve that covered the stage, the orchestra pit and a part of the seating and set the audience into motion: as the set moved so did the audience, as sections of seating were transported around the auditorium (75).

### **A Postdramatic Commercial Aesthetic**

All the above elements make *Cats* something more than a conventional musical; a mega-event, less a theatrical performance than a hyper-charged thrill ride, transforming the spectator into an explorer of new and challenging aural and visual sensations. In a piece called "O That Anthropomorphical Rag," T. E. Kalem wrote in *Time* magazine about *Cats*: "It is a triumph of motion over emotion, of EQ (energy quotient) over IQ" (qtd. in Walsh 127). According to John Snelson, it is this "energy in live performance" that held the whole show together: "a force that communicated itself to the audience and provided a vicarious thrill in its constant motion" (32). *Cats* is all about motion and energy: it achieves a rapid-fire presentation by bombarding the ear and the eye "with shifting stimuli and changing pace" (32). It affirms the autonomy of affect, by generating delocalized, inassimilable, free-floating intensities, which escape consciousness and refuse to be subjected to narrative function or be inserted into meaningful sequence (Massumi 25). These affective intensities must not be conceived as conventional emotional response to stage action, "which depends on

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consciously positioning oneself in a line of narrative continuity” (25). The musical number is not conceived anymore as an affective punctuation in an evolving narrative, but rather as the instigator of continuous neuro-physiological stimulation, whereby the spectator’s “body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived” (29). This orgy of sensory (re)presentations may be initially disorienting for audiences, even shocking, because it aims at outstripping their motor capacities and provoking a state of motor helplessness and powerlessness. At the same time, it is exactly this intentionally provoked inability to synthesize the bombarding synaesthetic experiences into meaningful sequences, the powerlessness to think the whole, the narrative totality, that creates a feeling of euphoria, aliveness, vitality.

It seems that *Cats* introduces a new commercial theatre aesthetic that foregrounds the affective potential of the audio-visual image and de-emphasizes the linear-successive, syntagmatic, logico-temporal unfolding of the narrative. Following Hans-Thies Lehmann, one could define this aesthetic as postdramatic: one that privileges the texture, materiality and sensory impact of a dynamic stage imagery and undermines the cause-and-effect systematization and instrumentalization offered by a coherent narrative, which abstracts from theatrical experience only what can be used as a means to an ideological or psychological end. However, one could argue that this postdramatic aesthetic was not entirely alien to the musical stage. In the second chapter of his book, entitled “Prehistories” (46-67), Lehmann includes variety entertainment in the various forms of modernist and avant-garde theatrical experimentation that are distinguished for their subversion of conventional dramatic organization, and so foreshadow the advent of postdramatic theatre. Forms of variety entertainment, like vaudeville and the revue, had a pervasive influence on the twentieth-century musical theatre, and especially the Broadway musical, and can be considered responsible for the “destruction of [dramatic] coherence” (62) one would normally expect from the traditionally narrative-driven forms of light musical entertainment. For example, in most of Broadway’s musical comedies of the first half of the twentieth century, the musical numbers appear to be too anarchic and claim an extraordinary autonomy, refusing to become integral parts of a narrative totality and trying in variety-like fashion to achieve the maximum aesthetic density and affective intensity in a dramatic present released from its connections to a dramatic past or its extensions to a dramatic future (Siropoulos, “Historicizing *Chicago*’s Resurrection of the Film Musical” 88-90). Similarly, many dance musicals of the 1950s, 1960s and

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1970s tend to concentrate on extended and highly imagistic music-and-dance sequences, which weight down dramatic action in their self-indulgent exploration of color, rhythm, texture and movement and are reminiscent of the big production numbers that one finds in elaborate vaudeville performances and revues. Finally, the concept musicals of the 1960s and 1970s adopt the revue's organization of dramatic action around overarching thematic and stylistic concepts that reduces to the minimum the network of causal connections, that a fully developed plot requires, and so allows for a more imagistic and pictorially extensive form of theatrical representation ("*Evita*, the Society of the Spectacle and the Advent of the Megamusical" 170).

*Cats* pushed more aggressively towards a postdramatic direction than any other musical before, not only by adopting the revue format that, after all, many musicals had already adopted, but mainly by disregarding any representational obligations. This musical seemed to move beyond socio-political reality, even beyond the referential domain itself, in order to celebrate an artistically progressive and financially expensive aesthetic form, almost totally devoid of dramatic content – or at least with a dramatic content made entirely out of pastiche. The dramatic universe of *Cats* is nothing but a collage of mass-cultural audio-visual signals and literary references, presenting a tribe of anthropomorphic felines that inhabit a sci-fi “waste land,” move in a combination of animal movement, acrobatics and various dancing styles, sing a vast array of musical genres and speak in a distinctively Victorian and Edwardian language, which contrasts in a playfully dissonant way with their ghetto-fabulous corporeal stylization (leg-warmers, arm-warmers, punk haircuts, new-wave make-up) (174). All these collage effects make *Cats* what according to Roland Barthes would be defined as a proper postmodern text: “a woven fabric” of “quotations without inverted commas,” which does not try to articulate a specific message, but rather functions as “a system with neither close nor centre,” the locus of infinite play (*Image, Music, Text* 159-60). As Barthes has shown, the text practices the explosion and dissemination of meaning, by foregrounding not only the irreducible plurality of its weave of signifiers but their very materiality as well. By using the various scenic discourses (movement, dance, stage and light design) in order to stress the irreducible materiality of its intertextual web, *Cats* offered the “*visual dramaturgy*” that Lehmann encounters in postdramatic performances: a dramaturgy “that is not subordinated to the [dramatic] text and can therefore freely develop its

own logic” (93).

However, musical theatre was not the first field in the entertainment industry that pushed aggressively towards a postdramatic direction. Cinema first introduced a commercial postdramatic aesthetic in the mid-1970s with a new breed of movies: the blockbuster films that constitute nowadays the culturally dominant and most lucrative form of filmmaking. The first blockbuster movie is usually considered to be Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975). However, it was George Lucas who fully explored the aesthetic, technological as well as commercial potential of the blockbuster in 1977 with his space epic *Star Wars*, which turned into a space saga, spawning two sequels, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), and three prequels, *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Lucas introduced a new breed of cinema, a more physical, visceral and dynamic one, employing an extremely stylized vocabulary that comprises quick cuts, brief shots frantically, almost hysterically edited, images either over-accelerated and hyper-kinetic or extremely slowed down, and, with the advent of the 1990s, the excessive use of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) according to the new rules of digital realism (or rather surrealism). These are movies that almost make human perception their subject matter and aim in a provocative way at testing the perceptual abilities of their audience, by making sight itself visible and, with the wide use of DTS and THX, sound itself audible. Not content with simply being objects of aesthetic contemplation, these high-tech, state-of-the-art extravaganzas “longed for something more athletic, more visceral, something capable of punching through the screen, through the fourth wall, and raising public alarms outside the theatre” (Shone 5); they longed to break the distinction between life and representation and become something more than films, unforgettable experiences that literally assault and overwhelm the senses – a not so favorable critic wrote about *Jaws*: “You feel like a rat being given shock treatment” (qtd. in Shone 35). These are films that can be watched again and again “for the same reason that people head back into a thrill ride, or keep doing bungee jumps” (37).

Naturally, this blockbuster aesthetic demands a very different film structure from the conventional one based on narrative coherence. As the *New York Times* wrote for *Die Hard* (1988), “[it] has the form of a movie, one made with a great many sophisticated skills, but it works on the audience less as a coherent movie than as an amusement park ride” (qtd. in Shone 146). This lack of coherence results from the

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very different, unconventional way in which the cinematic medium is perceived by the blockbuster *auteurs*: for them cinema is not just another way for telling a story; the power of the image becomes its very essence (Müller 9). Thus, Fredric Jameson talks about an “enfeeblement of narrative time” (*The Cultural Turn* 129) “in contemporary action film”, as “the former story has become little more than a pretext on which to suspend a perpetual present of thrills” (156). It seems that in postmodern high-cultural as well as mass-cultural artifacts “[t]he image, now liberated from the complex temporalities of a plot ... begins to call for a different kind of visual attention, its depths and tenebrosities projecting something like a visual hermeneutic which the eye scans for ever deeper layers of meaning” (127).

The weakening of narrative time and the emphasis on audiovisual intensities results in a necessarily dichotomous, “antagonistic” structure of narrative vs. spectacle; and as blockbuster form evolves, from *Jaws* to *Jurassic Park* (1993) and from *Star Wars* to *Speed* (1994), both directors and audiences become more and more impatient with the narrative pretexts needed for the preparation of the action sequences. Each of these sequences is an exercise in sensory assault through cataclysmic montage: the extremely brief and imperceptible shots are so rapidly edited that one “can no longer say ‘I see, I hear,’ but I FEEL, ‘totally physiological sensation’” (Deleuze 158). Instead of perceiving something in particular, one rather has a “*perception of one’s own vitality, one’s sense of aliveness*” (Massumi 36), as the body’s radical openness to the world and its ability to be polymorphously aroused, stimulated and affected are manifested and affirmed.

### **Historicizing the Pleasure of the Postdramatic Text**

Based on the enormous success and omnipresence of blockbuster films and megamusicals, one could argue that postmodern popular culture is defined to a large extent by a postdramatic sensibility. This argument is further strengthened, if we take into consideration the cultural pervasiveness of MTV, which exploded in the early 1980s and, in the case of the non-narrative music videos, further popularized a postdramatic aesthetic. In most non-narrative music videos, miniscule shots of the briefest possible duration are liberated from any obligation to form intelligible sequences or scenes. Instead, they are juxtaposed with each other through a disjunctive, fast-paced montage, which privileges jump-cuts instead of match-cuts and the rhythmical editing of the images on the musical tempo, discouraging the spectator

to impose a meaning on the stream of images and encouraging him/ her to indulge in an intense sensory, synaesthetic experience that approaches the state of dream and hallucination (Siropoulos, "Historicizing *Chicago's* Resurrection of the Film Musical" 92).

However, Lehmann refuses to recognize the postdramatic organization of many postmodern mass-cultural artifacts, and rather theorizes postdramatic performance in a strictly avant-garde context. Moreover, he views the spectacle that postmodern culture offers as "bad traditional theatre" mainly because it generates "passive viewing," during which "the bond between perception and action, receiving message and 'answerability,' is dissolved" (Lehmann 184). He also considers the possibility that "the overabundant world of images," created by our digitalized society of the spectacle, "could lead to the death of images, in the sense that all actual visual impressions are registered more or less only as pure information, the qualities of the truly 'iconic' aspects of the images being perceived less and less" (89). Such a summary rejection of postmodern visual culture prevents Lehmann from considering a possible erosion of the boundaries between the aesthetic practices of high and mass culture that other theorists like Laura Mulvey, for example, are ready to discuss. In *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Mulvey analyzes how postmodern editing techniques and viewing practices, like home cinema, could liberate the viewer from narrative continuity and closure, enabling him/ her to actively manipulate, recombine, reinterpret and remake a film. Moreover, by allowing the viewer to slow down, freeze, ponder, contemplate and scrutinize the image, these practices can foreground the truly iconic aspects of the image, by drawing attention to what Barthes defines as the third meaning of the image: a non-representational and quintessentially postdramatic meaning that "cannot be described ... because ... it does not copy anything ... does not represent anything ... what, in the image, is purely image" (*Image, Music, Text* 61).

Lehmann's reluctance to theorize the postdramatic structure of many contemporary entertainment practices can be explained, if we take into consideration the theoretical background and ultimate goal of his book. His theorization of postdramatic performance is largely influenced by the writings and theoretical outlook of the *Tel Quel* group, including such prominent and influential theorists as Barthes and, his disciple, Julia Kristeva, that in the late 1960s and early 1970s devised the theory of textuality. The aim of this theory was to create a model of aesthetic and

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cultural revolution, influenced by the high-modernist and avant-garde artistic practices of the past, that could inspire similar neo-modernist experimentations in the present. According to this theory, the narrative, cause-and-effect organization of many mass-cultural artifacts reflects the instrumental, means/ ends rationality of a middle-class capitalist mentality. The antidote to this instrumentalization and, hence, commodification of art is a quintessentially formalist, textual aesthetic, which foregrounds aesthetic form instead of narrative content, the materiality, the texture of the word (in poetry and fiction) or the image (in theatre and cinema) instead of their meaning-carrying functions. Obviously, then, the aesthetic theories of the *Tel Quel* group had a political, i.e. anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, dimension, and so does Lehmann's theorization of postdramatic performance. As he points out in the end of his book, in an "age of rationalization, of the ideal of calculation and of the generalized rationality of the market, it falls to the theatre to deal with extremes of affect by means of an *aesthetics of risk*," whose ultimate goal is "the 'training' of an emotionality that is not under the tutelage of rational preconsiderations" (186-7).

The theorization of an aesthetics of risk had already been part of *Tel Quel*'s project. For Barthes, the pleasure that the text provides is far beyond the traditional, "intellectual" one deriving from the desire to know; it is rather a kind of "shock, disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 19). Barthes uses in his writings the term *jouissance* in order to define this ecstatic, blissful state - a term that alludes to Lacanian psychoanalysis and carries the connotation of orgasm. This allusion to Lacanian *jouissance* is indicative of Barthes' conception of the aesthetic reception of the text as a psycho-corporeal experience, whereby the ego fictions that provide the unique sense of selfhood dissolve and the instant and immediate libidinal gratification of a body long now tamed, disciplined, repressed by the rationalizing intellect reigns supreme. This is an extreme state of being comparable only to severe psychopathology, a schizophrenic or psychotic delirium, whereby, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, a sense of primordial *jouissance*, a pre-specular identificatory fusion between the body and the world, is reclaimed through the foreclosure of the inter-subjective symbolic network and the almost autistic withdrawal into fantasy and hallucination (Ragland 54-83, 182-234).

Kristeva, in her seminal work *Revolution in Poetic Language*, further explores the theorization of textuality in relation to corporerality, the psychopathological dissolution of personality and modernist (anti)representational aesthetic strategies. In *Image & Narrative*, Vol 11, No 3 (2010)

the analysis of two nineteenth century early modernist writers, Stéphane Mallarmé and Comte de Lautréamont, Kristeva defines textual productivity as the reactivation of an archaic and incompletely repressed stage in psychosexual development: the *semiotic* which constitutes the primordial origin of language, signification and representation, but can also lead to their psychopathological breakdown, once it is fully re-activated within cultural symbolic practices. Taking its name from the Greek *σημειῶν* (distinctive mark), the term *semiotic* is used in order to emphasize the affective, somatic and material underside of representation, those primordial attempts to signification – gestures, articulations, rhythms, emittances. Its full reactivation within cultural practices can challenge the very representational logic of every ideology and so lead to a proper revolution in the area of signification, by forcing it to a psychopathological dissolution comparable only to psychotic delirium, which is characterized by the *semiotic* dislocation of symbolic meaning and coherence. For Kristeva, such a revolution was attempted by modernist art that emulates delirious discourse by disregarding representational coherence in favor of *semiotic* material, sound, rhythm, color, gesture.

However, nowadays, this reactivation of the *semiotic*, that once was synonymous with cultural revolution, appears to be a hegemonic cultural strategy. As we have already seen, our postmodern visual culture seems to be permeated by a postdramatic sensibility, becoming, thus, obsessed with the texture, materiality of the image as well as the intensification of its sensory impact, through the use of cutting-edge technology, sometimes at the expense of any narrative coherence or meaningful content. Moreover, with electronic screens invading our living environs in the form of LCD computer monitors, plasma TV displays, mobile touch screen surfaces and large-scale projection architectural hypersurfaces, every kind of human activity, from working and shopping to traveling, clubbing, dining out or simply walking down the street, is transformed into a *semiotic* multimedia aesthetic experience. Accordingly, human space is derealized and transformed into an all-encompassing affective landscape, where stable signification dissolves into color, rhythm, movement and sound. In other words, human space is redesigned according to an unnamable, improbable space, anterior to naming and meaning: a primordial space, the absolute locus of *jouissance* and *semiotic* heterogeneity, that Kristeva called *chora*.

This thorough aestheticization of our environs is by no means a new phenomenon, but rather has a century-long history and intensifies as we reach our

current late-capitalist societies. Tracing the history of this aestheticization and *semiotic* transfiguration of human space can help us understand the erosion of the boundaries between avant-garde and mass-cultural practices and theorize the advent of a commodified postdramatic aesthetic. Walter Benjamin is one of the first cultural critics that studied extensively the transformation of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century cityscape into a phantasmagoric three-dimensional stage, upon which the spectacle of mass consumerism is enacted. Shop-signs, advertising images, gigantic billboards, window displays, mannequins, illuminations and palatial department stores offer a dreamlike and totally immersive urban experience, as a plethora of onrushing stimulations bombard and overwhelm the senses (Buck-Morss 78-109). Benjamin has showed that this sensory overload, further intensified by the advent of capitalism's new technological forces (electricity and automatic movement), has a traumatic impact on a psychic level. It undermines the authority of the middle-class ego, which used to be an agent of synthesis and unity, systematizing the external data and controlling the internal instincts with a view to the future. The new phenomenological experiences challenge such attempts at cognitive, perceptual and affective mastery, as Benjamin's graphic description of the modern cityscape shows:

To move through the latter involves a whole series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, impulses crisscross the pedestrian like charges in a battery. Baudelaire describes the man who plunges into the crowd as a reservoir of electrical energy. Thereupon he calls him, thus singling out the experience of shock, "a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness." (Benjamin qtd. in Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 75)

Modernist art responds to and accommodates these new phenomenological experiences through its *semiotic* practices that open up a non-referential, anti-representational realm of pure visibility and pure sensibility, expressing in all its excess everything that is experienced as traumatic and pathological in this era. Similarly, neo-modernist or postmodern aesthetic practices, from textual productivity to postdramatic experimentations, that emphasize the texture, materiality and surface qualities of the word and image, are responses to the thorough penetration of social life by technologically mediated audiovisual images. The latter further destabilize the conscious, self-reflective ego, by enabling the momentary reconnection with a "body before discourses, before words, before things are named" (Deleuze 172-3): "an Image & Narrative, Vol 11, No 3 (2010)

‘unknown body’ which we have in the back of our heads” (201). These practices acquire a negative, anti-mainstream, revolutionary character because they attack the capitalist definition and formation of the subject as an autonomous social agent, able to unify and synthesize spatially and temporally his/ her socio-historical experience along a narrative line that leads from a past to a future. However, as Jameson points out, this traditional mode of subject-formation is gradually replaced by the schizo-fragmentation of the subject as we move from modernism to postmodernism, which finally produces a postmodern subject that is able “to accommodate a far greater sense of psychic dispersal, fragmentation, drops in ‘niveau,’ fantasy and projective dimensions, hallucinogenic sensations and temporal discontinuities” (*The Political Unconscious* 124-5). For this reason, aesthetic experimentations, like the postdramatic ones, which are associated with the almost psychopathological dissolution of the conscious, rationalizing ego, can now be disjoined from their revolutionary, oppositional, countercultural ideological content and become available for more decorative, mainstream and commercial uses. Thus, in late capitalist economy, commodity production and consumption become so intertwined with image production and consumption that Barthes’ third and quintessentially postdramatic meaning of the image thoroughly determines the exchange value of a product, making the colonization of the *semiotic* domain and the concomitant revolutionizing of the aesthetic realm as important as the revolutions in the realms of production and distribution. And, of course, this synergy between capitalist economy and progressive aesthetics affects every aspect of mass-cultural production, giving rise to postmodern artifacts, like megamusicals and blockbuster movies, that blur the lines between high-cultural and mass-cultural aesthetic practices.

### **The British Conquer the Globe**

The role of a successful producer is to sense such changes in the cultural sphere and respond accordingly. Cameron Mackintosh, who co-produced *Cats* with Lloyd Webber’s Really Useful Company, realized that he had hit upon a new form of predominantly imagistic musical theatre that shared many similarities with the enormously successful blockbuster movies and was tailor-made for an emerging, unashamedly commodified global visual culture. So he treated *Cats* as a commodity with universal appeal, a trademark, and marketed it as aggressively as Coca-Cola (Walsh 126). This musical exhibited an international appeal that no other musical had

ever exhibited before. *Cats* was a highly exportable product, mainly because of its postdramatic structure: it does not have a unique cultural identity or a culturally-specific narrative – or any traditional narrative at all; it is a sampling of many different visual elements and musical styles, constituting not so much a musical play as a unique experience. Understanding that every aspect of the staging constituted an authorship that contributed to the uniqueness of the whole experience, Mackintosh introduced a new way of licensing foreign productions. *Cats* would be sold as a whole, so that replicas of the original production would appear all over the globe, preserving both the identity of the show as well as its high quality staging standards. The uniformity and standardization in the global staging of the show called for an equally uniform and standardized form of marketing. The same minimalist black poster with the yellow cat's eyes, promising everything but revealing nothing, would appear all over the world. This was not traditional poster art but logo design, that could be reproduced on every piece of merchandizing, not only original cast album covers and glossy souvenir brochures, but also t-shirts, watches, key rings, coffee mugs. The show was a trendy cultural phenomenon, cutting edge, aesthetically and technologically progressive, so the acquisition of items bearing the distinctive *Cats* logo would make somebody look fashionable and “cool.” Thus, the official licensing of merchandize became an integral part of the musical theatre industry, multiplying the potential revenue of a show.

*Cats* ushered in a new era of musical theatre, when the musical would become a global multi-million-dollar gamble with multi-billion-dollar gross potential, and Lloyd Webber, Nunn, Napier and Mackintosh were among the key players. Throughout the 1980s, a considerable number of big-budgeted audiovisual extravaganzas would originate from London and then spread all around the world, with Broadway being, of course, one of the first necessary stops. This is how the so-called British invasion on Broadway began; although, as Snelson points out, this was not so much a sudden assault as a steady flow of high-profile productions succeeding each other on Broadway with severely diminished local opposition (42). Being at the centre of this new phenomenon, Lloyd Webber would come to represent a new “approach to musical theater and to its commercial exploitation” (42). Even more infuriatingly, he would prove that the term “Broadway musical” was no longer a viable one, as his predominantly visual, postdramatic form of musical theatre could now be considered an international art form “with expressions of national identity

becoming more a localized coloring than an essential element of the musical's identity" (189).

*Cats* arrived in New York in 1982, cocksure of its indisputable triumph after its sensational 1981 London opening. Every event surrounding its arrival shocked the sensibilities of the Broadway establishment: Lloyd Webber's greed during the negotiations, which was considered remarkable even by Broadway standards; the painting of Winter Garden Theatre's façade in black colour, as well as the opening of a hole in its roof to facilitate Grizabella's glorious ascent; the presence of the same logo everywhere in New York, from Broadway's biggest billboard, which was painted black and dotted only with the pair of yellow eyes, to television, with the voice-over: "Isn't curiosity killing you;" the advertisement-bearing airplanes, covering the New York metropolitan area; the feature stories in every major magazine and the teaser ads in every major newspaper; the sky-rocketing ticket prices and the record-breaking advance sales in the box office (Walsh 126). However, the buying public was fascinated by this unprecedented hype surrounding a musical; and from the moment one hundred pairs of illuminated cats' eyes blinked and winked in Winter Garden Theatre's darkened auditorium to signal the opening of the show, they were enthralled and could not stop applauding (Richmond 78). Whether the Broadway establishment liked it or not this was a seminal Broadway opening, comparable only to Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* thirty nine years ago. Both shows set new standards of commercial success and had a profound influence on the aesthetic development of the Broadway musical. If *Oklahoma!* influenced significantly the development of musical theatre's dramatic dimension, *Cats* was paramount in developing its postdramatic dimension, concluding, thus, an aesthetic process, which starts with the advent of variety entertainment, continues with the experimentations of the dance musical and the concept musical and concludes with the rise of the megamusical.

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