

## Paint your *Band Wagon*: style, space and sexuality

ROBERT ALFORD

‘Excuse me – I’m just a little bit fuzzy, but wasn’t this formerly the Eltinge theatre?’, Tony Hunter asks a hot-dog vendor early in *The Band Wagon*, the 1953 MGM musical directed by Vincente Minnelli (figure 1). Hunter is navigating a raucous and colourful stretch of 42nd Street in New York, and the centrality of Eltinge to his inquiry reveals successive levels of queer connotation in *The Band Wagon* – within both this and later scenes – that operate beyond aural allusion and infuse the stylistic space of the anachronistic, deliberately artificial metropolis created by the film. The mention of Eltinge effectively hails the contemporary queer (and most likely gay male) spectator, requesting a heightened attention to the film’s themes and style early in the plot, and encouraging an immersion in detail that verges on what D. A. Miller has referred to elsewhere as the ‘too close reading’.<sup>1</sup>

*The Band Wagon*, however, has thus far evaded queer or camp scholarly readings of the musical, and has even been framed as exemplary in its narrative heteronormativity. This seems surprising in light of the substantive body of work on the queer origins of MGM musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, in particular that by Matthew Tinkcom and Steven Cohan.<sup>2</sup> Both of these scholars seek out expressions of camp sensibility in the output of the (notably queer in composition) Freed Unit at MGM. *The Band Wagon*, though also made by this unit, appears positively sedate when compared to other films that Minnelli made there, such as *The Pirate* (1948) and *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945), which tend towards camp sensibility with their flamboyant stylistic excess. *The Band Wagon*’s emotional appeal is sincere, its moral universe is, if not explicitly conservative, at least

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Miller, ‘Hitchcock’s hidden pictures’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2010), pp. 106–30.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

**Fig. 1.** Tony (Fred Astaire) questions the hot dog vendor about the Eltinge. *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953).



reassuring, and its visual style is palatable and comparatively restrained. It may contain disruptive instances of camp, but it largely adheres to a conventional mode of expression that made it more marketable to a mass audience than the other two films. Although it was unable to turn a profit on its release – an indication of shifting popular tastes, also evidenced by the moderate loss made by *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) the year before – it was the best box-office performer of any MGM musical in 1953. This stands in contrast to *The Pirate* and *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), which were both considerable flops and are singled out by Tinkcom as instances where a camp aesthetic predominates at the expense of narrative integration and box-office success.<sup>3</sup> This peculiar, polarizing relationship between popularity (among both the public and scholars) and camp is also discussed in Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical*. From the addendum on 'Gay readings', Feuer asserts that

Above all, a gay subcultural reading would elevate [*The Pirate* and *Yolanda and the Thief*] above the currently more esteemed Freed Unit musicals of the 1950s – *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Band Wagon*, whose sophistication stems more from their smart Comden and Green scripts than from elements of excess in their *mise-en-scène*.<sup>4</sup>

Feuer makes the case (reiterated by Tinkcom) that queerness is a matter of style in excess, and that this is explicitly at odds with normative, successful forms of narration that typify 'well-integrated' musicals like *The Band Wagon*.

Apart from discourse on musicals, the lack of queer readings on *The Band Wagon* is curious given Minnelli's status as a queer auteur. Minnelli's sexuality, though contested by different scholars in the past, is indisputably queer, even if it is difficult to categorize with any greater specificity. As articulated by David A. Gerstner, 'Although Minnelli married four times, had two children, and did not publicly identify himself as "gay", he certainly

<sup>3</sup> Peter Lev, *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950–1959* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), p. 17. Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual*, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd edn (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 141.

5 David A. Gerstner, 'Queer modernism: the cinematic aesthetic of Vincente Minnelli', in Joe McElhaney (ed.), *Vincente Minnelli: the Art of Entertainment* (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 2009), p. 252.

6 Emanuel Levy, *Vincente Minnelli: Hollywood's Dark Dreamer* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 2009).

7 See also David A. Gerstner, 'The production and display of the closet: making Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy*', in McElhaney (ed.), *Vincente Minnelli*.

8 George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995).

partook of a cultural milieu that was made up of a significant coterie of artists and critics whose aesthetic interests came to be marked as queer'.<sup>5</sup> Emanuel Levy's recent biography of Minnelli goes further, describing the many homosexual liaisons that accompanied his marriages.<sup>6</sup> In turn, scholarship that characterizes Minnelli and his films as queer tends to rely on a biographical approach that focuses on narrative themes and characterization rather than style. For example, essays describing Minnelli's 1956 adaptation of Robert Anderson's 1953 play, *Tea and Sympathy* – which featured a young, allegedly homosexual man on stage before it was bowdlerized for the screen – draw parallels between Minnelli's life and his directorial output, expressed bluntly by the chapter title 'Personal films' in Levy's biography.<sup>7</sup>

*The Band Wagon* does not adhere to these paradigms, having neither a prevalence of queer visual excess to upset the narrative nor normatively queer narrative elements, at least in its theatrical version. The film instead charts a subtler path, one that is heartfelt and cohesive in its narrative address, and more subdued – if nonetheless queer – in its visual style. *The Band Wagon* acts as a cinematic love letter to the New York of the early and mid 1930s, and especially to the spaces and professions therein that were commonly occupied by gays. As described by Gerstner, as well as indirectly by George Chauncey in *Gay New York*,<sup>8</sup> Minnelli's time there, before he moved decisively to Hollywood in 1940, was sustained by an abundance of queer relationships within the theatre world and beyond, and was situated within a larger field of gay, metropolitan practices. *The Band Wagon* gives expression to nostalgia for a past that was inaccessible when the film was produced, and also speaks to gay sexual practices that prevailed in the city at the time of the film's release. Furthermore, this nostalgia (communicated largely via style, with a few narrative cues) would have resonated for Minnelli, other members of the Freed Unit, and for the film's gay spectators who had actually visited New York or were familiar with its spaces via gay travel guides. In comparison to brasher musicals directed by Minnelli that have been claimed as queer, *The Band Wagon* is a more nuanced portrait of queer life, melodiously hinting to viewers 'in the know' rather than overtly displaying queer modes of signification.

*The Band Wagon* encourages spectatorial nostalgia by thematizing the appreciation and revivification of older, apparently outmoded forms of entertainment. The narrative follows Tony Hunter (Fred Astaire) as he returns to Broadway after spending decades in Hollywood. Coaxed by his friends, the writing team Lester and Lily Martin (Oscar Levant and Nanette Fabray), he becomes involved in a new musical directed by the theatrical guru Jeffrey Cordova (Jack Buchanan). Throughout the show's production, Tony resists the innovative but incoherent directions in which Cordova takes the show, from the hiring of famous ballerina Gaby Girard (Cyd Charisse) as its the female lead, to its dramatic, Faustian overtones. The musical flops spectacularly in preview, at which point Tony rallies the cast and, with

Cordova's blessing, takes the show in a more traditional direction. It goes on to become a huge success, leading to the romantic union of Tony and Gaby and the preservation of the outdated Broadway revue format.

The intertextual slippage between Tony and Astaire is crucial in conveying the film's nostalgic appeal. The collapse between the two is evident from the film's opening frame: the fixed image of a top hat, cane and white gloves being a clear reference to Astaire's film *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, RKO, 1935). The camera pans to reveal that these are but one lot among many in an estate sale of Tony's belongings, and furthermore that they are 'the ones he used in *Swinging Down To Panama*', a reference to another of Astaire's films, *Flying Down to Rio* (Thornton Freeland, RKO, 1933). It is clear that no one wants to buy them. Tony's outmodedness is articulated directly thereafter in a scene on a train, when a passenger, not realizing Tony is seated nearby, says 'Well, he was good twelve, fifteen years ago, but the columnists out there say he's through'. Tony chimes in, 'Through? He's washed up, hasn't made a picture in three years', announcing his own obsolescence and one-upping his fellow passenger. This scene ironically plays off of Astaire's own well-publicized retirement in 1946.<sup>9</sup> He came out of retirement two years later to appear in *Easter Parade* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1948), but many of his subsequent lead roles, especially Josh Barkley in *The Barkleys of Broadway* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1949), work with his star persona to thematize a desire to change or end his career. *The Band Wagon* takes this one step further to consider Astaire at the other end of the retirement, about to return to the public eye and the stage.

As the film continues, Tony arrives at the railway station in New York and is promptly whisked away by Lester and Lily to an unfamiliar 42nd Street; this scene is also pivotal in demonstrating the type of nostalgia viewers might experience. Marvelling at the changes to the stretch, he begins to recall shows that previously ran at well-known theatres, including the New Amsterdam and the Eltinge, and remarks about the former that, 'I had one of my biggest successes there, it ran a year and a half', before finding out that the former site of the Eltinge is currently occupied by a penny arcade. Astaire's remark is a possible allusion to his performance in the original stage production of *The Band Wagon* at the New Amsterdam, a straightforward but elegant Broadway revue that featured songs by Dietz and Schwartz, some of them ('Dancing in the Dark', 'High and Low', 'I Love Louisa' and 'New Sun in the Sky') making the transition into the film version.<sup>10</sup> Tony's recognition of Broadway's past marks a movement of spectatorial nostalgia from Astaire to theatrical entertainment more generally, and the theatre world of New York in particular.

The depiction of 42nd Street in the film is strange, however, in that it resembles the actual street at no time before or during the film's production (figure 2). This is important, as *The Band Wagon*'s anachronistic and imaginary visualization of the well-trafficked street departs from previous standards for picturing New York in MGM musicals, and also troubled MGM's relationship with exhibitors. In 1949 the Freed musical *On The*

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Green, *Starring Fred Astaire* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead, 1973), p. 301.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas S. Hischak, *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical: Theatre, Film and Television* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 48. It should also be noted that several other Dietz and Schwartz songs from other shows made it into the film, including 'I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan', 'Louisiana Hayride', 'You and the Night and the Music', 'Shine on My Shoes' and 'Triplets'.

Fig. 2. The anachronistic stretch of 42nd Street, as visualized in *The Band Wagon*.



*Town* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly) set a precedent for location shooting in New York. Although it mixed actual locations with set pieces, and deformed spatial relationships within the city, it also functioned as a type of virtual tourism that pictured famous areas, including Columbus Circle, Rockefeller Center, Central Park and Times Square, as a way to express the frenetic pace of its protagonists: sailors on shore leave with only a day to explore the city. *The Band Wagon* does not offer the same sort of cinematic tourism, as most of the film takes place indoors in theatres, apartments and hotels, with the brief sequence on 42nd Street and the later dance number between Charisse and Astaire in (a highly stylized) Central Park being the two substantive exceptions. In departing from a mimetic representation of 42nd Street or its cinematic presentation, Freed and Minnelli also encountered resistance from exhibitors, demonstrated in this interdepartmental memo sent to Minnelli:

There is also the matter of the way the 42nd Street sequence is handled, meaning the scene where 'Tony' returns to New York after 15 years and remarks about the street. On this matter I have been in touch with you several times, regarding the objections of Mr. J. Robert Rubin of our New York office to anything derogatory in the way of comments, which might hurt the relationship of Metro with certain of our important exhibitors (i.e., customers) on this street.<sup>11</sup>

This resistance on the part of exhibitors is complicated by the fact that the site of the penny arcade that Tony thinks was formerly the Eltinge was in fact a cinema at the time of the film's release: the Eltinge closed in 1942 and reopened the following year as a film theatre called the Laff.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the lobby of the Eltinge continues to welcome filmgoers as part of the AMC Empire 25 cinema – it travelled two-hundred feet down the block towards 8th Avenue in 1997 to accommodate the necessary construction for the megaplex, and unlike the penny arcade it features large, pastel-hued murals

<sup>11</sup> From the *The Band Wagon* file, in the Vincente Minnelli papers at the Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas van Hoogstraten, *Lost Broadway Theatres* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p. 148.

13 Ibid.

on its vaulted ceilings rather than neon and flat primary colours (described in greater detail shortly).<sup>13</sup> The altered 42nd Street in *The Band Wagon* instead embodies a sort of cognitive dissonance between what *is* and what is *remembered* (both for Tony in the film's diegesis as well as for the film's spectators, especially those familiar with New York's theatre district), encouraging nostalgia if not exactly recognition.

What, then, is the importance of explicitly naming the Eltinge, especially if its depiction in the film was likely to displease potential exhibitors in the area? It is clear from reviewing subsequent versions of the script that the explicit naming of the Eltinge was important for Minnelli and Freed. In Comden and Green's completed draft of the script, dated 25 August 1952, there is no mention of the Eltinge, or any other theatre for that matter. The scene is much sketchier:

Tony is amazed at the change in this street which was once the center of legitimate theatrical activity in New York. Since he last saw it, it has become a real honky-tonk kind of Coney Island Midway. The street is garish and noisy and on both sides are huge penny arcades. ... The change in the street and Tony's surprise lead to an exuberant number for him, mainly in the penny arcade.<sup>14</sup>

14 From *The Band Wagon* script, 25 August 1952, in the Turner/MGM scripts at the Margaret Herrick Library.

15 Ibid.

References to specific theatres and some additional dialogue appeared only later in the 'OK' versions of the screenplay that were edited by Minnelli and Freed. Their changes (made between 28 August and 15 December 1952) add dialogue about the Eltinge, the Selwyn and the New Amsterdam; previous shows at the latter two are described, and, as in the film, Tony asks a hot-dog vendor about whether the penny arcade was formerly the Eltinge.<sup>15</sup> In the filmed version the reference to the Selwyn is dropped entirely, and Tony's line describing the Eltinge as the location of his first show is added, doubling aural references to the Eltinge while eliminating the mention of another theatre.

For some spectators, the theatre's namesake, Julian Eltinge, would have evoked a particularly deep nostalgia, not only for anachronistic forms of entertainment but also for specific queer community practices. Early in the twentieth century Julian Eltinge was the leading female impersonator in the USA, having risen to prominence through his uncannily convincing and alluring portrayal of femininity.<sup>16</sup> At the time of *The Band Wagon*'s release, however, Eltinge had been dead for over a decade. Female impersonation became subject to harsher legal regulations in the 1930s, and instead of being seen as 'proper' entertainment it developed associations with vice and homosexuality. Eltinge suffered the consequences. After a gradual fall from fame he was found dead in a derelict apartment building in 1941, reportedly killed by a brain haemorrhage.<sup>17</sup> His namesake theatre was closed the next year, perhaps to avoid the spectre of association with the recently deceased performer, and reopened the following year as the Laff.

16 Sharon R. Ullman, *Sex Seen: the Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 45–46.

17 Ibid., pp. 55–56.



18 Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 331–54.

19 As reported in *The New York Times*, 7 May 1942.

20 Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: the History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*, 20th anniversary edn (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 75.

It would make little sense to invoke Eltinge doubly if this were the extent of his legacy, but his name lived on after his death, largely through ‘soldier theatricals’ during World War II. Although successive legal clampdowns on female impersonation as a reputable form of entertainment had coincided with stricter policing of homosexuals in urban areas, drag performance ironically remained a popular, sanctioned activity within the US armed forces.<sup>18</sup> Female impersonation was an unofficial military institution, with roots going back at least to World War I and Irving Berlin’s 1918 *Yip Yip Yaphank*, which featured drag performance and was composed while he was serving in the army. Berlin’s popular 1942 stage show *This is the Army* featured numerous drag numbers and was used as a fundraiser for the Army Relief Fund, with tickets costing up to \$5000 each and featuring soldier performers who were called to duty from all across the USA.<sup>19</sup> Eltinge in particular, however, was an important point of reference for queer members of the armed forces, who often found a safe haven for subversive forms of gender expression in soldier theatricals. As chronicled by Allan Bérubé in *Coming Out Under Fire*, contradictory forces played out to legitimize female impersonation on the stage by soldiers in the 1940s in comparison to older forms of female impersonation. As drag culture became subject to legal regulation in the late 1920s and 1930s, it also shifted in character from a practice that sought to reproduce femininity convincingly to one that commented on and played with gender and sexuality, pointing to the disjuncture between presentation and biology rather than attempting to erase it. In order to distance *This is the Army* from the more temporally proximate, subversive forms of queer drag of the 1930s, the 1942 production was promoted as a revival of forms of soldier entertainment from the teens, such as *Yip Yip Yaphank*. These inherently drew from an older type of female impersonation that promoted gender trickery rather than the lampooning of gender stereotypes, and famous female impersonators served as models: Bérubé notes an issue of the magazine *Theatre*, referring to these productions, stating that ‘comparing a soldier or sailor to Julian Eltinge was the highest compliment’.<sup>20</sup>

The nostalgic framing of *This is the Army* and other World War II soldier theatricals could only intervene, however, in a limited way in contemporary discourse about the proper forms of masculinity and gender expression, which were regulated ever more stringently within the armed forces. In turn, convincing gender impersonation was not always desirable, because presumably heterosexual male soldiers needed to be legible as such when on stage in drag. Such a relationship to drag performance (that more closely resembled queer styles of performance in the 1930s) was counterintuitively legitimated by the legacy of performers like Eltinge, who attempted to make his masculinity invisible. The dissonance between performance styles in a single show such as *This is the Army* – for example the ‘Ladies of the Chorus’ number, which featured lumbering, gruff men dressed in pastels, and the more glamorous ‘That Russian Winter’, which presented a more convincing female illusionism – created a space where the divisions between proper and subversive forms of gender impersonation became

21 Ibid., pp. 78–80.

illegible, in turn providing a place where queer soldiers could be praised for behaving queerly in public. While this was certainly true for larger productions that had national audiences, such as *This is the Army*, it also applied to smaller, local productions at bases throughout the armed forces.<sup>21</sup>

The repeated naming of Julian Eltinge would have elicited a number of different spectatorial responses from viewers of *The Band Wagon*. For many it would have simply been a reference to an antiquated form of popular entertainment on Broadway, in keeping with the film's characterization of Tony as outdated and anachronistic. For viewers familiar with soldier theatricals, the reference may have been perceived as more current, if also ultimately nostalgic. Queer members of the audience, however, especially those who had served in the armed forces, are most likely to have been hailed by the film as its privileged viewers, possessing a knowledge not only of Eltinge as a performer but also of his relevance to resistant social practices. Eltinge was a figure whose queer legacy was cemented only a decade before *The Band Wagon*'s release, and who also stood at the centre of queer social life within the armed forces. The references to Eltinge would have appeared deliberate to queer members of the audience, and – in the absence of other motivating factors – Minnelli's tenacious addition of the name to the script in the face of potential resistance from exhibitors highlights the importance of naming the deceased star for such an audience.

If the repeated aural allusions to Eltinge early in *The Band Wagon* primed its queer viewers, the film then goes on to give visual expression to its queer connotations. After Lester and Lily depart, Tony is left to wander along a very crowded block of 42nd Street. As he ambles along, the visual space of the film is overwhelmed as much by the presence of bright lights, colours and text in the frame's upper registers as by the churning motion of pedestrians below. There are certain figures on the street, however, whose presence remains legible despite this commotion. Soldiers and sailors predominate the space, at first inconspicuously, then appearing repeatedly in clusters. A lone sailor emerges from the right side of the screen to purchase a ticket at the box office behind Tony at his first mention of Eltinge, providing a visual corollary for possible queer spectatorial associations (figure 3). As Tony continues down the street, the presence of soldiers and sailors becomes more pronounced and they are often linked by physical contact, for example the two soldiers behind Tony are grouped with the man behind them, who fondles their necks (seen in figure 2). When Tony finally arrives at the penny arcade and asks whether or not the space was formerly the Eltinge, a hot dog is thrust into his hand – an unexpected (if not unwelcome) phallic token of admission to the amusements therein (seen in figure 1).

In visual terms, Tony's approach to the arcade stresses both the dynamic nature of the theatre district as well as the prevalence of different types of traffic along the stretch. Evident is the more straightforward traffic of legitimate commerce, present in the exchanges at box offices, the hot-dog



Fig. 3. A sailor is seen purchasing a ticket in the background.



<sup>22</sup> John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 11.

stand, and within the space of the penny arcade; implied, however, is gay sexual traffic (especially by and for men in the armed forces) in an area that was a well-known cruising spot. As John D'Emilio has argued, the development of gay social life was contingent on processes of industrialization and modernization and their coincident creation of thriving and diverse cities in which gay subcultures could flourish.<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that rural homosexuality did not exist, only that it had little access to the same resources or communities; furthermore, the gay imaginary was (and continues to be) pitched towards urban settings, where sexual liaisons were more likely to go unnoticed by authorities. A testament to this is the development of gay travel guides, which provided information to visiting queers about the location of homosexual havens in large cities. These guides were most likely distributed clandestinely through existing social networks that crossed geographical divides, principally via connections established in the armed forces. Indeed, the preface of one guide released in 1950 warns, 'Because of the survival of various archaic laws, it might be just as well if you didn't leave [the guide] around to be studied by your mother (the other one), your landlady, your Sgt. or your CPO, as the case may be', and closes with the following note about potential future editions: 'The possibility of a new War, although it may bring a great increase of activity and many changes (which would justify a new edition), might also affect the lives of the authors in such a way as to make another impossible'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Hagijs, *Swasamt Nerf's Gay Guides for 1949* (New York, NY: Bibliogay Publications, 2010), pp. 1, 71.

The city that was profiled most extensively was New York, and the oldest-known gay travel guide (*Gaedicker's Sodom-On-Hudson*, from 1949) describes at length the many sexual cruising spots across the city, including a handful that are central to *The Band Wagon*. The area around 42nd Street and Times Square was known to be an especially active cruising area of New York, second only to certain pockets of Central Park. When describing public cruising areas on streets, the guide states, 'There are whole blocks,

Fig. 4. Roughhousing in the penny arcade.



like 42nd between 7th & 8th Aves (once aptly called “The Meat Market”), before describing the many gay bars in the area:

In the Times Square or Midtown area, we find a multiplicity of bars of all types ... Diamond Jim’s at 42nd & Bway has a large proportion of servicemen, some of them trade (mostly commercial) and is frequented also by some younger civilians (also mostly commercial) and by older ones interested in either of the two foregoing.<sup>24</sup>

If Tony is walking down 42nd Street, he would have probably been moving westward along the street’s southern side from 7th to 8th Avenue, the exact stretch that the preceding quotations (with their emphasis on servicemen) name as ‘The Meat Market’.<sup>25</sup> It is also important to note – considering that the original Eltinge had been converted to a cinema – that cheap film theatres were also popular cruising spots detailed by the travel guide: ‘Almost all of the cheaper second-run and foreign theaters in the Times Square area have a substantial amount of faggotic activity’.<sup>26</sup> Among gay men in New York and beyond, the film pictured what was known to be a libidinally charged locale, encouraging queers in the audience to read sexual meaning into the prevalence of sailors and soldiers within the sequence. These servicemen function within the scene both as potential points of identification for queers in the armed forces who had visited the city in the past or hoped to in the future, and also as sites for the investment of gay spectatorial desire more generally. Chauncey, in *Gay New York*, insists that ‘The sailor, seen as young and manly, unattached, and unconstrained by conventional morality, epitomized the bachelor subculture in the gay cultural imagination’.<sup>27</sup>

Sailors and soldiers remain visible as Tony begins to explore the interior of the penny arcade. Upon entering, he is greeted by a trio of men running around the space and roughhousing, two of them sailors and one a civilian, muscular in a slim-fitting T-shirt with red stripes across the chest (figure 4). As the scene continues, Tony goes from machine to machine, playing each

24 Ibid., pp. 13, 16.

25 I am assuming the trajectory of Tony’s movement down the street based on the historic prevalence of theatres on that stretch, in addition to the historic (and current) location of the Eltinge on that side of the street and the location of the New Amsterdam on the opposite side.

26 Hagius, *Swasart Nerf’s Gay Guides for 1949*, p. 18.

27 Chauncey, *Gay New York*, p. 78.

Fig. 5. 'The Gayest Music Box'.



one, apart from a mysterious contraption in the centre of the space with a large question mark painted on it, until he wins. Tony eventually encounters the shoeshine man (played by an actual shoeshine man, LeRoy Daniels) and breaks into 'A Shine on Your Shoes', pink and blue neon signage overhead reading 'The Gayest Music Box' as he sings (figure 5). The male trio continues to cycle through the space as the number goes on, along with a regular cast of figures, among them a couple of soldiers, a fat woman, and a tall, lanky woman who excites easily and eventually screams. The repeated use of the same figures appears deliberate, an invitation to the viewer to linger on the physical characteristics of the actors that inhabit the space. This repetition was even remarked upon (in annoyance) by a member of a test audience before the film's release:

The dance number in the penny arcade was good, but the same extras turned up too often in the background. As an example, the girl in the white sweater with a green skirt. She comes in with a soldier, is seen twelve times and leaves with a sailor. The others are also seen a lot.<sup>28</sup>

It is possible that the repeated use of these figures was the result of money-saving or poor planning, but this would be surprising; the characters are far more recognizable and idiosyncratic than would be the case if they were intended to appear only as bodies milling about. It is more likely that the figures in this scene were meant to stand out and be noticed by the audience.

The number in the penny arcade and the segment that leads to it draw heavily on the work of US artist Paul Cadmus, a famous chronicler of New York (subcultural) life. Cadmus achieved national infamy in 1934 when his painting *The Fleet's In!*, which pictures rowdy sailors on shore leave and an implied homosexual liaison between a sailor and a civilian in suit and red tie, was banned from a group show at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC (figure 6). The scandal propelled Cadmus to the status of household name, as a 1937 article in *Esquire* asserted, 'For every individual

<sup>28</sup> From the *The Band Wagon* file, in the Vincente Minnelli papers at the Margaret Herrick Library.

**Fig. 6. *The Fleet's In!*, by Paul Cadmus (1934).**



<sup>29</sup> Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Scott Bukatman, 'Brushstrokes in CinemaScope: Minnelli's action painting in *Lust for Life*', in McElhaney (ed.), *Vincente Minnelli*.

<sup>32</sup> From the *The Band Wagon* file, in the Vincente Minnelli papers at the Margaret Herrick Library.

<sup>33</sup> David Leddick and George Platt Lynes, *George Platt Lynes* (New York, NY: Taschen, 2000), p. 16. Lincoln Kirstein and Paul Cadmus, *Paul Cadmus* (San Francisco, CA: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1992), p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> Justin Spring, *Secret Historian: the Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist and Sexual Renegade* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 146.

who might have seen the original at the Corcoran, at least one thousand saw it in black and white reproduction'.<sup>29</sup> Although he remains relatively obscure today, and rapidly lost popularity after the War, he was counted among the greatest living US artists by both *Time* and *Newsweek* in the late 1930s, and his first solo show at New York's Midtown Gallery in 1937 broke attendance records.<sup>30</sup> Minnelli's propensity for translating painting to the cinema has been described by Scott Bukatman in relation to the Van Gogh biopic *Lust for Life* (1956), and it is also evident in *An American In Paris* (1951), *The Cobweb* (1955) and *Gigi* (1958).<sup>31</sup> The presentation of art in *The Band Wagon* was of importance to Minnelli, as indicated by a list from his collected papers related to the film that specifies the exact titles of paintings that are to appear in Tony's residence, gathered as prints from the catalogue of the now defunct Raymond and Raymond.<sup>32</sup> While it is not clear whether Minnelli and Cadmus actually knew each other, they did inhabit the same social sphere while Minnelli was living in New York. As described by Gerstner, 'By 1935 Minnelli's social circles were swirling with the glamour of such persons as George Balanchine, George and Ira Gershwin, Tchelitchev, Dorothy Parker, Steichen, Paul Bowles, George Platt Lynes, and Kay Swift'. George Platt Lynes, a photographer for magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, was a close friend of Cadmus, and because of his connections to the theatre it is likely that Minnelli would have encountered Cadmus's work in *Filling Station*, the 1938 ballet for which he designed the sets and costumes.<sup>33</sup> Even if the two did not know each other personally, Cadmus was an important figure in US art and culture in the 1930s – the milieu evoked by *The Band Wagon* – and remained a fixture in the US gay imaginary throughout the 1950s, when the film was released.<sup>34</sup>

Cadmus's style comprises oversaturated colour, tumultuous, crowded, horizontal compositions, and an exaggerated figuration that switches uncomfortably between the grotesque and the idealized; these are all traits that Minnelli's presentation of 'The Gayest Music Box' translates to the screen. Minnelli's reference points in fleshing out the space of 42nd Street and the penny arcade seem to be a series of paintings that Cadmus completed in 1934 (in keeping with the film's general 1930s anachronism and



Figs 7 and 8. The mysterious machine echoes Marsden Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914).



Minnelli's time in New York), among them *Greenwich Village Cafeteria*, *Coney Island* (perhaps in response to the script's characterization of space as a 'kind of Coney Island Midway') and *The Fleet's In*. Cadmus's restricted palette, which leans heavily on primary colours with the addition of green, is consonant with the interior of the penny arcade, evident in the space's mustard yellow walls, painted red accents, and the prominence of red and blue neon throughout, in addition to the bright signs and contraptions that populate the space. Minnelli's fluid camerawork pans and tracks through the crowd and bustle, replicating the horizontal thrust and overfull compositions of many of the paintings. Cadmus's emphasis on a variety of physical types is evident throughout the scene, especially in the repeated presence of the fat and the lanky women and the muscular man in the group of sailors, all of which feature in *The Fleet's In* and *Coney Island*. Given Cadmus's notoriety and fame in the 1930s, his visual influence would have been perceptible to a somewhat older queer audience in 1953, even though his style would have been relatively obscure when compared to other, canonical artists Minnelli drew from, such as Van Gogh.

Cadmus, however, is not the only gay, New York artist from whom Minnelli borrows in this sequence. Just before the number ends, Tony returns to the mysterious machine with the question mark, this time successfully setting it off and unleashing a kinetic, if perplexing and apparently pointless, display (figure 7). The festive contraption reveals several flags, nationalist signage in the form of a shield and eagle in the upper centre, an illuminated bulls-eye, chequerboard patterns, and an emphasis on red, green, blue and gold. The machine bears an uncanny resemblance to Marsden Hartley's 1914 painting *Portrait of a German Officer*, a coded likeness of a soldier (and probable lover of Hartley's) that features flags, chequerboard patterns, an iron cross in place of the shield and eagle, bulls-eyes, and a similar colour palette (figure 8). Hartley was a

35 Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 141–93.

36 Leddick and Lynes, *George Platt Lynes*, p. 56.

well-known fixture of New York artistic life, who rose to prominence as part of the Stieglitz circle in the 1910s and 1920s, and gained notoriety for the homosexual overtones in many of his portraits of men.<sup>35</sup> Hartley was also related to the same social circles as Minnelli and Cadmus, and was photographed by Lynes in 1942.<sup>36</sup> Although *Portrait of a German Officer* dates to 1914, it had just become publicly accessible in 1949 – a few years before the release of *The Band Wagon* – as part of the Alfred Stieglitz Collection, on permanent display at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, where Minnelli may well have seen it, along with a multitude of locals and tourists. This reference to a specific painting is more limited in its potential to speak to a queer audience than the evocation of a queer style or direct allusion to a performer central to queer practice, but even if the machine functioned predominantly as a private joke for Minnelli and the workers in the Freed Unit, it remains an important imprint of sensibility and taste, and reveals a fuller picture of queer life in the New York theatre world of the 1930s as well as 1950s Hollywood.

If the number in the penny arcade is packed with queer allusions, the rest of the film appears to yield meagre opportunities for the projection of queer spectatorial desire. Indeed, the number in penny arcade does not derail the film’s narrative so much as launch it (in opposition to the way queer visual excess is typically framed), and the theatrical version of the film contains only a couple of additional points for queer recognition. One of these appears fleetingly after the preview of the original, failed version of the show, when Tony seeks out the unofficial cast party. In an attempt to make Tony comfortable in the crowded, informal space, a conspicuously intimate pair of women – one standing with her arms wrapped around the waist of the one in front – offer Tony a snack: ‘How about a sandwich? We’ve got ham and devilled egg’ (figure 9). The presence of Jeffrey Cordova throughout the film, however, provides a more lingering queer impression for viewers of *The Band Wagon*. A pretentious if innovative director and star of the theatre, with a fondness for flamboyant spectacle (best exemplified within the film by the use of explosives during the dance set to ‘You and the Night and the Music’), Cordova is easy to read as a fictional analogue to Minnelli. This comparison holds in the presentation of Cordova’s apartment, a fashionable space for social gatherings that may have been modelled after ‘The Minnellium’, Minnelli’s salon (so named by Kay Swift) on East 53rd Street while he was working for Radio City.<sup>37</sup> Cordova’s demeanour is elegant and loquacious, and does not conform to prevailing models for heterosexual masculinity; as such several members of the film’s test audiences commented on his ‘pansy’ behaviour. One of the most succinct notes that ‘Buchanan is obviously effeminate. Better at end than at beginning’; the perceived improvement over the course of the film presumably being because his presence diminishes towards the end.<sup>38</sup>

What is missing from the theatrical version of the film, however, is a highly suggestive scene that appears in Minnelli’s and Freed’s revised

37 David A. Gerstner, ‘Queer modernism: the cinematic aesthetic of Vincente Minnelli’, in McElhaney (ed.), *Vincente Minnelli*, p. 266.

38 From the *The Band Wagon* file, in the Vincente Minnelli papers at the Margaret Herrick Library.



Fig. 9. Striking intimacy at the cast party.



version of the script. The scene comes midway through the film, while the original production of the show is still in rehearsal and the morning after Tony and Gaby have been reconciled by dancing in Central Park. The action takes place in the atelier of a woman named Carlina, the costume designer for the show whose character was cut completely (along with her workshop) from the theatrical version. It opens in the morning, with Lily looking over scripts as Lester, her husband and cowriter, enters the room. It is quickly made clear that Lester had gone missing the previous night, and that Lily is furious with him and suspects infidelity. After unsuccessfully attempting to smooth over the situation by asking Lily to do a heap of laundry from the previous day that he has tucked under his arm, he says, 'Look, Lily – I – I can explain', to which she responds, 'There's nothing to explain. You never came back last night. You never came home. It's perfectly clear.' What follows is an elaborate and absurd story about Lester happening across, and spending the night at, a Turkish bath:

Lester: But I was gonna come back. Then I walked down the street – and passed this Turkish bath – and –

Lily: (very dryly) Turkish bath!

Lester: Yes – and went in – and – they have quite a steam effect there – Jeff oughta see it for the show!

(he laughs hollowly)

So – I had a massage, and I was still coming back – but I fell asleep. Honest, lady, that's my story – and I can prove it. Exhibit A – my receipt – (he holds up a large receipt with a picture of a muscular man wrapped in a towel. The receipt reads: 'Harry's Baths')

Good likeness, huh? Exhibit B – (he unrolls his towel, which bears the inscription, 'Harry's Baths'.)

Exhibit C – sunlamp. (he starts unbuttoning shirt to show his chest, as Jeff comes over)<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> From the *The Band Wagon* script, 28 August 1952, in the Turner/MGM Scripts at the Margaret Herrick Library.

40 This is the only bathhouse that is described substantively in the guide, so I am using it as a general reference. It is not clear from the script exactly where Lester stumbles upon the bathhouse, but it could have been Everard's, since it is not too far from the theatre district, or the Times Square Baths, which the guide notes was 'the next most famous'. Hagius, *Swasamt Nerf's Gay Guides for 1949*, p. 20.

41 Ibid., pp. 18–19.

The presence of this scene in Minnelli's and Freed's script indicates that at a certain point in the film's production it was intended to give greater expression to common gay practices in New York. Bathhouses served as sites for gay sex throughout the twentieth century, and the entry for Everard's Turkish Baths (at 28th Street near Broadway) in the gay travel guide is lengthy.<sup>40</sup> Referred to off and on as 'the fellatorium', the guide insists that it 'plays a major role in New York's gay life', and was a site of exceptional gay visibility and sexual freedom, resulting in lengthy sessions of 'between six and ten hours' that were both active and voyeuristic. Furthermore, the guide insists that 'most of the attendants [were] straight', often in the form of a 'sailor or soldier desiring a maximum of blowjobs in a minimum period of time'.<sup>41</sup> In this context, Lester and Lily's exchange takes on added insinuation and humour, as Lily's expectations about sexual object choice are unsettled when she is presented with what might be described as a form of sexual tourism that transgresses heteronormative boundaries. As if these homosexual associations with the bathhouse were not already enough to connote 'gay', Lester also links Jeffrey (heretofore the queerest character in the film) with the baths, joking that he 'oughta see it for the show!'

Keeping the sequence at Carlina's in mind, *The Band Wagon* functions as a type of virtual tourism of New York, but one that would have been impossible by more direct means under the Hays Code. Returning to the earlier comparison to *On The Town* that emphasized the film's location shooting, *The Band Wagon* departs markedly from the photographic representation of actual sites in New York to picture instead a stylized, anachronistic version of the city. The non-realism of the film certainly functioned to arouse spectatorial nostalgia for an earlier era of entertainment, but also to picture gay life in the city in a way most likely to evade close scrutiny, and to connote queer content by constructing an artificial reality. To present actual footage of gay liaisons on 42nd Street or elsewhere would have been impossible under Joseph Breen's production code office, which closely monitored and restricted expressions of a 'pansy' sensibility. As previously demonstrated, however, the picture of New York that *The Band Wagon* paints is surprisingly faithful to spatial relations in the city as they concerned gay life and the theatre, despite its artificial visual presentation, and would have been read by queer spectators of the film familiar with the city (or accounts of it) as an informed representation of gay cruising areas. To extend the comparison to *On The Town*, the relationship of that film to New York was much like a booklet of photographs or postcards, providing appetizing glimpses of sites grouped merely by virtue of being in the same city rather than with any clear spatiotemporal continuity, whereas the New York of *The Band Wagon* – while more geographically limited – is pictured in a way much closer to a diary or a personal travelogue that combines lived experience with the affective charge of the places and times described therein. Although the visual world of *The Band Wagon* is thoroughly theatrical, it also bears a remarkably

felicitous relation to the queer world of the theatre in which Minnelli and others found themselves during the 1930s.

The virtual tourism provided by *The Band Wagon* comes not only in form of a colourful, sexually charged simulacrum of space that would appeal to queer members of the audience, but also figures in the presentation of an inaccessible past that would have held great meaning for Minnelli and queer workers in the Freed Unit as the popularity of musicals waned. As previously argued, the film evokes an anachronistic vision of New York that draws from the 1930s. This was also, however, a time when the theatre district in New York became the locus for gay life within the city. As noted by Chauncey, the Times Square area had been home to a significant number of queers since the 1910s because the eccentric reputation of theatrical types ‘provided a cover for many men who adopted widely recognized gay styles in their dress and demeanor’, but this growth in population was balanced by the gay exodus from a newly commercialized Greenwich Village in the 1920s.<sup>42</sup> Like Minnelli, many of these workers migrated to Hollywood, and especially to the Freed Unit, where homosexual tastes were understood to translate into greater profits for MGM.<sup>43</sup> *The Band Wagon*, however, was released in 1953, a watershed year when many films capitalized on new technologies such as widescreen and 3D in an effort to draw spectators from the home back to the theatre, following a mass movement from the cities to the suburbs.<sup>44</sup> Read in this context, *The Band Wagon* functions not only as a nostalgic appeal for older forms of entertainment, but also as an affirmation of forms of collaborative, queer production that were beginning to appear outmoded to the public and accordingly failed to turn a profit for MGM. In other words, it was not only a mode of entertainment that came under threat, but also an entire means of living and providing for oneself in the context of queer labour. The themes of *The Band Wagon* provide a surprisingly prescient commentary on the devaluation of the Freed Unit due to shifts in popular taste and the coincident recalibration of production practices, as 1953 marks the first year that the unit produced only one film, a trend that continued until it ceased to exist in the same form after 1957.<sup>45</sup> For those who made it, *The Band Wagon* may have functioned as a time machine of sorts, validating and reenergizing a mode of production and sociality that was currently under threat by dwelling upon older forms of entertainment, given expression by the film’s thematization of the triumph of the Broadway revue format over Cordova’s hifalutin’, spectacle-heavy flop.

The desire to remain in a mode of production that had already become outdated is expressed most movingly in the film’s final scene, which may also provide the film’s queerest frisson in its conflation of heterosexual coupledness and the impossible perpetuation of cooperative queer production. After the first show in New York, Tony is waiting in his dressing room for friends and colleagues to come by and celebrate. When no one shows up, he leaves his dressing room alone, singing ‘By Myself’, a reprise of the song he sang when he first arrived in New York. This time it is hopeful and poignant rather than melancholy, but as Tony begins to descend from his dressing room he realizes the song’s lyrics are misguided. Waiting for

<sup>42</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 301–03.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321; Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual*, pp. 37–49.

<sup>44</sup> John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 74–76.

<sup>45</sup> Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual*, pp. 38–39; Lev, *The Fifties*, p. 17.

Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



him below are the assembled cast and crew, as well as what appear to be some of the production's backers; upon his descent they begin to sing 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. Gaby speaks for them all, saying, 'Tony, the whole company got together, we all chipped in and we bought you ... nothing. So we have nothing to give you, but our admiration, our gratitude, and our love.' As Gaby speaks, the film cuts from a medium shot (figure 10) that captures most of the cast and crew in relatively deep focus, to a shallowly focused medium closeup that is centred only on Gaby, visually slipping between her articulation of a collective message and her individual feelings for Tony (figure 11). She continues until the film cuts again to a closeup of her face and shoulders, at which point she says, 'Yes, there were obstacles between us, but we've kissed them goodbye (figure 12). We've come to love you Tony. We belong together. The show's going to run a long time, and as far as I'm concerned ... it's going to run forever.' Tony and Gaby then kiss, only to be interrupted by Lester, Lily and Jeff, who break



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.

into a reprise of ‘That’s Entertainment’, and push the newly formed couple to opposite sides of the screen, inserting themselves – along with the rest of the cast and crew in the background – into the romance (figure 13).

The closing scene of *The Band Wagon* is remarkable for its ability to provide normative closure to the film in the form of heterosexual coupledness, while immediately deprioritizing the couple and foregrounding a fantasy that is inherently impossible, both within and beyond the film. As Tinkcom has argued, the plots of US film musicals centred on heterosexual romantic union in order to provide a normative film that would meet the demands of the Hays Code, but queer influence could continue to be found more prominently in musical numbers that refused narrative integration.<sup>46</sup> Rather than expressing queerness through poorly integrated numbers and visual excess, however, *The Band Wagon* articulates homosexual sentiment through its narrative conflation of sexual coupledness with the social context of the production corps, as well as the apparent impossibility of the union

<sup>46</sup> Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual*, pp. 51–53.



being maintained. When Gaby speaks at the end of the film, her words are those of the entire company until she finally says 'I', when insisting that she wants the show to run forever. The film plays off this ambiguity by the successively closer shots of Gaby, forcing the feelings of a diverse group of people into a single body that conforms to the standards for heterosexual union. Thus when Gaby speaks alone to Tony before their union is disrupted, she is never really just one person but instead stands for a larger group, even as she is expressing her own desire. Heterosexual coupledness is achieved visually, while the collective that discursively subtends it undermines the dyad; it is only appropriate that Tony and Gaby are then visually separated by the rest of the company so that the scene's balance might be restored. It is furthermore striking that Gaby's most tenuous utterance – coinciding with her movement from 'we' to 'I', and mirroring the disequilibrium between personal and collective – is impossible: 'as far as I'm concerned ... [the show is] going to run forever'. This line signifies at least doubly, referring both to their romance as well as to the actual show; and given the audiovisual composition of the scene that slips between couple and collective, the two are irrevocably intertwined. The desire for the show to run forever can never be met, and Gaby's articulation speaks more properly to a melancholy understanding that the show *must* end eventually. Although Gaby's wish can be framed within the narrative of *The Band Wagon* (expressing a nostalgic desire to remain outside of time) it demands to be considered contextually as well. Much like the version of *The Band Wagon* pictured within the film, that revived older, outdated forms of entertainment, the Freed Unit itself was outdated, in terms of both the forms of entertainment created as well as its unsustainably expensive production model. In the film's remarkably self-reflexive final scene, Gaby speaks not only for the company in the film but also for the workers of the Freed Unit, who understood that their time in an exceptional, queer environment would soon be at an end.

If *The Band Wagon* was a means to allay the grief brought on by the waning of a way of life for the members of the Freed Unit, it was certainly an emotionally meaningful experience for Minnelli. Much like Tony, Minnelli had long ago abandoned work in New York and on the stage. Although he may not have returned to the stage in fact, *The Band Wagon* was the first proper backstage Broadway musical he had directed, and stands as a counterpoint to the previous year's *The Bad and the Beautiful*, that had thematized the toxic environment of behind-the-scenes Hollywood. In contrast, New York was the home of many of Minnelli's formative experiences, both professionally and personally. His time in New York had elevated him from window dresser to one of the most celebrated theatre directors in the city, and provided a setting in which he could explore his homosexual desires and cultivate a circle of worldly friends without the judgment that he would endure after moving to Hollywood.<sup>47</sup> In many ways Tony is a more proper analogue for Minnelli than Jeffrey, in leaving a world that snubbed him to return to a home where he was celebrated, and in his recourse to the song 'By Myself' at the beginning and end of the film. For

<sup>47</sup> Levy, *Vincente Minnelli*, pp. 27–40, p. 156.



Minnelli, recreating an idealized New York theatre world of memory would have been an act that was joyous, passionate and libidinal yet also elegiac, a fond return to a past time that was necessarily melancholic because it could not be recovered fully. Thus the non-realism and anachronism that characterize *The Band Wagon* – beyond being a means to convey queer content to viewers – formed a way both to prolong the fantasy of return to an earlier time by denaturing time itself, and to prevent the fantasy’s illusionism from being too seductive. When the film ends on ‘That’s Entertainment’, with the lines ‘The world is a stage / The stage is a world of entertainment’, it refers as much to those who made *The Band Wagon* as to its spectators. This dual address gestures to the importance of a mode of life spent creating entertainment as well as to its precariousness, and also to the coincident drive to lose oneself in its fantasy as a way of diminishing the pain of its expiration.

Throughout the course of this essay I have analyzed various components of *The Band Wagon* (setting, stylistic references, narrative) to draw out their queer appeal. While some of what I have argued adheres to existing paradigms for the articulation of homosexual taste within the confines of the classical Hollywood studio system, much of it also complicates or expands the boundaries of how this taste circulated and was received. Whereas Tinkcom and biographers of Minnelli are concerned with the status of texts as queer based on their production by queers (and in turn the sexual preferences of Minnelli and the workers of the Freed Unit), I am much more interested in the circulation of queer material and the particular ways that queer style and narrative content might have been recognized by audiences. This difference can be demonstrated by considering a quote Tinkcom takes from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* to elucidate the mechanics of camp:

The typifying gesture of camp is really something amazingly simple: the moment at which a consumer of culture makes the wild surmise, ‘What if whoever made this was queer too? ... [Camp-recognition] says *what if*: What if the right audience for this were exactly me?’<sup>48</sup>

Tinkcom ends the quote here, and proceeds to focus attention on queer producers and the products of their labour. In doing so he simplifies the dissemination, circulation and recognition of camp as it existed for Minnelli and the Freed Unit as ‘the general idea of camp as a reader’s emphasis on stylistic excess’, and reinforces its necessity for the marketability of MGM musicals.<sup>49</sup> My own interest lies in moving beyond Tinkcom’s definition for camp, its association with visual excess and its production, to examine more closely the content and visual style that animates the relations of queer spectators to these texts. Sedgwick goes on in the same passage to highlight these dynamics: ‘the sensibility of camp-recognition always sees that it is dealing in reader relations and in projective fantasy ... about the spaces and practices of cultural production’.<sup>50</sup>

As I have argued, *The Band Wagon* largely lacks the flamboyant forms of spectacle and excess that are typically associated with camp; it does, however,

<sup>48</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, quoted in Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual*, p. 46.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>50</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 156.

represent the spaces and practices of producers in ways that are surprisingly faithful to historical spatial relationships and gay cultural practices in New York. This deeper understanding of the stylistic dynamics of *The Band Wagon* – its engagement of recognizable gay artistic styles and specific paintings, the representation and reference of public and semi-private spaces that were known as hotspots for gay sexual tourism, and the ways in which the film’s anachronism and antirealism would have evoked nostalgia for time spent in the army and other gay points of reference – is what marks the film as queer rather than displaying what could be framed more simply as ‘stylistic excess’. At the root of the problem is that film studies generally pays little attention to the circulation, currency and meaning of images and styles beyond how these function in a specific film or group of films that are united by characteristics of production. Style signifies in ways that are complex, multivalent and historically specific. Although my attention to stylistic detail may seem unusual within the field, it conforms to art historian Michael Baxandall’s concept of ‘the period eye’, which argues that ‘some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his experience’.<sup>51</sup> Within the context of MGM and *The Band Wagon*, it is necessary to understand style and vision as complex, nuanced forms of communication that functioned under the constraints of hegemony generally (and the Hays Code specifically) for period homosexual viewers.

The larger stakes of ‘the period eye’, however, also trouble the direct attribution of an object’s effects and potential for meaning to a specific author or corps of producers. Considered more fully in *Patterns of Intention*, Baxandall uses ‘intention’ to describe not the desires of the author, but the positioning of their works within larger hermeneutic systems, ‘a relation between an object and its circumstances’:

Some of the voluntary causes I adduce may have been implicit in institutions to which the actor [read: director, producer or labourer] unreflectively acquiesced: others may have been dispositions acquired through a history of behaviour in which reflection once but no longer had a part. Genres are often a case of the first and skills are often a case of the second. In either case I may well want to expand the ‘intention’ to take in the rationality of the institution or of the behaviour that led to the disposition: this may not have been active in the man’s mind at the time of making the particular object. . . . So ‘intention’ here is referred to pictures rather more than to painters.<sup>52</sup>

Although Baxandall addresses painting in this passage rather than filmmaking, its consideration of how style and visual expression operate within the confines of professional and institutional settings, such as MGM, the classical Hollywood style and the marketable aesthetics of the musical genre, is especially germane to discussion of Minnelli, the Freed Unit and *The Band Wagon*. Baxandall argues that while it may be tempting to attribute intention to an author such as Minnelli, or to stabilize a body of

51 Michael Baxandall, ‘Extract from “The Period Eye”’, in Joanne Morra and Marquand Smith (eds), *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies. Volume IV: Experiences in Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 38.

52 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: on the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 42.

work around him, such efforts would be better directed towards an examination of the contexts, histories and imperatives that conditioned the production, visual expression and reception of these works. In turn, although what I have detailed in this essay may be used to buttress auteurist scholarship on Minnelli, I also hope that it destabilizes the agency typically attributed to him (or his fellow workers) in order to highlight the circumstances that enabled it to resonate among particular audiences.

There are persuasive reasons for concentrating the excavation of queer history onto a single figure or group: it stabilizes a history that was made inscrutable by design, and left unwritten by actors who left spectral traces in order to avoid legal persecution and other forms of disenfranchisement. In the face of this, figures like Minnelli are pillars of stability on a tremendously unstable terrain, and they also, indisputably, created numerous texts that facilitated queer forms of spectatorship. To concentrate analysis predominantly on the side of production without providing a fuller picture of how its products had meaning, however, provides only a partial view of their history. The absence of such analysis is notable for *The Band Wagon* especially, since it has been neglected as a queer text precisely because its style is not flamboyant enough, even as it also advances an alternative style that is deeply rooted in lived and imagined homosexual practices and historical spatial relations. It is important to remain attentive to the minutiae of visual expression, especially when considering the spectatorship of populations that have been marginalized historically and forced to develop sophisticated forms of paralinguistic communication. It is my final desire, therefore, that such an understanding of the dynamics of style should inform not only readings of queer films but also the particularity of what Miriam Hansen has described as ‘vernacular modernism’, whereby Hollywood conventions were adapted to regional demands following the global circulation of US films.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> See Miriam Hansen, ‘The mass production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism’, in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold, 2000).