

Chapter 8

The Utopian Longing of Musicals

Experiencing Transcendence in Entertainment

Stefanie Knauss

1. Introduction

A woman and a man walk through a street, the darkness interrupted by small pools of light from old-fashioned street lamps, her bright yellow dress and his white shirt standing out against the night. They arrive at an outlook with a beautiful view across Los Angeles, the lights of the city twinkling under the purple sky (fig. 1). The two have been at odds since they first met and they keep bickering as they walk. But as soft piano music starts on the soundtrack, the atmosphere shifts and the man – Sebastian – starts singing, slowly spinning around a lamp pole like Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen/Gene Kelly, US 1952). The lyrics, however, contradict what appears to be a highly romantic moment and in fact, they make that contradiction explicit: »What a waste of a lovely night«, sings Sebastian, since there's no spark between them. And Mia agrees: »I'm frankly feeling nothing.« As the rhythm picks up, the two move into a tap dance routine à deux until the music slows down again, they stop dancing, and, as the camera zooms into a close-up of their faces, they look as if they are going to kiss – only to be interrupted by Mia's phone: her boyfriend is calling.



Fig. 1: *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, US 2016), film still.

Together, the soft piano music and the visuals – the sky shaded from pastel pink to dark purple above the lights of the city, the street lamp creating a small protective circle of light around the couple against the darkness of the street, the choreography of the dance number at first emphasizing the apparent antagonism between the two and then pulling them closer together – create a dreamy atmosphere in which anything might be possible, even a kiss between Mia and Sebastian, with their squabbling and animosity – explicit in the lyrics of the song and embodied in their movements – more like foreplay than the expression of real, unsurpassable differences. It is a moment of escape – »the pink sky [becomes] escapism in its purest form«, as critic Niklas Lotz writes in his review of the film¹ – from the frustrating reality of their lives: Mia was networking at the party they just left to kickstart her career as an actress, while Sebastian, who dreams of opening a jazz club, played mindless 80s pop to entertain the guests. It is a moment of illusion that they might find something special, only to be shattered by the sound of Mia's phone, the sound of reality.

With the affective power of the combination of music, dance, and emotionally charged narratives, musicals like *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, US 2016), from which this scene is taken, could be considered the epitome of escapism from harsh reality into a world where people sing and dance in the

1 Niklas Lotz, Resonanzen finden statt die Welt abzubilden: Wo Konflikte singend und tanzend beigelegt werden: Die Musicalfilme der vergangenen zehn Jahre im Rampenlicht, Filmdienst.de, 16 December 2024, <https://www.filmdienst.de/artikel/70152/essay-uber-filmmusicals> [accessed 2 June 2025]; in the original: »der pinke Himmel [wird] zur Weltflucht in Reinform«.

middle of the street, where enemies turn into lovers, and dreams come true. Consequently, musicals are often summarily dismissed as shallow entertainment without any deeper significance, perhaps even, as Ernst Bloch writes disparagingly about Hollywood films in general, a means »of ideological stupefaction and fascistic incitement«,² whose visions of dreams-come-true numb the masses in order to reconcile them with their oppression by the capitalist class. Instead, rather than simply discounting entertainment as useless or even dangerous, Richard Dyer proposes to draw on the concept of ›utopia‹ in order to understand how entertainment – such as musicals, the example he discusses and on which I focus here, as well – functions and what it does: »Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as ›escape‹ and as ›wish-fulfilment‹, point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism. Entertainment offers the image of ›something better‹ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide.«³ While Bloch was not, as indicated, impressed by Hollywood productions, he, too, recognizes that films, when liberated from their ideological entanglements, can offer a vision of what is possible, a vision of a new world.⁴

According to Dyer's definition of entertainment as »a type of performance produced for profit, performed before a generalized audience (the ›public‹), by a trained, paid group who do nothing else but produce performances which have the sole (conscious) aim of providing pleasure«,⁵ entertainment results from capitalist relationships of production (produced by professionals with the purpose of creating profit), and thus the dreams and escapism that entertainment offers – the pleasure it provides – are framed and limited by capitalist interests. But Dyer argues that entertainment »does not simply reproduce unproblematically patriarchal-capitalist ideology«. ⁶ The more or less explicit ideological struggles between capital and the workforce in the process of production leave their traces in the products which might contradict hegemonic ideologies and provide an opening for dreams of a dif-

2 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* [1959], translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986, 410.

3 Richard Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, in: Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2002, 31–44, here 32.

4 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 411.

5 Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 32.

6 Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 32.

ferent society. Thus, the utopian longing expressed in and encouraged by entertainment is ambivalent: it offers an alternative to the reality of capitalist society but it does so within the framework of capitalist ideology, both affirming and questioning this framework to different degrees depending on the specific production.

This ambivalence of the utopian imagination of entertainment characterizes utopia also more broadly as a form: generally understood as a disruptive critique of the status quo and the imagination of a better world of individual and communal flourishing, and often associated with a progressive left-wing or Marxist approach, it is important to note that utopias also exist on the Right and that utopian visions of the good life or ideal humanity might be reactionary and function to maintain the status quo by repressing change. Not all utopias are necessarily ›good‹ in all aspects; their realization might have negative consequences, or their imagined ›better‹ world might only be better for some people or groups but not for others. Richard Howells thus realistically notes: »one person's Utopia is another's dystopia.«⁷

Given this fundamental ambivalence, in this chapter I argue that musicals highlight and shape the capacity and need for utopian longing and hope in human existence (something the previous chapter briefly touches upon in the discussion of the prophetic-utopian potential of street art), while also embodying its ultimate unattainability. To be clear, the film musicals I discuss here – *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez* (Jacques Audiard, FR/US/MX 2024) – do not propose a ›Christian utopia‹; but I suggest that their stories and the affective mode in which they are told offer theological insights. The musicals lay open the internal structure of utopia as transcendental, reflecting both the human capacity for transcendence and – through the failures of the utopias they represent – the ultimate human incapacity to find fulfillment in their own achievements in this world, so that the always only imperfectly realized utopian striving for the transcendent reflected in the films *ex negativo* points the human being toward absolute fulfillment possible only in the new creation of God's realm. Thus, this chapter contributes to the foundational theological reflection on the conditions of the possibility of human openness for and orientation towards the absolutely transcen-

7 Richard Howells, *A Critical Theory of Creativity: Utopia, Aesthetics, Atheism and Design*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 8.

dent God this volume has pursued as a whole, by focusing on the encounter with musicals and their specific constitution in music, dance, and narrative, yet without attempting a dogmatic formulation of what the utopia humans long for should look like in its specifics.

I will begin with tracing the contours of the notion of ›utopia‹ and its significant elements from philosophical and theological perspectives and discuss how musicals formally express utopian longing, drawing especially on *La La Land* – a more ›typical‹ musical than *Emilia Pérez* – for examples. I then turn to a more detailed analysis of *La La Land*’s utopian imagination of individual fulfillment and its failures. The critically acclaimed but also controversial recent musical *Emilia Pérez* will then provide an occasion to attend to the ambivalence of utopia between repression and liberation experienced in the reception of the film’s representations of trans identities and Mexican society. The critical-constructive potential of utopia expressed in the films, I conclude, provides important nourishment for the utopian imagination of viewers, but the frustrations that viewers also experience – when protagonists do not fully realize their dreams or when a film’s utopia does not respond to the needs of a community – point them towards their existence in the tension between reality and utopia as beings (capable) of transcendence.

2. Utopia in Philosophy, Theology, and Musical

2.1 Utopia between the Good Place and the Non-Place:

Philosophical and Theological Discussions

The discussion about the meaning of ›utopia‹, a notion first introduced by Thomas Moore – is it the ›good‹ place (from the Greek prefix *eu-*) or is it the ›non-place‹ (a contraction of the Greek negation *ou-*)? – can serve as an entry point to this brief discussion of philosophical and theological conceptualizations of ›utopia‹. In fact, as Carla Danani notes,⁸ the significance of utopia lies precisely in this ambivalence of its imagination as an ideal place (or community, society, life, humanity) and the recognition that this ide-

8 Carla Danani, Utopie, in: Verena Eberhardt/Anna-Katharina Höpfinger/Stefanie Knauß/Marie-Therese Mäder/Daria Pezzoli-Olgati (Hg.), Religion – Medien – Kultur: Interdisziplinäres Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium, Baden-Baden: Nomos (forthcoming).

al has not been and never will be fully realized in any concrete place. Thus, as Lucy Sargisson, Ruth Levitas, and others⁹ propose, instead of thinking of utopia as a particular state of being to be achieved, it is more helpful to describe utopia as a longing, attitude, process, or method. Howells argues¹⁰ that this utopian method is at work in all forms of human creativity, in the capacity to imagine ›otherwise‹ and create ever-new designs, objects, models of communal living, or even whole alternative worlds. This utopian attitude or method expresses itself in two forms: in the critique of the current imperfect, problematic, unjust state of affairs, and in the constructive vision of a different, better world of individual and communal flourishing, sometimes imagined as a new and future world or as a return to an ideal past of »peace, abundance, leisure, equality, consonance of [human beings] and their environment«, as George Kateb summarizes some main traits of utopian imaginations.¹¹

Ernst Bloch, in spite of his blindness to the oppressive elements of the Marxist utopia rather imperfectly realized in the Soviet Union and GDR, remains an important influence in the discussion of utopia. He helpfully distinguishes between abstract and concrete utopia,¹² with abstract utopia, on the one hand, describing a wishful thinking that primarily serves to compensate for the imperfections or dissatisfaction with what is instead of changing it: the utopian function only »flickers up« in wishful thinking, as he writes.¹³ Concrete utopia, on the other hand, is oriented towards social engagement and political action to bring about actual change. While the utopian longing expressed in musicals appears to fit Bloch's definition of abstract utopia – which might make it seem easy to dismiss them as mere escapism – it is nevertheless important to recognize the possibility of the anticipation of a better world that may appear even in popular culture, as Bloch also acknowledges.¹⁴ The dreams given shape, color, and sound in musicals do not simply serve to sedate the masses but they also create cracks in their world through

9 See for a discussion Howells, *A Critical Theory of Creativity*, 26–27.

10 Howells, *A Critical Theory of Creativity*, 1.

11 George Kateb, quoted in Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 36.

12 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 145–146. For a detailed discussion of Bloch's concept of utopia, see Howells, *A Critical Theory of Creativity*.

13 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 144.

14 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 411.

which other possibilities may become visible and think-able.¹⁵ At a minimum, the contrast between the dream worlds of popular culture and current reality creates a consciousness of »our mental and ideological imprisonment«, as Fredric Jameson writes.¹⁶ The sense of estrangement characteristic of the form of the musical with the use of extra-diegetic music and dance numbers disrupting its illusion of reality contributes to this contrasting effect and increases its utopian potential precisely because it allows for a different perspective onto the status quo.¹⁷

Utopia's relationship to reality thus is dialectical. On the one hand, it aims to transcend reality in its imagination of another world with new possibilities which is purposefully »unrealistic« as its goal is to liberate itself from the constraints of reality. But on the other hand, the imagination even of the most different worlds always has its point of departure in this world – the only world we know – and so the constructive impulse of utopia lies in its critical-imaginative response to the imperfections and injustices of this world. Thus, even in its most fanciful flights into the imagination, utopian longing remains connected to and grows out of the concern about and engagement with reality, at the same time as it attempts to transcend it.

This dialectic also shapes the genre conventions of the musical which include both realistic elements and highly artificial and constructed ones. In *La La Land*, the artificially purple sky creates the dream-like atmosphere of the dance scene I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and other non-diegetic dance and song numbers further enhance its unrealistic character. Interestingly, though, Karen Hua notes that the director chooses not to use computer generated imagery to make these artificial elements of the musical's visualization of utopian longing appear as real, but instead he makes their artificiality obvious. In a dance number set in the planetarium, Mia and Seb are lifted into the sky on wires barely visible at the beginning and end of the scene to dance among the stars projected onto the dome of the planetarium. And in a »what-if« sequence at the end of the film, to which I will return below, painted backdrops are chosen to create an illusory Paris

15 Jonathan Roessler, »Utopianism in Pianissimo«: Adorno and Bloch on Utopia and Critique, *Critical Horizons* 23.3 (2022), 227–246, here 235.

16 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London: Verso, 2005, xiii.

17 Lotz, *Resonanzen finden*.



Fig. 2: *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, US 2016), film still.

instead of realistic images of the city (fig. 2).¹⁸ The artificial character of these scenes implicitly recognizes the *real* human capacity for *unrealistic* dreaming and creativity. Thus paradoxically, the illusions created by the film could be called a ›realistic‹ element in so far as they represent a reality of human existence, the ability to imagine otherwise.

The film also includes elements of realistic representation of the world with which its utopia contrasts: a montage sequence of short takes of auditions that Mia attends highlights the ruthlessness of the film industry, and the frustration and discouragement displayed by Mia show the real emotional (and financial) costs of trying to achieve her dream to become an actress. The dialectic of reality and utopia is also aestheticized when the setting of a scene – its anchor in the ›real‹ world – fades away to black, highlighting only the protagonist and their dream as if isolating them from the constraints of reality, for example in a scene when the busy restaurant disappears around Seb as he shifts from the cheesy Christmas songs his boss wants him to play to a jazz melody, while Mia listens, enchanted by his music. For a moment suspended in time, the two exist in a world of their own, until reality with its limitations – bills to pay, bosses to please, compromises to be made – comes crashing back as the restaurant setting reappears around them, and Seb's boss fires him.

As this scene makes clear, even if utopian longing imagines a different world in which Seb is able to live his dream, this world cannot be realized:

18 Karen Hua, Behind the Scenes of ›La La Land‹: How the Sets Made the Movie Magical, *Forbes*, 16 January 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/karenhua/2017/01/26/behind-the-oscar-nominated-production-design-of-la-la-land-david-wasco/> [accessed 15 July 2025].

the light comes back up again, the dream fades away. The good place of utopia is, after all, a non-place, the utopian dream cannot even be fully and perfectly articulated, let alone be realized within the limitations of human life under the social and material conditions that constrain it. Even in moments when the utopian imagination seems to be ›already‹ fulfilled, there is always a ›not yet‹ lingering in the background (or more often, in the foreground), as the musical also shows through the tension between the fulfillment of one dream and the disappointment of another, as I will discuss below. Thus utopian longing is inherently characterized by its transcendent quality as a more-than-reality, with its current incompleteness complemented by the always-future hope of its full realization. This dialectic between the recognition of the limitedness of human capacities under their material conditions and the human potential for creativity, growth, change, and perfection could be described in theological terms with Dennis Doyle and Chad Walsh, as »an eternal struggle to strike a proper balance between the fulfillment of human potentiality and the acceptance of human limitations and sinfulness.«¹⁹

For Bloch, this transcendent character of utopia is an essential aspect of it. In fact, for him, »[t]he utopian function is also the only transcendent one which has remained, and the only one which deserves to remain: one which is transcendent without transcendence«, connected with the hope for »the Not-Yet-Become, in the shape of a Not-Yet-Become-Good.«²⁰ Human existence is characterized by this capacity for transcendence which is inherent to utopian longing, as he writes: »[The human being] is that which still has much before it.« It is the utopian impulse which drives human beings to reach beyond their limits in the hopes for the not-yet realized, better world: »[The human being] repeatedly stands ahead on frontiers which are no longer such because [as] he [sic] perceives them, he ventures beyond them.«²¹

While Bloch understands utopia explicitly in non-theistic, secular terms, even as something opposed to religion (although he recognizes the utopian function in religions), from a theological perspective, it is precisely this transcendent impulse in utopian longing that expresses the human capaci-

19 Dennis M. Doyle/Chad Walsh, Utopia and Utopianism, in: Catholic University of America (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., Detroit/Washington: Thomson/Gale/Catholic University of America, 2003, 359–362, here 362.

20 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 146.

21 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 246

ty for relationship with the transcendent, with God. Karl Rahner defines the human being as transcendent being: »In the fact that he [sic] experiences his finiteness radically, he reaches beyond this finiteness and experiences himself as a transcendent being, as spirit. The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as an horizon which recedes further and further the more answers he can discover.«²² As with each utopian vision which turns out to be imperfect, limited in some aspect and thus in need of further imagination, for the human being »[e]very answer is always just the beginning of a new question«.²³ In this transcendent reach for the infinite, which expresses itself also in utopian longing, the human being experiences a »pre-apprehension« of absolute being, the infinite from which the finite human being receives their being.²⁴

Utopian longing thus reveals something about the human condition as the being of transcendence. The transcendent dynamic of utopia is also apparent in two additional, related ways, already briefly discussed above, to which I now return from a theological perspective. First, utopia reaches beyond the present reality in the dialectic between being anchored to reality and the utopian vision of a different and better reality discussed above. For Rahner, this tension is an essential mark and challenge of Christian existence: »We are stretched out between heaven and earth and have neither the right nor the capacity to renounce one or the other.«²⁵ The utopian striving to transcend the boundaries of reality toward something better that lies beyond them – »even though attaining it is difficult, uncertain, or even improbable«²⁶ – orients me toward the unknowable God in whom the promise of the fulfillment of reality lies. This leads Rahner to reconsider the meaning of ›reality‹ and ›utopia‹: the present reality is now recognized as preliminary and incomplete, whereas what is called ›utopian‹ – and might be considered illusory in a derogatory use of the word – points towards the only true reality, that of God. Thus, in faithful surrender to God, »[w]e are grasped by the

22 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych, New York: Seabury Press, 1978, 32.

23 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 32.

24 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 34.

25 Karl Rahner, *Utopia and Reality*, translated by R. Modras, *Theology Digest* 32.2 (1985), 139–144, here 142.

26 Rahner, *Utopia and Reality*, 140.

really real, by a holy utopia and not a so-called realism.«²⁷ However, living in the utopian hope in God as the only true reality does not mean a retreat into interiority and a neglect of the Christian responsibility for the world in which we now live and in which we already experience God's presence. In fact, Rahner warns: »Each of us will have to answer to God whether we have fulfilled our political obligations, whether we have loved our neighbors and accorded them freedom and justice.«²⁸

Utopia is also transcendent in a second sense, already noted: it is the non-place, that is, it is never fully realized in this world and through human efforts alone. For Christians, this leads to the recognition that only God can bring about the new creation. Utopian imagination is thus an expression of eschatological hope nourished by the faith in God, who is committed to the liberation and flourishing of humanity and creation. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez writes: »Christian hope opens us, in an attitude of spiritual childhood, to the gift of the future promised by God.«²⁹ While the utopia of liberation from all forms of exploitation and oppression will be fulfilled in God's future, this does not mean that utopian imagination is other-worldly or, to use Bloch's typology, merely an abstract utopia, mere wishful thinking. Instead, like Rahner, Gutierrez insists that Christian utopia is concrete and historical, »subversive to and a driving force of history«.³⁰ Thus Christians are responsible for working towards the realization of the utopian hope rooted in their faith in God the liberator to bring about – even if imperfectly – a society of solidarity already in this world, trusting in its perfect fulfillment through God: »Faith proclaims that the [fellowship] which is sought through the abolition of exploitation [...] is something possible, that efforts to bring it about are not in vain, that God calls us to it and assures us of its complete fulfillment.«³¹ Christian utopian hope is nourished by the already-not-yet structure of God's realm announced in Jesus Christ in whose teaching and actions the realm of peace, justice, and love is already present in this world to be fulfilled in God's new creation (Matt 11,2–6). The eschatological

27 Rahner, *Utopia and Reality*, 141 (my emphasis).

28 Rahner, *Utopia and Reality*, 144.

29 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973, 238.

30 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 232.

31 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 237.

character of the already-not-yet utopia in the Christian understanding also emphasizes that all attempts at the realization of an ideal social order are provisional.³² This ›eschatological proviso‹ thus provides a lens for the critical evaluation of any claims of social utopias and attempts at their realization.

The Christian utopian imagination is nourished by the social criticism and visions of a new world of right relationship among humans and with nature in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, such as Isaiah's vision of a world of peace and justice: »[God] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more« (Isa 2,4). Jesus' acts of healing and social inclusion, his teaching of God's realm of peace and justice, and his death because of the threat his utopian vision posed to those in power provide concrete utopias that both critique current injustice and oppression and imagine a new world of radical love.

Throughout the history of Christianity³³ – from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, in Nicholas of Cusa, and in modern times, in Catholic social teaching and theologies of advocacy for the marginalized and oppressed, such as liberation theology, Black theology, or queer theologies – the Christian utopian function has continued to express itself in its critical mode as a two-fold critique of social injustice *ad extra* as well as – *ad intra* – of the theological short-comings that have contributed to inequality and oppression. Equally, its constructive mode is two-fold, formulating visions of just and equal social and economic systems as well as new ways of theologizing that will further individual and communal flourishing. While the concrete features of these Christian utopias differ among individual proposals, they generally share one aspect: the emphasis on the relational dimension and communal wellbeing which is seen as mutually related to individual flourishing in the recognition of the social nature of the human being. Thus, social justice, the common good, egalitarianism, love, and peace are important elements of biblical and later Christian utopias, even if they have not always fully extended to include women, slaves, or other ›others‹, including animals and nature. Subsequent critical utopias, such as those of feminist, Black, or postcolonial

32 With reference to Johann Baptist Metz, Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 223.

33 For a short overview, see Doyle/Walsh, Utopia and Utopianism, 360–362.

theologies, have critiqued these shortcomings and try to imagine a more fully developed utopia in the dynamic of transcendent striving where each preliminary answer leads to a new question, as Rahner says.

As already noted, however, a sober evaluation of utopian longing in Christianity also has to consider two other aspects. First, as Jesus' life and death shows, the utopian imagination requires commitment in the face of adversity and possible sacrifices, either because one's utopia of justice and equality challenges those in power who might wish to silence the utopian critic or because one has to give up one's own privileges in order to make possible the flourishing of all. Thus even the partial utopia that may be realized in this world will not be without its challenges and pains. And second, as discussed above, a critical consideration of Christian utopias also has to attend to the ambivalence of (Christian and any other) utopias whose liberative visions for some might turn out to be oppressive for others. The imagination of an ideal community might well be based on the exclusion of parts of this community, as has been recognized in the critical theologies committed to the liberation of marginalized and oppressed groups. The oppressive and exclusive potential of utopias is apparent, for example, in the vision of a society shaped by Christian ideals of heteronormativity or a theology of salvation that fully extends only to baptized Christians or, even more exclusively, Catholics. The theological task, Verna Ehret notes,³⁴ is thus to deconstruct utopian visions through the continuous critical questioning of whether they uphold current privileges, affirm exclusion, or create new inequalities, even in the well-meaning attempt to overcome them.

From both a secular and a theological perspective, utopia can be considered an expression of (eschatological) hope nourished by a humanist faith in the human capacity for creativity and development on the historical plane, which for Christians, however, will only be fulfilled in God's ultimate realization of a new creation of justice and peace. Given their utopian visions of a different world, musicals may thus also be called a ›genre of hope‹.

34 Verna Ehret, *Utopia and Narrative: Theology between the Boundaries of Overhumanization and Hypertheism*, in: Daniel Boscaljon (ed.), *Hope and the Longing for Utopia: Future and Illusions in Theology and Narrative*, Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014, 12–21, here 12.

2.2 Affect, Music, and Time: The Utopian Sensibility in Musicals

The utopian imagination unfolds a critical and motivational potential that reaches beyond individual dreams of wish-fulfillment in order to mobilize the collective for social change by charging its visions of a better world with affective intensity. Affect theory provides a helpful lens to understand better how the individual and the collective, the conscious and unconscious, discourse and feeling are connected in the utopian imagination. For the purposes of my reflections here, ›affect‹ can be described with the scholar of religion Jenna Supp-Montgomerie as »the social energy through which subjects, meanings and cultures are produced, organised and undone.«³⁵ As such, affects are pre-individual and intersubjective but they are felt in the individual body as an experience of intensity, shaping »the relationship between our bodies, our environment, and others.«³⁶ This includes the relationships among characters in a film (and with their world more in general) and between the film and its viewers. Affects cross the boundaries between screen and audience, drawing them into the world of the film and allowing the utopian longing envisioned on screen to spill over into the audience. As a pre-conscious intensity that cannot be grasped in language, affect is not primarily about the content of an image or a story but about its effect and intensity, as Brian Massumi emphasizes,³⁷ or, put differently with film scholar Tarja Laine, it is not so much about *what* is told in a film, but about *how* it is told and thus, what the film or story *does*.³⁸ It is through this affective intensity which is achieved in the embodied reception of its colors, sounds, movements, and other formal elements (together with the resonances these elements have in a social context and an individual viewer) that media are able to move people, as Eric Shouse argues: »the power of many forms of media lies not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning.«³⁹ I agree with Shouse about the capacity of media such as film musicals to »create affect-

35 Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, Affect and the Study of Religion, *Religion Compass* 9/10 (2015), 335–345, here 336.

36 Eric Shouse, Feeling, Emotion, Affect, *M/C Journal* 8.6 (2005), n. p.

37 As discussed in Patricia Clough, *The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Bodymedia and Bodies, Theory, Culture & Society* 25.1 (2008), 1–22, here 5.

38 Tarja Laine, *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*, New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2011, 4.

39 Shouse, *Feeling, Emotion, Affect*.

tive resonances« that have a powerful effect on viewers and are not necessarily identical with the discursively formulated ›meaning‹ of a film. Yet, I would argue that it is precisely this capacity which contributes to the »ideological effects« of media, that is, their ability to endow bodies, groups of bodies, ideas, or imaginaries with an intensity that might attract or repulse, motivate commitment or create opposition on the level of embodied feeling rather than conscious thought or argument and, thus, serve to stabilize ideological positions as common sense within the social order.

This affective capacity is also at play in the utopian potential of musicals and other forms of entertainment, as Dyer argues: »Entertainment does not [...] present models of utopian worlds [...]. Rather the utopianism is contained in the feeling it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production.«⁴⁰ The utopian dimension of musicals can thus be understood as an affective intensity that ›colors‹ the viewers' experience of the dreams and visions of a better life represented in the film in a complex circulation of affects on the screen, between screen and audience, and among the audience, endowing them with a positive charge that attracts us to them and pulls us into their utopian current, even though we remain aware of the disappointing imperfection of the world we inhabit.

The »given mode of cultural production« Dyer mentions are the conditions of the capitalist production system of Hollywood and its conventions of representation that emerge from and reference the Western cultural context. These provide the framework for the codes that musicals employ to achieve this utopian affect, especially by integrating music and dance into the narrative, which both are particularly suited to the creation of pre-conscious and pre-discursive intensities because they communicate without words but through the movement, sound, color, and light that stimulate the sensory system and thus affect viewers on an embodied level. According to film scholar Caryl Flinn, the capacity for pre-discursive communication connects (film) music to utopia because neither can be fully represented: both are, discurs-

40 Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 20.

sively, ›non-places‹.⁴¹ For Flinn, music is a transcendent phenomenon that creates a sense of harmony and perfection in a world that is imperfect and fragmented and thus achieves, through its form rather than its content, a utopian intensity.⁴² Film music – specifically that of the classic Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 40s on which Flinn’s study focuses, which is also referenced in the sound and visuals of *La La Land* – evokes a »sense of lost integrity and grandeur«.⁴³ This musically evoked nostalgia coincides with the utopian impulse to (re-)create the wholeness and perfection of an ideal past as an »eschatological goal«,⁴⁴ bringing together the longing for the utopian past and the imagination of its future realization in the affective experience of the present moment.

What film music (and by extension, musicals) offers is not a fully developed utopia but only »glimpses« of it.⁴⁵ Because music is non-representational, these glimpses of utopia require interpretation which is always shaped by its context, the subjectivity of the interpreter, and their intentions or goals. With Bloch, Flinn thus cautions that utopia is contingent on its hermeneutic context, both individual and social,⁴⁶ as is illustrated by the divergent reception experiences of *Emilia Pérez* which I will discuss below. The interpretation of utopian visions consequently is neither unambiguous nor inherently subversive or liberative, as Flinn points out⁴⁷ and as I have also noted above. As we will see in the discussion of the two musicals I have chosen for my considerations here, what might be considered liberative by one person or one group may well be experienced as oppression by another, or the feelings evoked by a musical number may serve to create an affective affinity for values one might otherwise not want to endorse and instill a sense of acquiescence with the limitations imposed by society.

Dyer’s discussion of entertainment in terms of utopia also notes this ambivalence of the utopian sensibility whose liberative impulses may remain constrained by the framework of the hegemonic capitalist-patriarchal ide-

41 Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 10.

42 Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 9.

43 Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 91.

44 Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 92.

45 Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 91.

46 Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 103.

47 Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 105.

ology, although this ideological framework is never perfectly tight and subversive contradictions that question the framework may emerge from its cracks. Thus, the categories of utopian sensibility that Dyer identifies in his analysis of musicals – energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community – respond, he argues, to the specific constraints and failures of capitalist society: exhaustion, scarcity, dreariness, manipulation, and fragmentation.⁴⁸ Dyer notes: »while entertainment is responding to needs that are *real*, at the same time it is also defining and delimiting what constitute the *legitimate* needs of people in this society.«⁴⁹ The utopian imagination expressed in entertainment remains framed and constrained by the ruling ideologies which allow to address some needs, such as the need for abundance – and only in ways that fit its ideology (through capitalist consumerism, for example) – but deny others, such as the need for gender, racial, or class equality.⁵⁰ According to Dyer, this dialectic between liberation and constraint is apparent on the formal level in the construction of the musical that combines a narrative functioning under the conditions of ›reality‹ with unrealistic non-diegetic music/dance numbers in which the protagonists escape the constraints of realism into utopian worlds of song and dance.⁵¹ While I agree with Dyer regarding the ambivalence of liberation and constraint in the utopian sensibility of the musical and its expression through realistic and fantastic elements on the formal level, I would not limit the realistic element exclusively to the narrative and the utopian to extra-diegetic dance numbers but rather see the ambivalence between realistic constraints and utopian fantasy playing out in the combination of realistic and fantastic conventions of representation at all levels, as the brief reference to the planetarium scene above has shown.

As the following discussion of *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez* will illustrate, the ambivalences that characterize the utopian impulse on various levels – in the dialectics between reality and imagination, ideological constraint and subversion, oppression and liberation, desire and disappointment, utopia as the good place and the non-place – emerge in the genre of the musical both in its form (the combination of realistic and artificial codes, diegetic and

48 Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 37–38.

49 Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 36 (my emphasis).

50 Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 38.

51 Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 38.

extra-diegetic elements, discursive and non-discursive forms of communication) and its reception (being swept away in its utopian longing, encouraged to dream and reach beyond the constraints of one's life, and being rendered complicit with and satisfied by the hegemonic ideological framework). Ultimately, it is these multiple ambivalences that make the musical's utopian sensibility such an interesting case for the theological consideration of the human capacity for transcendence within the constraints of human life limited by finitude and sin.

3. Utopian Ambivalences in *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez*

3.1 *La La Land*: Professional and Romantic Utopias in Conflict

A traffic jam on a highway in Los Angeles. The camera slowly tracks along the cars, with the music on the soundtrack changing as if it comes from the different radio stations the drivers listen to. Then one driver starts to sing herself, she gets out of her car, and the traffic jam turns into a dance number which introduces the theme of *La La Land*: the utopian longing to realize one's ambition and vocation (in the show and film business for which LA stands, as is implied), to be recognized for who one is and inspire others by doing so, even if the costs are high – which, conceivably, could be considered a utopian dream more easily fulfilled even in a city full of aspiring actors and singers than evading the traffic congestion of the LA highway system. Hollywood itself as the ›dream factory‹ and the utopian potential of the genre of the musical (popularized by Hollywood productions such as *La La Land*) are here, in a meta-narrative move, the topic of the musical's plot, and its forms of representation unfold characteristics of utopian longing outlined in the previous sections: the motivating power of dreams, the sacrifices and failures experienced in the process of trying to realize one's utopia, the dialectic between the nostalgic longing for an ideal past and the hope of a future good life, the ultimate impossibility to perfectly fulfill one's utopian dreams and thus their transcendental dimension, and finally, the ideological constraints of ideological longing.

The singers of this first number emphasize the courage needed to follow one's dream and the risk it involves: »Without a nickel to my name, hopped a bus, here I came, could be brave or just insane, we'll have to see.« And they

agree in the chorus that perseverance is a necessary part of striving for utopia: »Climb these hills, I'm reaching for the heights and chasing all the lights that shine. And when they let you down, you get up off the ground, 'cause morning rolls around, and it's another day of sun.« The singers and dancers turn the annoyance and hindrance of the traffic jam – symbolic of the constraints of reality – into a moment of exuberant utopian freedom and joy as they vault across cars and dance on the highway. While Mia and Seb, the protagonists of *La La Land*, do not directly participate in this first dance number, they are shown to also sit in the traffic jam and thus are a part of the affective energy and optimism generated by the music and dancing right from the beginning of the film.

The utopian longing of the protagonists in *La La Land* is one of self-realization in professional and personal terms: Mia dreams of being an actress, and Seb wants to open a jazz club to give a home to the music he loves and which he feels is no longer appreciated as it should be. The film traces their efforts and failures, as they stumble and »get up off the ground« again in their attempts to realize their dreams: as mentioned, in a sequence of short takes, Mia is shown in one unsuccessful audition after the other without getting a call-back, and when she finally does, she is dismissed after two lines; Seb has to hire out his talent as a jazz pianist to play pop and Christmas songs after he was swindled out of his savings. But as they each struggle to realize their professional utopia, another utopia that they did not plan for comes true: they begin a romantic relationship full of sunshine, laughter, and love, which has them literally dance in the sky in the planetarium scene mentioned above. And because it is a musical, they don't just *look* at the world through rose-colored glasses, but the sky itself really *is* rose, pink, and purple. It seems as if they have achieved the unachievable: perfect love, an ideal relationship.

But this relationship comes at the cost of their professional dreams: Seb joins a band that combines acoustic jazz with electronic music which turns out to be wildly successful, but it means that he compromises his dream of playing pure jazz because he thinks he should have a stable job now that he is in a relationship. And Mia tries to put on a one-woman play she has written but fails miserably when only a handful of people show up for the performance and she overhears their dismissive comments about it and her lack of talent afterwards. For Mia, this failure is the last straw on the camel's back,

and she decides to give up on her dream to be an actress and return home to her family, apparently also taking a break from her relationship with Seb which had already been strained by the frustrations, disappointments, and compromises they experienced in their efforts to realize their dreams. And just then – because it is a musical, after all, whose utopian dynamic pushes against the constraints of reality – Seb takes a call for Mia with an invitation for an audition and rushes to find her in her hometown in Nevada. Although she is wary of putting herself out there again, he convinces her that her dream is worth the risk.

Even though just a moment ago, Mia was ready to give up on utopia and content herself with what reality has to offer, during the audition, she actually recovers her utopian longing. When asked to tell a story, she starts talking about her aunt who inspired her to become an actress and is, so to say, her ›model dreamer‹. As the setting of the audition room around her fades to black, the story turns into a song, first very quiet, which then becomes a passionate endorsement and celebration of »the ones who dream, foolish as they may seem«. Although the actress Emma Stone's eyes slightly move to the right and left of the camera to indicate that she is looking at the diegetic audience of the casting and film directors, the audience in front of the screen is pulled into the current of Mia's fierce defense of the importance of dreaming in spite of »the mess we make«, to let go of the worries about what is realistically achievable, to free ourselves from the constraints we put onto ourselves and that are put onto us, and to soar up like the music, to reach for the impossible, to embrace our dreams. However, the song is about more than simply the motivating power of dreams in individual life. It reaches its climax when Mia sings about the social importance of dreamers whose utopian »madness« »give[s] us new colors to see« through which reality will look different – and »who knows where it will lead us«. Utopian longing, even if expressed in the form of personal dreams and aspirations, has a socially critical and imaginative dimension, »and that's why they need us«: »the painters and poets and plays« are »rebels« who take on the task of critiquing the status quo with their visions of a more colorful, different, better world. Thus their dreams are not just for themselves but the affective dynamic that they create includes all of us and allows us to see the world differently and consequently to live differently. This song seems to echo Bloch's appreciation of the arts – although as mentioned, he was not an enthusiast of Hollywood

cinema – as the »pre-appearance [*Vor-Schein*] of something achieved«, a partially realized vision of something better, which does not have to be limited to the utopia of a different socio-political order but may also include other, more personal dreams and hopes.⁵²

However, Mia's success at the audition means that now it is the personal relationship that has to take second place to the professional dream, and Seb and Mia break up so that she is free to pursue her career. The film skips forward five years, and in a scene that repeats an earlier scene, but now with a twist, Mia enters the coffeeshop on a studio lot where she used to work and, like the famous actress she had admired before, she is recognized and offered coffee on the house. This small scene indicates that she has achieved her utopian longing which was embodied in the earlier scene when she was star-struck by the actress entering her coffee shop. In yet another repeat-with-a-twist sequence shortly after, Mia is walking along the street after dinner with her husband when she hears a quiet jazz tune. This time, she is not lured into the restaurant where Seb rebels against his boss by playing jazz instead of Christmas songs and promptly gets fired for it (as in the earlier scene) but into a jazz club which turns out to be Seb's and where he is playing the piano. However, these two sequences – earlier scenes of longing and failure are now turned into moments of utopian fulfillment – are bitter-sweet. Yes, Mia and Seb have fulfilled their dreams of professional success, but it is not a perfect utopia because it meant giving up their love for each other. As Seb plays on, a music/dance sequence suggests an alternative reality: what if Seb hadn't joined the fusion jazz band? What if Mia's play had been a success? What if they had gone to Paris together, had had a family? Would it then have been Seb with Mia, instead of her husband, ending up in a jazz club together, kissing as they listen to the music? The illusory character of this perfect utopia of professional *and* romantic fulfillment is clearly underlined by the dance elements, the use of painted backdrops for scenes in Paris, and other representational codes indicating its artifice (fig. 2). No effort is made on the formal level to create the appearance of realism in this sequence; instead, the fully realized utopia – where Mia and Seb can have it both, living their professional as well as romantic ideal life – is clearly marked as impossible, pure imagination. And so the film shifts back to the »reality« of its plot and

52 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 156.

as Mia leaves the club with her husband, she turns back and looks into Seb's eyes, their facial expressions – shown for a long moment in shot-counter-shot takes – shifting from sadness about their loss to soft smiles, ending with a nod acknowledging the choices they made and the limitations life placed on them, accepting the incomplete fulfillment of their dreams.

The musical moves dialectically between embracing the individual and social importance of unrestrained utopian longing and realistically stressing its sacrifices and costs, especially the fact that the perfectly realized utopia will always remain the hope of a future to come. This eschatological dimension of utopia is as much at the center of the film as its motivating and orienting power for individual life, reflecting the transcendental character of utopian longing as the individual capacity to always reach beyond one's limitations in the unresolvable tension with the fact that the perfect utopian fulfillment will be possible only in the absolute transcendence of the constraints of this world.

La La Land's utopian sensibility also transcends the temporal order by evoking a past affectively charged as ideal while dreaming of a perfect future. On the formal level, this is achieved through film historical references, such as the lamp post move from *Singin' in the Rain* picked up in the dance number at the overlook or the painted backdrops from the what-if sequence referencing the 1964 version of *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, US), the use of *Rebel Without a Cause* in the plot (Nicholas Ray, US 1955; Seb and Mia watch the film together and visit the planetarium in an explicit reference to the film), the presence of titles dividing the film into parts by season and indicating the five-year break before the last part whose design and function reference the silent film era, and by the use of costumes and settings that evoke an earlier era of Hollywood cinema. These representational choices give *La La Land* a timeless feel, as if it is set in a dream-time beyond reality, while also being concretely situated in the mechanisms and dynamics of the ruthless business of the contemporary film and music worlds.

Yet, while *La La Land's* utopian longing is transcendental in these several respects, it does not transcend the framework of capitalist neo-liberalism. As a utopia that primarily focuses on individual fulfillment and self-realization, it remains firmly situated within this ideological frame, with the utopian dream of structural change for social justice only briefly hinted at in Mia's audition song. Dyer's observation noted above is also true for *La La Land*: the musical responds to the real needs of neo-liberalist society – in this case especial-

ly the exhaustion it creates with the demands and pressures of urban professional life, the loss of relationship in the competitiveness and fragmentedness of society, and the manipulation by the culture industry that dangles the possibility achieving one's dreams of success and happiness in front of its audience – with the energy of its dance scenes, the protagonists' optimism that encourages them to pursue their dreams in spite of the costs, their deeply felt love for each other, and, not least, the satisfaction of their professional success. But in doing so, as Dyer notes, the musical responds to needs this society itself has created and in a way that remains firmly within its boundaries. The choice that Mia and Seb make between professional success and romantic relationship is a choice required particularly of women which serves to stabilize the social hierarchical gender order and furthers the capitalist system of production and exchange. And their dreams of self-realization affirm the individualist focus of neo-liberal society in which anybody who will work – and dream – hard enough and not give up when the going gets tough will ultimately achieve their goal, without consideration of the structural injustices of the Hollywood production system or of a society that privileges the White, middle-class protagonists. Although Mia sings of the social power of utopia and society's need for these rebel-dreamers that imagine a different world, her and Seb's dreams do not envision an alternative society, and their achievements – satisfactory as they are on the individual level – do not contribute to bringing about a different world. They only add some color, beautiful music, and stories to the world-that-is – which is not an insignificant contribution but not one that would challenge the system itself.

Thus, *La La Land* remains a part of Hollywood's dream factory, simultaneously laying bare that dream as an unachievable illusion and affirming dreaming as an individually and even socially significant human capacity. It echoes, thus, the ambivalence of utopian longing in the tension between the realistic reckoning with the impossibility of its realization and its motivating power and creative drive. The affective charge of Mia's and Seb's dreams, highlighted through the music and dance scenes – the buoyant, optimistic energy of the highway number, the passion of Mia's audition song – and of their realistic acceptance of the need to compromise in the melancholic what-if sequence at the end communicate this ambivalence to the audience, who thus experience themselves as stretched between possibility and limitation, utopia and reality, or, with Rahner, between heaven and earth.

3.2 *Emilia Pérez*: Utopia as Liberation or Oppression?

Although the title of the film puts the trans woman Emilia at the center, it is a film about the utopian dreams and hopes of all three protagonists – Emilia, Rita, and Jessi – to flourish as who they are and live their best lives, free from social constraints and the expectations of others. This dream of the individual good life is embedded in a utopian longing for a better society without sexism, racism, and the corruption and violence caused by drug cartels. While this musical thus considers the interdependence of individual and communal flourishing, it will become clear that, like *La La Land*, its utopia of a healed society stays within the boundaries of existing social structures, those determined by the cartels and the patriarchal disregard of women. The critical reception of the film regarding its representation of trans identities and Mexican society highlights the complex affective intensity created by the musical, which can both attract viewers and repulse them, depending on how the affective economy of the musical interacts with their experiences. The controversial reception of the film thus highlights the importance of considering the hermeneutic context of utopian imaginations emphasized by Flinn and shows the ambivalence of the utopian imagination that can be experienced as oppression or liberation.

The three protagonists share the same utopian longing to live a self-determined life following their own dreams, but what this looks like is different for each. In spite of the film's title, viewers are first introduced to Rita's dream through a dance number with a chorus of cleaning women. After Rita, a lawyer, helped a client to get away with murdering his wife, Rita wonders »How much longer will I hang my head [...] will I waste my talent on them?« How much longer will she be complicit with an unjust legal system and a misogynist society that accepts femicide as normal? How much longer will she waste her intelligence and grit to work for a minimal salary, remaining in the background while her boss reaps the rewards for her hard work, only because she is a woman, and she is Black? The chorus of cleaners affirming her stands in for the many other women who share her situation in a sexist, racist society. Thus, accepting a mysterious invitation for a meeting seems like a risk worth taking if it frees her from these constraints. Rita is hired to fake the death of a cartel leader and facilitate surgery to complete her transition so she can live fully as a woman, named Emilia. While this first job for Emilia makes Rita rich and gives her the financial recognition she feels

she deserves, later on, when Emilia founds a charity, Rita joins her again and finally also finds the public professional recognition she had been denied before when Emilia praises her contributions to their work at a gala dinner. Her personal longing to be a mother, however, is realized in a way she would not have wished for when, after Emilia and Jessi, Emilia's ›widow‹, are killed, she takes in their children. As in Mia's and Seb's case, realizing her material, professional, and personal dreams comes at a cost.

Emilia's utopia, while introduced second, is the most prominent in the film and also impacts – positively or negatively – the realization of the other two women's hopes for their lives. Emilia's dream is not to *be* a woman – she has always been one, as is clear when she speaks about Manitas, the name and gender she was assigned at birth, in the third person – but to be socially recognized as a woman. Although she had thoughts of suicide, she insists that »it's not fair to leave without living my real life«. For Emilia, thus, utopian dream and reality are, in a way, inverted: her utopia is to live her reality, her identity as a woman. But in order for this longing to be realized, sacrifices will be needed as well. To keep her wife and children safe, they have to move away and be made to believe that Manitas, their husband and father, truly died. When Emilia later brings them back to live with her in Mexico City, she acts as the children's aunt – a compromise that at least allows her to be a part of their lives. Her dreams seem to be perfectly fulfilled when she meets Epifanía and begins a relationship with her. After their first night together, she sings: »Life without love has been an endless fall«; her complete and integrated sense of self is fulfilled in her relationship with an other: »I was born from her desire«.

Although Emilia's utopian longing for being recognized in her gender identity appears to be individualist, Rita's conversation with the doctor who will perform the gender-affirming surgery highlights that it also has social implications. As their conversation shifts to a quiet song number, the doctor cautions – reflecting a rather problematic body-mind dualism – that his intervention will only remain on the physical level: »You know I only fix the body [...] But I will never fix the soul«. His efforts remain limited to the individual: »I fight and fix but I'll never stop the war.« But Rita disagrees: »Changing the body changes society, changing society changes the soul, changing the soul changes society, changing society changes it all.« Rita recognizes the entanglement between individual identity, body, soul, and society: Emilia's

transition is – even if individual – an act of resistance against social transphobia and a step towards the realization of the utopia of a society in which all individuals are able to flourish in their identity, no matter which gender has been assigned to them by society.

The social dimension of utopian longing is further underlined when Emilia decides to use her former connections as a cartel leader to recover the disappeared bodies of cartel victims so that those who died can be remembered and their relatives find closure. Founding her charity can be considered both an attempt at finding redemption for the violence she and her cartel committed, and an act of healing for a society torn by the violence of the cartels. Rhythmic music and vocalization punctuate the stories of torture and death told by the sicarios Rita contacts as Emilia's go-between while we see a montage of short takes of the charity's headquarters being set up, sicarios talking through prison bars, a map identifying the graves, and the clothes of the victims being spread out, illustrating the violence of the cartels and the efforts of the charity. This leads into a melancholic and, at the same time, hopeful song number in which the relatives of victims sing their loss which now finds closure, and former cartel members express their hope to start a new chapter in their lives by working for the charity.

However, Emilia's utopia of a healed society remains limited to treating the symptoms of corruption and violence rather than their causes, and it depends on the social structures shaped by the influence of the cartels. In order to be able to continue her work, she has to take the money of the corrupt elite which benefits more or less directly from the cartels who perpetrate the violence she attempts to undo. In a song and dance number set against the background of Emilia's speech at a fundraising gala, Rita indicts the hypocrisy of the corrupt politicians and judges who are no more than puppets of the cartels and benefit from their violence. The contrast between Rita's more radical utopian hopes of a new society and Emilia's realistic pragmatism is underlined by the contrast between the angry edginess of Rita's hip-hop inspired song and dancing set against the more operatic style of Emilia's speech (fig. 3). It becomes clear that rather than working towards the creation of a new utopian society of peace, flourishing, and justice, Emilia remains mired in the system of crime and violence, as is emphasized even more in the tragic conclusion of the film.

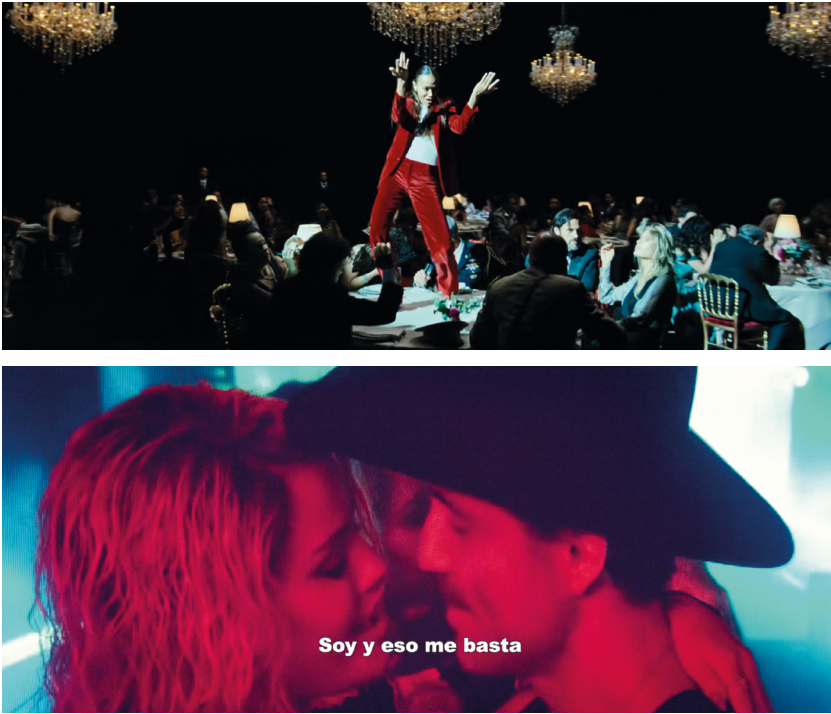


Fig. 3 and 4: *Emilia Pérez* (Jacques Audiard, FR/US/MX 2024), film stills.

Contrasting with the success of Emilia and Rita, who have found their purpose and are recognized for who they are, Jessi remains caught up in the lives and dreams of others, moved around from the US to Mexico to Switzerland and back to Mexico like a piece on a chess board. Fundamentally, her dream is the same as Rita's and Emilia's: to live her own life, to escape from her gilded cage, and to find happiness and love on her own terms (fig. 4). In a song/dance number that starts out as a diegetic song with Gustavo – her former lover with whom she has reunited upon her return to Mexico – in a karaoke bar and then shifts back and forth between Jessi's duet with Gustavo and an extra-diegetic solo with a chorus, Jessi sings: »I want to love myself, to love myself fully, to love myself as I am.« Bathed in pink light, with shots of the karaoke screen that shows her and Gustavo singing on the stage, interlaced with takes of her solo with dancers in the background, the scene's multi-layered construction visualizes the tension she experiences between her con-

fined, artificial existence in a life that has all the comforts money can buy but is defined by others, and her desire to be herself and find happiness on her own terms. But even this dream still seems to be dependent on others: her song about being her authentic self is a duet with Gustavo, and her solo parts, too, are embedded in a group of dancers. Given the artificial setting of the karaoke bar, the pink light, the multiplication of her face on screen, and the extra-diegetic parts of the song, what she imagines as her ›real‹ life appears to be as inauthentic as the life she is living at the moment.

In fact, Jessi is not able to escape from the constraints of her life's entanglement with Emilia's and Gustavo's ambitions. When she announces her decision to marry Gustavo and move to another city, Emilia cannot imagine being separated again from her children and resorts to her former cartel strategies. Gustavo is beaten up and offered money to disappear but, instead, he and Jessi take the children and move out. When Emilia cuts off Jessi's funds, they respond with violence and kidnap Emilia to demand a ransom. As the gunmen Rita called for help assemble their weapons – their synchronized, economic movements choreographed like a dance and the rhythmic clanking of the guns underlining the beat of the soundtrack – it becomes clear that Emilia's attempt to leave behind the violence of her past in the cartel and to start over was unsuccessful. In a sequence that could have been taken from a gangster movie, the attempt to free Emilia fails, and she is shot. Afraid to die, she identifies herself to Jessi. Gustavo puts the two women into his car and tries to escape but, in a struggle with Jessi who wants to get away from him, the car goes over the edge of the street and blows up, killing all three. Emilia's attempt to hold on to her own realized utopia destroys Jessi's dream of a self-determined life, and the sequence of events unfolding as she tries to manipulate Jessi yet again, leads to the destruction of both women's lives and dreams. With this – even if somewhat convoluted – tragic ending of Jessi's and Emilia's utopia, the film highlights the ambivalence of utopia when one person's efforts to realize her ideal impedes or even destroys another person's life and hopes.

This ambivalence of utopian longing is also apparent on the level of the reception of the film's representation of trans identities and Mexican society by these communities in comparison to the critical acclaim it found among the cis-reviewers of the Global North evidenced by the numerous nominations and awards it won at film festivals, although, ultimately, the racist and

Islamophobic comments by lead actress Karla Sofía Gascón as well as other controversies around the film's production, such as filming a film set in Mexico completely in France, dampened the initial acclaim.

Trans reviewers criticize the stereotypically reductive and unrealistic representation of trans persons and of the process of transitioning, the presence of scenes that imply transphobia and disrespect of trans persons (such as Rita's continued references to Emilia as 'he' even after Emilia identifies herself as a woman, or Emilia's song with Epifanía in which she describes herself as half man, half woman), and the implication that transitioning is a moral decision in the narrative's association of Emilia's transition with her repentance for her violent past as cartel leader. This implied moral dimension of Emilia's transition as also one from sinner to saint seems to be confirmed by the final scene in which the statue of a saint – Saint Emilia? – is carried in procession through the streets, with Epifanía leading the mournful chants of the people.

This is not just a matter of accuracy or realism in the film's representation – which one might not even expect in a musical – but the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD)'s summary of the critical points raised by trans reviewers points out that such »inauthentic portrayals of trans people are offensive and even dangerous«⁵³ given the effects they may have on trans persons in real life and given the hegemonic cis-heteronormativity of Western societies. Thus, for some trans reviewers, the affective intensity of the musical is reversed and rather than being attracted by the film and being folded into its utopian imagining of authentic identity and a healed society, their embodied-affective viewing experiences are marked by discomfort and pain. Reviewer Reanna Cruz says in a conversation about the film: »The entire time I was watching it I had a really weird feeling in my stomach because to me it seemed like the filmmaker was painting trans women as liars.«⁵⁴ And reviewer Fran Tirado »took [...] three sittings to complete [the film], and each one felt more torturous.«⁵⁵ These reviewers' life experiences as trans persons – which might not reflect those of all trans viewers but are significant to their specific experience of the film – interact with the

53 GLAAD, »Emilia Pérez« Is Not Good Trans Representation, [glaad.org](https://glaad.org/emilia-perez-is-not-good-trans-representation/), 15 November 2024, <https://glaad.org/emilia-perez-is-not-good-trans-representation/> [accessed 20 July 2025].

54 Reanna Cruz, quoted in GLAAD, »Emilia Pérez«.

55 Fran Tirado, quoted in GLAAD, »Emilia Pérez«.

film's representations in a way that creates an affective intensity that repulses them. Their reception of the film shows that the depiction of Emilia's utopian dream and its realization is not experienced by all trans people as a utopia that reflects their own experiences and dreams and that could contribute to a better understanding of trans identity in society and create better conditions for the flourishing of trans persons. Instead, for them, the film represents a cis-heterosexual view of who trans people are and what they should want to realize in their lives,⁵⁶ a utopia imposed on them by others that is restrictive and disrespectful of trans persons' lived experience and potentially even furthering transphobic violence.

From the perspective of Mexican critics,⁵⁷ the film is a superficial, insensitive representation of drug-related and gender-based violence which is a serious problems in Mexican society and responsible for high numbers of deaths every year.⁵⁸ With its beginning with the outline of a Mariachi trio during the opening credits, the film is criticized for the superficial and stereotypical representation of the complexity of Mexican society, reducing it to folklore, poverty, drugs, and violence. Given that only *Epifanía* is played by a Mexican actress (Adriana Paz), who however has the most marginal role among the four women at the center of the film, and that several scenes show the filmmaker's admitted lack of research about the cultural context of Mexico, it is no surprise that critic Carlos Aguilar opens his review by simply stating: »Emilia Pérez« is not a Mexican film.«⁵⁹ Instead, it represents an outsider's reductive idea of how Mexico looks like and thus is not conducive to a careful consideration of the complex reality of Mexican society, including the impact of cartel violence on individuals, its structural aspects, and social movements of resistance against cartels and femicides.

56 Fran Tirado, quoted in GLAAD, »Emilia Pérez«.

57 See for an overview of reactions and critical discussion of the film Adriana Santos, »Emilia Pérez« Is All Outline, No Substance, *The Latinx Project*, 28 January 2025, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/interventions/emilia-perez-review> [accessed 20 July 2025].

58 See for details Center for Preventive Action, *Criminal Violence in Mexico*, *Global Conflict Tracker*, updated 11 June 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/criminal-violence-mexico> [accessed 30 July 2025]; Statista Research Department, *Femicide Rates in Mexico from 2017–2024*, 10 March 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/979065/mexico-number-femicides/> [accessed 30 July 2025].

59 Carlos Aguilar, *Emilia Pérez*, *RogerEbert.com*, 1 November 2024, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/emilia-perez-netflix-film-review> [accessed 20 July 2025].

As a White cis-woman from the Global North and thus an outsider myself, I do not want to engage in a debate whether and to which degree these critical comments are justified or how the producers explain their choices. The film's genre-defying form which integrates elements of narco and gangster films, melodrama, and social drama into the genre of the musical certainly evokes expectations of social realism that the artificiality and constructedness of the musical genre does not fulfill. Instead, I take the fact that the film caused such widely divergent reactions in its viewers – from critical acclaim to complete rejection – as an indication for the ambivalence of its utopian longing to live a self-determined life, experience happiness in loving relationships, repent and repair past crimes, find social recognition of one's identity and capacities, and heal the effects of crime and violence. Certainly, in the abstract, these are utopian dreams worth defending which the film communicates as attractive and valuable ideals to its viewers through its affective expressiveness – in Rita's defiant song and dance numbers, the both melancholically mournful and cautiously hopeful number with the relatives of cartel victims and former members, and not least in the emotionally charged, tragic ending of Emilia's kidnapping that deprives Emilia and Jessi of finding their utopia. But the concrete shape this longing takes in the stereotypical representations of trans persons and Mexican society or the means that characters use to fulfill their utopia are deeply problematic because they do not contribute to the flourishing of all but, on the contrary, impede the good life of some in favor of that of others who are more powerful. This utopian failure is made concrete for trans reviewers in the negative affects of repulsion and pain the film inscribes into their bodies.

The oppressive dimension of concretely realized utopian models which always remain limited to the perspective of those imagining them and the contexts and experiences that have shaped them, is important to keep in mind, even while acknowledging the liberative importance of utopian longing as a significant dimension of human existence which reflects the capacity of humans and societies to change and grow. The ambivalence of utopia in this tension between human potentiality and failure that the film reflects in its reception points *ex negativo* toward the need for an absolute Other to fulfill the perfect utopia whose precise traits human beings cannot even imagine. From a theological perspective, thus, the musical's failures of imagining a utopia that speaks to the people whose longing it claims to represent can

be read as an expression of the eschatological proviso with which we need to encounter all human attempts at imagining and realizing a perfect utopia: they are an imperfect, at best preliminary version of the new creation for which we hope.

4. Musicals and Transcendental Longing: The Non-Place of Utopia

Both *La La Land* and *Emilia Pérez* are driven by their protagonists' dreams of the good life whose realization the musicals envision. The musicals express and energize utopian longing with their song and dance numbers and through their storytelling centering around the journey towards the fulfillment of their protagonists' utopia, and so they encourage the human striving for what lies beyond the limitations of their everyday reality, to never be satisfied with what they may have achieved. This affirmation of the importance of daring to dream is a significant contribution of musicals to the nourishment of the human capacity to imagine otherwise which lies at the beginning of any attempts to bring about change, to work towards the realization of a better world of solidarity and right relationship with self, other, and – although not addressed in the films – environment. But as utopian as the musical's visions are, they are tempered by a dose of realism because these dreams are only partially fulfilled for Mia and Seb – they achieve their professional dreams but not their romantic ideal – and are even ultimately negated for Emilia and Jessi, who die in the pursuit of theirs. The utopian longing to overcome real constraints remains limited by the conditions of reality and human finitude.

While both films focus on the utopia of individual flourishing, they note the social dimension of utopian longing: dreams of a better life offer an alternative vision of reality, »new colors to see«, as Mia sings, Rita's rebellious songs push for social change, and Emilia's achievement of her utopian dream represents a contribution to a better, more just society in which others might find it easier to follow the path she forged. But as Dyer notes, these utopian visions – even if they include a note of social criticism – remain conditioned by the same social structures against which they react: Mia's and Seb's vision of professional success that can be realized if they just dream

hard enough, even if it requires a choice between love and career, does not challenge capitalist-patriarchal neo-liberalism but rather imagines personal success within its structures, and Emilia's utopia of a healed society without violence is funded through the ill-begotten wealth of those who benefited from this violence or even perpetrated it in the first place. The musicals' utopias are thus reactionary affirmations of the world-that-is – shaped by capitalism, patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity, the political and cultural hegemony of the Global North – at the same time as they are visions of alternative worlds, reflecting the structural ambivalence of utopian longing. This ambivalence is further illustrated in the reception of *Emilia Pérez* which is experienced as an oppressive utopian vision by trans and Mexican reviewers, emphasizing the dependence of utopias on their hermeneutic context – both social and individual – which determines whether they will be experienced as liberative or oppressive.

From a theological perspective, it is these structural ambivalences and dialectics apparent in the utopian sensibility of musicals – between utopia and reality, longing and frustration, free imagination and constraints, liberation and oppression – that are most interesting to me for what they reveal about the human condition in its relationship with the transcendent, beyond the question of whether the musicals imagine a ›Christian‹ utopia or not. With their affective power that both pulls us into their world (something that might be experienced as enjoyable or disturbing) and renders our own world strange to us, musicals – and art, in general – are able to present our own human condition to us, as Robert Innis writes about the power of artworks: »they give us a heightened sense of being present to something that pulls us out of ourselves and discloses to us the space of our own existence by shattering its taken-for-grantedness.«⁶⁰ In the films, the tensions in utopian longing are not so much communicated discursively but inscribed into the bodies of protagonists and viewers through the musicals' affective density in multi-layered and even contradictory experiences of longing, desire, repulsion, disappointment, courage, frustration, nostalgia for the past and hope for the future, pain, or comfort. In sharing these affective intensities, like the protagonists who dream of the impossible, the viewers are reminded of their ability to extend their transcendent imagination and creativity

60 Robert E. Innis, *Dimensions of Aesthetic Encounters: Perception, Interpretation, and the Signs of Art*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022, 181.

beyond the limits of what is, and they experience at the same time the boundaries of their capacities of imagining and realizing what they hope for. In this ultimate frustration of their transcendent capacities, though, human beings are not simply left with the recognition of the impossibility of realizing utopia but (may) experience themselves as beings of eschatological hope oriented towards the absolute transcendent who will bring about the impossible in the full realization of utopian longing. Because the utopian sensibility of musicals is a feeling, as Dyer notes, their offer of the experiential realization of the human capacity for relationship with the absolute Other as the one in whom we place our hope for a new creation is an open invitation but not a required response or a definitive statement about the nature of the transcendent. In the encounter with the affectively charged utopian imagination of musicals, in the tension between utopia as the good place and the non-place, viewers experience in a heightened intensity the conditions of their existence precisely in this paradox which enables them to reach for the transcendent and live in hope of fully realized existence in relationship with God while already partially expressing this relationship in how they realize their everyday life here and now.

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