A Fetish for Fugitive Aesthetics:
Cinematic Kitsch and Visual Pleasure in *The Tales of Hoffmann*

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> *"Your production of Tales of Hoffmann has proven that you can have everything. For the first time in my life I was treated to Grand Opera where the beauty, power and scope of the music was equally matched by the visual presentation."*
>
> — Extract from Cecil B. DeMille's letter to Messrs. Powell and Pressburger (Powell 138)

Under the collaborative pseudonym "The Archers," British director Michael Powell and Hungarian-born screenwriter Emeric Pressburger gained fame throughout the 1940s and 1950s for a number of visually arresting films whose brazen romanticism might have seemed anachronistic to many wartime and postwar audiences. Over the course of a seventeen-year-long creative partnership, this celebrated duo concocted eccentrically stylized motion pictures that not only frustrated categorization, but also challenged taste-based distinctions between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow forms of cultural production and consumption. From the vertiginous Himalayan fever-dream of *Black Narcissus* (1946) to the hallucinatory ballet of *The Red Shoes* (1948), the Archers' color-drenched films blend the sacred and the secular, the sublime and the sometimes ridiculous. Indeed, their musicals, melodramas, and costume adventures are so mystically inflected, their emotional allegories so phantasmogorical at times, that the resulting tension between fantasy and reality, the rational and the irrational, is stretched to the point of absurdity and rendered in a style approximating kitsch.

By critically interrogating what is undoubtedly the *decorative*, if not artistic, culmination of their career—the 1951 episodic opera film *The Tales of Hoffmann*—I seek to address some of the aesthetic and ideological implications of cinematic kitsch as seen through the overlapping lenses of queer theory, resistant spectatorship, and art history. In doing so, I am pursuing a line a thought articulated in Andrew Moor's essay "Bending the Arrow: The Queer Appeal of The Archers," which begins with the author's own imaginative staging of scenes from Powell and Pressburger's oeuvre in discrete episodes and argues that queerness resides not only in viewers (or in the sphere of reception) but also "in the texts themselves" (at the level of diegesis). An alternative subject position, if adopted by a "receptively resistant" spectator, is well suited to extrapolate the subcultural sensibilities of certain films, particularly those featuring "peculiar stories" and "oddly told tales" which, according to Moor, feature "disruptive outbursts of sensual excess, camp performances and curious closures that have a particular resonance to gay spectators and make them ripe for requisition" (209-211).

In adapting Jacques Offenbach's 1881 *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* into a "fantastic pageant" for the screen, Michael Powell—working closely with scenic designer Hein Heckroth and art director Arthur Lawson—transformed Stage H at Shepperton Studios (in the southeast of England) into a kind of "distraction factory," one filled with what Raymond Durgnat pithily refers to as "expressionistic clutter" (*A Mirror for England* 210). Implicit in Durgnat's less-pithy assessment of the film as a "gallimaufry of Gothicisms," a "pantechnicon of palettical

paroxysms," and an "olla podrida of oddsbodikins" is the belief that the director's visuals elicit an ironic, liberating, and ambulatory gaze that ultimately unhinges the narrative's heteronormativizing functions—its hegemonic conception of male-female relations along customary lines of causality and character development. As Kevin Gough-Yates suggests in his reading of the film, Pressburger's episodic and repetitive narrative sustains an ideological position that allows "Powell the space to play." Ironically, the director's contribution to the film, in particular his deployment of flamboyant colors and visual excess, lays bare the ideological predispositions of the former. Indeed, the power of Powell's visuals lies primarily, if not exclusively, in their ability to temporarily unseat authorized subject positions and give audiences their own "space to play."

Because it foregrounds an aesthetic paradox (in collapsing "high culture" and "low culture"), *The Tales of Hoffmann* should be of interest to cultural theorists interested in the disruptive potential of kitsch.[1] Like the *New Yorker* magazine of Clement Greenberg's day, the film can be seen as a piece of "fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade, [which] converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde material for its own uses" (13). Not coincidentally, the *New Yorker*'s April 14, 1951 review of *The Tales of Hoffmann* begins by stating that the film was "the biggest package of culture that has been tossed into a movie house since Sam Rothafel brought Martha Graham to the Radio City Music Hall." In terms of "packaging culture," it is interesting to note that *The Tales of Hoffmann* was the first sound-era motion picture shown at New York's Metropolitan Opera, where a movie projection booth was installed especially for its premiere. As a special benefit for the American Red Cross, the ticket prices ranged from $25 to $1.50. And in place of popcorn or soft drinks, the opera bar served hors d'oeuvres and champagne. As many audiences at that Manhattan screening likely noted, the film's unconventional approach to art design suggests that it is not only indebted to various avant-gardes of the early twentieth century (especially Dadaism and Surrealism), but also indicative of Michael Powell's Disneyesque interests in the paganism of Greek myths and the pantheism of pre-twentieth century German culture. Although Emeric Pressburger—an émigré who had worked at Germany's Universumfilm Aktiengesellschaft (UFA studios) before fleeing the Nazis and eventually landing a career in London—would appear to be the one who was most mired in German cultural history, Powell's early appreciation of Romanticism and Expressionism in the visual arts proved to be the main source for the Teutonic iconography and emotional excess partially characterizing *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

Siegfried Kracauer, a German cultural critic noted for his faith in the post-*Caligari* cinematographic image to redress earlier distortions of reality, dismissed *The Tales of Hoffmann* as being "nothing but photographed theater…Cinema estranged from itself because of its surrender to operatic values and meaning" (*Theory of Film* 155). In this essay I hope to show that the film is much more than simply photographed theater. Indeed, its Technicolor-imbued mise-en-scène, although "contained" within a narrative economy in which male characters' insatiable appetite for female characters lends a regulated yet repetitive structure to heterosexual desire, is so embroidered with surface embellishments that it offers a unique spectatorial position from which to gauge the performative and transgressive articulations of gender and drag. Because Powell subjects the theme of internal human suffering to an extravagant, externalized aesthetic form, the film mitigates any deeply felt sense of torment or catharsis generated by the heteronormativizing narrative and, in doing so, illustrates some of

the disruptive, liberating, and potentially pleasure-inducing dimensions of (queered) cinematic kitsch. Before examining the film through an episode-to-episode analysis sensitive to its oscillation between the aesthetic registers of “high” and “low” as well as miniaturization and excess, it will be useful to ask: What constitutes cinematic kitsch?

Towards an Understanding of Cinematic Kitsch

It would seem that after years of inconclusive ruminations on the part of art critics and historians, *kitsch* is still less an explanatory term than a term that desperately needs explaining. Since it is often mentioned in the same breath as camp, perhaps a comparison of the two will facilitate this venture. Susan Sontag’s 1964 “Notes on ‘Camp’” is perhaps the most famous and substantial, if contentious, contribution to Camp Studies—a remedy to the denigrating epitaphs lobbed at the mass culture industry by Marxist critics. In her jottings on a particular sensibility that “converts the serious into the frivolous,” she not only assigns value to previously devalued or misunderstood cultural phenomena, but also opens a channel for the discussion of queered aesthetic sensibilities.[2] Moreover, she demonstrates the ways in which any film-viewing experience resting on a camp sensibility is contingent upon pre-established assumptions of “Art” and its hierarchical fields. Anyone who plunges into the murky waters of kitsch does so in Sontag’s shadow.[3] Mark Booth, arguing that the origins of camp lie much deeper than Christopher Isherwood and Susan Sontag (its birthplace being Louix XIV’s court at Versailles), states that *se camper* (a French reflexive verb) means “to present oneself in an expansive but flimsy manner, with overtones here of theatricality, vanity, dressiness, and provocation” (33). According to Andrew Ross, another specialist in the area, the “camp effect” is generated when “the products…of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste.”[4]

Unlike camp, kitsch is never self-aware, nor does it conveniently provide a parodic lens for viewing and re-appraising cultural clichés against the backdrop of burlesque. Camp, whether naïve or deliberate, is an established sensibility on the verge of institutionalization, a mode of address that allows one to experience the sinewy paintings of Gustav Klimt, the lava-like architecture of Antonio Gaudi, and the flamboyant films starring Gina Lollobrigida or directed by Ed Wood from an ironically detached point of view. For all of its irony, however, camp remains an affectionate attitude, not an insulting judgment. It provides the quotation marks that frame and contain the bric-a-brac of kitsch, while at the same time exaggerating and transforming even its most “vulgar” manifestations into moments of radical *jouissance*. Historian Curtis F. Brown, offering perhaps the definitive elucidation of the camp-kitsch relationship, says that “the camp response addresses itself mainly to the intellect; it is content with the risibility of recognition…But the kitsch sensibility rationalizes,” through commercially cathected overlays of value or “worth,” the gaudy (and thus irrational) appearance of an object (15). It is Brown’s object-orientation that I shall retain in my analysis of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, an episode film whose bracketed narrative sections can be likened to fetishized objects in a row, “small things” that paradoxically radiate power through a compressed form of visual excess.

Derived from the old German verb *kitschen*, which literally means, “to collect rubbish off the street,” kitsch has over the course of its surprisingly short conceptual life attracted a great deal of attention. Although certainly not unique to the twentieth century (having emerged from the Industrial Revolution and the triumphant ascendancy of the middle-class, extension of leisure hours, and rise of literacy that ensued), kitsch as an aesthetic phenomenon began to generate critical attention and debate only in the last hundred years. Hermann Broch addressed the “problems” of kitsch in 1933, connecting it to nostalgia and escapism. As one of the first critics to suggest that German Romanticism was “the mother of kitsch,” Broch was instrumental in sketching the coordinates of the “insipid” decorative cult within a finite, closed system. The conclusion at which he arrived, one that suggested that an “ethical evil” was at the heart of any attempt to rationalize and beautify the irrational, was influential in guiding subsequent critiques toward the didactic and imitative tendencies of kitsch and its role in consolidating middle-class attitudes toward commodified forms of manufactured “beauty.”[5]

In formulating a thesis of the avant-garde six years after Broch’s essay, Clement Greenberg, the renowned apologist for modernism, relied upon kitsch as the avant-garde’s binary opposite to suggest how the differences between the two typify a political disjunction between bourgeois and bohemian ideals. In his binary schema, kitsch is hierarchically imaged as the Other responsible for or indicative of the cultural decline that would continue to define the late twentieth century. In Greenberg, one senses a fear that the diminution of aesthetic sensitivity and the onset of crass materialism and commercialism foretell the dwindling authority of intellectuals and the inauguration of new adjudicators or determinants of taste (such as opinion pollsters and corporate sponsors). In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” which begins with the assumption that T.S. Eliot and Tin Pan Alley are different things, that a cultural and aesthetic chasm separates a Braque painting and a Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover, Greenberg says that kitsch “welcomes and cultivates...insensibility...and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations...Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times” (12).

Since the publication of Greenberg’s article, kitsch has been summarily dismissed, sometimes vilified, as mechanically counterfeiting “real” or authentic experiences for passive, indiscriminating, middle-class consumers. Yet, many opponents of kitsch seemed to overlook the fact that the High Cubism of Picasso and Braque evolved only by entering into a complex dialogue with all types of heretofore unacceptable image-material (including street refuse) and infusing its vocabulary with caricature. What followed Cubism—the Duchampian deconstruction of authenticity and a celebration of the quotidian—lay bare the avant-garde’s foregrounding of fugitive aesthetics, its fetishistic attitude toward the culturally degraded and materially discarded. Decades after dream-obsessed Surrealists and technologically inclined anarcho-Dadaists appropriated kitsch motifs in their projects, Pop Artists further minimized the disparity between highbrow and lowbrow. Andy Warhol, armed with Campbell’s soup cans and Brillo boxes, led this parade of the Plastic Inevitable, with younger artists such as Julian Schnabel in tow.

In the post-Warholian art world, many painters and sculptors have parasitically latched onto the flotsam of daily life, further frustrating any attempt to delineate the boundaries between high art and the world of plastic Madonnas, costume jewelry, Candy Darling, Disneyland, and *Pierre et Gilles*. Some artists like Jeff Koons (who, before cashing in on the

appeal of throwaway culture, was a commodities trader) specialized in framing consumer goods—from vacuum cleaners to basketballs—as cash-value kitsch. From this vantage, it becomes clear that kitsch, as a kind of aesthetic vandalism, contributed to the final annihilation of modernism, leaving the door open for the entrance of postmodernism. Seen from a postmodern perspective, the avant-garde, which was actually "intended to challenge the effete world of high art, to embrace the vitality and freshness of popular culture, and to be treated with the same nonchalance accorded everyday commercial products or ephemera," as Deborah Menaker Rothschild notes, "has instead been put behind glass in gilt frames reserved for balletomanes and opera-house audiences" (132).

And yet, many critics, even those from the Left who envisioned the radicalism of the avant-garde capsizing mainstream ideals and the sociopolitical status quo, frequently sought to restore a sense of cultural hierarchy. Elitist branches of art education and connoisseurship maintained that kitsch brought out all that is artificial, vulgar, synthetic, and aesthetically corrupt in the world. To them, kitsch, regardless of the inroads made into the respectable arenas of the avant-garde, ultimately denoted any object so infused with banality, sentimentality, and preciosity as to be made "bad." With the publication of his book, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, aesthetician Gillo Dorfles surpassed all earlier efforts to itemize the many varieties of kitsch prevalent in the late 1960s, from pink flamingos and lawn gnomes to lacquered pictures of Jesus and J.F.K. on tree trunks. Yet Dorfles failed to acknowledge what constituted the aesthetic bankruptcy that such simulacra outwardly displayed and, when read today, he unfortunately comes across as a kind of anti-kitsch cultural custodian ushering in only the exemplary depictions of human nature while keeping the aesthetically bad at bay.

In the years since the 1969 publication of Dorfles's book, several scholars and critics have attempted to revamp the term "kitsch." In the late 1990s, Manthia Diawara wrote a brief article entitled "Afro-Kitsch," which measures the relative authenticity of certain Afrocentric films and musical compositions that produce mass identification, thus conceiving of a "kitsch of blackness" couched in the nostalgic discourse of liberation. By re-positioning the dogmatic opinions of kitsch promulgated by earlier critics (those who considered it the "murderer of authentic art") in a poststructuralist milieu which celebrates "difference, hybridity, creolization, and the carnivalesque," Diawara indirectly links the epistemological violence performed on kitsch by highbrow aestheticians to a general failure to grasp its liberatory traits (177-181). Additionally, Celeste Olalquiaga, author of *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*, challenges the anti-kitsch position promulgated by Dorfles, Greenberg, and Broch, and goes on to provide a cultural history of kitsch that is sensitive to the value of artificial aquatica, petrified nature, and all manner of souveniric superficialia. Significantly, many of the things discussed in her book can be seen in *The Tales of Hoffmann*, a film that I wish to examine in hopes of contributing to ongoing attempts to break with negative assumptions of kitsch and rehabilitate the term, to recalibrate it as a theoretical tool for elucidating certain properties and functions of the motion picture medium.

Before turning directly to the film, though, it might be helpful to explore how a "kitsched critical theory" might it be useful to the study of films (episode films in particular). Although Curtis Brown thinks that such a theory is "intoxicatingly rich in potential," he argues that it is "completely mechanical and operates by a basic formula" (15). Yet his cynical depiction of kitsch's self-indulgent tendency to overkill neglects to account for the *movement* of kitsch

(its ability to oscillate between cultural fields and aesthetic thresholds) as well as kitsch's *ability to move audiences* by, paradoxically, *binding them* to the inherent banality of an object through an interface with its surface.[6] The relative "banality" of many kitsch-infused episodic motion pictures, such as the 1940 Walt Disney classic *Fantasia*, does not necessarily detract from the frisson engendered by their effectively *affective* array of surfaces, the plurality of which facilitates interplay not only amongst the various episodes but also between spectator and text. Because it is assumed that the production of kitsch is contingent upon the mechanical casting of replicas, as a critical method it seems tailor-made for the machine art most representative of mass-culture: cinema. Kitsch theory—if sensitive to the technological inroads made into art, to the hierarchical frameworks of class and cultural value, and to the "thematics of repetition, imitation and emulation"[7] so central to the postmodernist debate—can be grafted onto traditional theoretical paradigms and directed toward a variety of films.

As distinct from the *theory of kitsch* proposed by Tomas Kulka, which explains "why it is that so many people are attracted to kitsch…as well as why…kitsch is not entitled to the status of respectable art" (19) *kitsch theory* provides a strategic mode of interrogating image-tracks and soundtracks, cracking the celluloidal surfaces of those films that splash the senses with visual and aural dissonance, not to mention an abundance of narrative and non-narrative material. While this penetrative maneuver might immediately denote a phallogocentric impulse, it nevertheless assumes a "posterior," rather than "frontal," position to the text (if we concede to Greenberg's designation of kitsch as the "rear guard" several steps behind the avant-garde). Because kitsch transforms consumers into producers directly implicated in the manufacturing of cultural meaning, a kitsch-based theory goes beyond the "active audience" metaphor to expose how the aesthetically questionable collection of objects itself (whether a set of willow-pattern plates, a cabinet of curiosities, or an episode film composed of two or more narratives or sketches) is merely the vehicle of various emotional responses that the consumer provides and then vicariously taps back into, as if in a circuitous relay.

Rather than simply drain an object of its substance, kitsch paradoxically dismantles and erodes style through embellishment. In its piling up of excess, in "fugueing" the image of an object until the contents therein begin to exfoliate or "leak out," kitsch unwittingly reveals a critique of the bourgeois temperaments impinging upon its construction. It is in this way that *The Tales of Hoffmann* allots space for a double movement.[8] Although it could be argued that the film's retina-searing colors and rich décor simply mask a traditional politics of gender and inundate the spectator with sensorial overload, I propose that it is through superfluous and "tasteless" decoration that the film *reveals itself*. Sometimes a shout speaks more subtly than a whisper.

Kitsch iconography is prevalent in practically every film genre, although it assumes different permutations. As a musical extension of melodrama, the opera-film genre—an extravagant mélange of dramatic, sonic and visual components—draws upon a vast repertoire of kitsch iconography. And yet no other opera-film so brims with frivolous artifice as does *The Tales of Hoffmann*—perhaps the *locus classicus* of kitsch cinema.[9] As mentioned earlier, the film is based on Jacques Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, an adaptation of Jules Barbier and Michel Carré's 1851 stage play "Fantastiques d'Hoffmann" (a work that similarly borrows from the stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann, the early Romantic era's preeminent author of fantastical tales who is perhaps best known for the original story of "The Nutcracker").[10] Prior to The Archers'

adaptation, there had been at least two other film versions: *Hoffmanns Erzählungen*, a 1911 German film, followed by a same-titled Austrian production from 1923. As Gillo Dorfles emphasizes, "adaptation from one medium into another, from the means of expression of one type of art into that of another—this is an operation that often leads to kitsch" (87). As the culmination of multiple adaptations, the material of the film thus passed through three kitsch pit-stops prior to projection, its trajectory signifying the transformative operations involved in the hypertextual trivializing and trashing of a pre-existing "noble" text (Stam et al., 209).

The resulting film is one of visual excess, a space where one might derive sensorial pleasure from the grotesque spectacle of Dragonfly Dances and lovelorn men wearing magic eyeglasses that even Elton John would think twice about. As Raymond Durgnat says, "though frequently overblown to the point of gruesomeness, the film is incessantly breathtaking, an effect which survives repeated viewings; perhaps, after all, it's a bad taste classic" ("Durgnat on Powell and Pressburger" 70). Yet, with a few exceptions, and for all of its "tacky," plasticky elements, camp practitioners and disciples have thus far resisted valorizing it as a burlesqued text. Nor has it entered the gay canon.[11] Whatever status the film has acquired has been refracted through the auteurist prism, and thus given over to the aura of the Powell/Pressburger collective. Although *The Tales of Hoffmann* has at its disposal all the gaiety, verve, sparkle, and melodramatic absurdity necessary to elevate it to cult status (as well as spoken/sung lines that, even in their diegetic context, sound quotably queer), the film remains a cinematic curio. Nevertheless, as both an "unclassifiable" souvenir from the Technicolor era (to borrow Vicente García Márquez's remark)[12] and a representative illustration of the ways in which certain antinomies (event/object, time/space) are collapsed in the similarly novel narratological form of the episode film, it deserves careful consideration at both the structural and ornamental levels.

Taking Aim at a "Bad Taste Classic": Unity and Disunity, Episodicity and Desire in *The Tales of Hoffmann*

The Tales of Hoffmann opens, in typical Archers fashion, with an arrow hitting a bull's-eye. This trademark image initiates what will develop throughout the film as a double movement—a constant oscillation between centrifugal and centripetal forces that will become especially pronounced during Act I. As the credits for the prologue fill the screen, the camera pans across a painted blue sky, a theatrical screen with *trompe l'oeil* effects. Apart from the hushed tones of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra warming up, the soundtrack is silent. The camera then voyeuristically gravitates toward the window of a château through which we see a young man apparently declaring his love to a young woman. The suitor then turns the lamplight off, robbing the spectator of this romantic couple's visibility.

Although this couple does not appear at any subsequent point throughout the rest of the film, the primal position they occupy provides the first of many targets for an eroticizing camera whose scopophilic impulse to look in on the private lives of others will discursively radiate throughout the narrative. Furthermore, this moment, in a subtle way, discloses the Archers' ocularcentric predisposition. Although *The Tales of Hoffmann* is considered a "composed" film—a kind of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which drama, dance, and music are given equal billing—the film in fact privileges the eyes over the ears, images over sound (an

exception to the rule of the opera-film genre which quite often leans on the sonic dimensions of drama); and thus contests Powell's own assertion that "the score is master."[13] As *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther says in his review of the film, The Archers actually violate "the very nature of the opera itself, which is essentially aural, by…overwhelming the eye" (97).

As the prelude begins bombastically, the frame centers the image of a spinning weathercock atop a tower-spire. Although it seems inconsequential, the copper rooster (which will reappear in the first Act) signifies—by pointing east then west on the weather vane—the "either-or" dichotomies of the film; the cock pivoting on an axis that seemingly delimits discursive agency and thus forms the nucleus of a tightly governed narrative economy based on binarized oppositions (between male and female, high and low, inside and outside, etc.). But, as I will argue, these binarized oppositions are nevertheless problematized by a *decorative* dialectics (filled with similarly disarming images) structurally sustained through episodicity and the kitsching of narrative.

As the prologue begins, Councilor Lindorf (Robert Helpmann) strides into an opera house where *Don Giovanni* is being performed. Stella (Moira Shearer), a prima ballerina dancing "The Dragonfly Ballet," is onstage, and Hoffmann (Robert Rounseville), the hero-poet of the film, sits mesmerized in the audience. As choreographed by the Anna Pavlova-inspired Frederick Ashton (who appears later in the film), this angular yet fluttery dance (which is somewhat reminiscent of the silhouetted "Ballade Ballet" number from Disney's 1946 package feature *Make Mine Music*) betrays a post-Martha Graham modernism anachronistically at odds with what we are to believe is a mid-nineteenth century milieu. During the dance, Stella "mates" with another dragonfly, Cancer (Edmond Audran), only to predatorily push the male insect away. In an astonishing image, Cancer recedes from her, slinking into a "slit" in the stage floor that opens up and swallows him.

This image launches the principal motif of the film: Man falls victim to Woman (who is herself controlled by a Svengali-like master) and, failing to attain the object of his desire, is thrust into an amorphous space and indeterminate time. This indeterminacy suggests the physical fluctuations between the episodic film's narrative apertures and closures and can be said to have homoerotic connotations. As Judith Lynne Hanna states, ballet, in furnishing "an image of interaction between men and women that is rarely consummated, presents an illusion experienced by gay men as parallel to their relationships with women and the difficulties some gays have in establishing long-term relationships with each other" (210). These difficulties are furthermore indicative of an audience's phenomenological engagement with many episode films, which ironically militate against extended spectatorial relationships yet offer intense pleasures in short bursts (episode to episode).

During a break, Stella gives a note to her servant Andrès, to be delivered to Hoffmann. The message is an invitation for a rendezvous after the performance. Lindorf, jealous of their affection, intercepts the note by bribing Andrès. During the intermission, Hoffmann joins a group of admiring students at Luther's Tavern, a beer hall adjacent to the opera house. The tavern, a homosocial entertainment spot free of women (save for Luther's wife), is the only place where Hoffmann is not victim to female charms. Hoffmann's loyal companion, young Nicklaus (Pamela Brown in drag), constantly lurks along the perimeter of the action, suspiciously glancing at Lindorf while remaining attentive to Hoffmann's needs.[14] The students convince Hoffmann to regale them with a song describing the legend of the hunchback jester

Kleinzach. At this point, Powell's visuals provide a momentary *mise-en-abyme* of the film's episodic structure: Kleinzach's dance takes place on the mantle of a fireplace, where a collection of grotesque tankards function as kitschy material metaphors. Arranged in a row, the living objects recapitulate in miniature the anthology composition as well as the film's main theme (the male desire to possess and collect mates). If an audience's relationship to real objects lined up on a mantel or bookshelf seems different from their engagement with episode films, then that physical and perceptual disparity can be partially reconciled once we consider an important if overlooked point: Although, in physically approaching a collection (say, of paperweights, snowglobes, or tankards), we perceive its totality first and its multiple singularities second, our understanding of it on a material level can only be deemed "complete" after the second, more intimate relationship is struck. This is what episode films like *The Tales of Hoffmann* deliver. Our understanding of the text as a unity comes *after*, not before, the piecemeal process of viewing each of the miniature stories in the order prescribed by the producer, director, and/or screenwriter.

While singing of the potbellied figure, Hoffmann is reminded of Stella and detours into an increasingly plaintive call for his love—a woman who embodies three women from his past. To assuage the curiosity of his attentive listeners, he recounts the stories of his three previous loves, each presented in the film as a different "act" ("Act 1: The Tale of Olympia," "Act 2: The Tale of Giulietta," "Act 3: The Tale of Antonia").

The first episode to come after the frame narrative is set in Paris, where the inventor-physicist Spalanzani (Léonide Massine) has created a life-size windup doll named Olympia (Shearer), an obedient automaton whose vocal apparatus conveniently contains only the words "Yes" and "No." Coppélius (Helpmann), the designer of Olympia's eyes, sees in Hoffmann a likely customer, and sells him a pair of magic spectacles through which the mechanical doll is anthropomorphically brought to life as a human of unearthly beauty. Hoffmann immediately falls in love with Olympia. After getting full ownership of the doll by writing out a check against the bankrupt house of Élias, Spalanzani and his half-human/half-puppet servant Cochenille (Ashton) set Olympia in motion to seal the deal with Hoffmann. She dances for the poet, while a crowd of guest puppets with brightly colored wigs and flower-petalled eyes applaud. While performing dazzling *fouetté* turns, she sings an aria. When she winds down, Cochenille gives the clockwork doll a crank so that she can resume her eurhythmic performance. Eventually, Hoffmann and Olympia begin waltzing together, their *pas de deux* accelerating until Hoffmann (initially stiff and mechanical compared to her) spins out uncontrollably from her grasp and falls on his magic glasses, breaking them. Coppélius, incensed after finding out that the bank draft is worthless, seizes Olympia, chops off her head and begins ripping her limbs apart.

When Hoffmann discovers what Coppélius has done, he is thunderstruck by the unreality of it all and bellows "It's automatic! It's automatic!" In one of the strangest images ever committed to celluloid, Cochenille is shown kissing the dismembered hand of Olympia. Art critic Bevis Hillier discusses the ways in which images of disembodied hands came to be motifs "prolifically used between the war years and the late fifties…To some degree this was no doubt a manifestation of the Surrealist influence." Hillier goes on to say, "Certainly Surrealism had some part in popularizing the disembodied hand and indeed the disembodied anything else. But…after the war the hand theme is more likely to represent the idea of remaking the world."[15] All her limbs torn except for a single dancing leg, Olympia could very well be a

Surrealist icon, sister to the fractured female in Magritte's 1933 painting *La Lumière des coincidences* and mother of the corporeally cut-up woman in Ken Russell's kitschy contribution to the ten-episode omnibus film *Aria* (1987). Set to the "Nessun dorma" from Puccini's *Turandot*, this latter piece of cinematic surrealism features British stripper Linzi Drew as a woman who—after dreaming that her body is adorned with jewels—wakes up to discover that she is on an operating table in a hospital. Having been in a car crash, she will have to undergo a complete physical makeover, with potentially fragmenting effects, as suggested by a shot of the various prosthetic body parts awaiting her.

That shot from *Aria*, like the abovementioned moment from *The Tales of Hoffmann*, speaks to the kind of corporeal fragmentation unique to episode films, which are similarly split into separate pieces, and illustrates Jean Baudrillard's thesis that, "Once broken down by body parts into a series, the woman as pure object is then reintegrated into the greater series of all woman-objects, where she is merely one term among others." According to Baudrillard, "The only activity possible within the logic of this system is the play of substitutions. This was what we recognized earlier as the motor of satisfaction in the collector."[16] The broken bodies of females in these kitschy films furthermore represent the corporeal constraints of cinematic episodicity and thus come to visually substitute for structural properties otherwise unseen (or at least often unnoticed) by spectators. Indeed, these images of combined unity and disunity, allure and abjection, allegorize the contradictions of this narratological meta-genre as a whole.

The second episode begins with Offenbach's famous "Barcarolle," the luxurious melody of which prompts a gothic vision of Venice. A seductive courtesan, Giulietta (Ludmilla Tcherina), is gliding down the Grand Canal in a gondola when she and her sinister pimp, Dapertutto (Helpmann), spot Hoffmann. Back in Giulietta's palace, Dapertutto, dangling a necklace with glittering jewels alchemically fashioned from candle wax, persuades the prostitute to steal Hoffmann's soul. Having already robbed her lover Schlémil (Massine) of his shadow, she snares Hoffmann's reflection. Now in love with Giulietta, Hoffmann duels Schlémil for the key to her boudoir (which is literally a cage), killing the pale specter in a gondola. After the duel, Dapertutto and Giulietta depart together, leaving Hoffmann alone and heartbroken. Anguished by her betrayal, Hoffmann throws the key at a mirror. It splinters, releasing his reflection and breaking the spell of this Hedonistic pleasure palace. The fractured glass not only recalls the dismembered doll Olympia from the previous episode but also the hero's broken pair of eyeglasses. Moreover, it suggests the narrative fragmentation of this and other episode films, which are rent into discrete sections that are nevertheless bound together by thematic repetition.

The third episode takes place on a Greek island, at the house of Crespel (Mogens Wieth), an eccentric impresario whose daughter, Antonia (Ann Ayars), is the third of Hoffmann's previous loves. Like her mother before her, Antonia is in danger of dying from consumption. She has also inherited her mother's shimmering voice, yet promises her father not to sing lest she die in the process. When Hoffmann appears, they attempt to reprise the song that once bound them together, and she nearly collapses from the vocal strain. The evil entrepreneur Dr. Miracle (Helpmann) appears and tricks the young woman into accompanying her dead mother's disembodied voice in an aria. To Hoffmann's dismay, Antonia expires on the trill of a high C, and falls into Dr. Miracle's arms, leaving the poet alone once again. At the conclusion of this final tale, Coppélius, Dapertutto, and Dr. Miracle each take off their masks to

reveal the visage of Lindorf, Hoffmann's old nemesis. This conforms to the original conception of the opera, with all four male adversaries, as manifestations of a singular evil cloaked in different personas, played by the same baritone. Yet, while all four soprano roles (Olympia, Giulietta, Antonia, and Stella) are typically performed onstage by the same vocalist, the Archers depart from this model by casting three different women in the roles. After Lindorf is unveiled, Olympia, Giulietta, and Antonia physically fuse into one woman: Stella. This collapsing of femininity, couched within the patriarchal parameters of the film, supposedly forges the "perfect woman," whose body is shown from four different camera angles simultaneously.

The last scene of the film returns us to Luther's Tavern where Hoffmann, drunk, gazes implacably ahead, exhausted by his retrospection. As Stella enters the beer hall for their rendezvous, he passes out, completely unaware of her presence. His collapse completes the cycle of earlier rejections. Lindorf, who has been awaiting Stella's arrival, escorts her out of the tavern into town, leaving Hoffmann with his transgendered muse Nicklaus. Finally, Sir Thomas Beecham, the *deus ex orchestra*, is shown waving his baton, bringing the film to a thundering close with all the deified presence of Stokowski in Disney's equally kitsch-filled *Fantasia*.

Replicating the movement of the rotating weathercock mentioned earlier, *The Tales of Hoffmann* spins on a thematic axis that forces Hoffmann to choose between unrequited, worldly love and introspective dedication to his muse. The film's episodic yet sequential narrative foregrounds the protagonist's accumulating sense of emotional fatigue and melancholia. As he repeatedly succumbs to his desire to possess the female Other, he gradually takes on the persona of a tragically absurd hero-tourist floating from city to city—a transnational *flâneur* guided by his muse through the haunted corridors of his memory. Much like the equally cynical *The Red Shoes*, *The Tales of Hoffmann* forces "a genre entirely devoted to exultation to consider the problems of duration and permanency" (Altman 265). Siegfried Kracauer thought that the importance of Offenbach's opera "was not that it went deeper than [earlier] operettas, but that it laid bare the dark foundations out of which the operettas had grown, and thus showed their depth (*Orpheus in Paris* 263).

Overwhelming the Eye:
***The Tales of Hoffmann* as Cinematic Kitsch**

Writing in 1968, Thomas Elsaesser felt that the disturbing, nihilistic themes of *The Tales of Hoffmann* foretold the pessimistic themes so prevalent in 1960s cinema. Gesturing toward the film's episodicity, Elsaesser furthermore claimed that the "almost prophetic urgency of [the film's] themes has, as it were, wrecked the traditional narrative form" (62). William K. Everson, referring to *The Tales of Hoffmann*'s disjointed and bleak trio of stories, calls the film "the *Big Sleep* of ballet and opera." And in his adulatory account of the film's production, Monk Gibbon suggests that it is only the presence of Hoffmann that lends "cohesion" to "what otherwise might have seemed a hodge-podge of rather heterogeneous elements" (22). In both amplifying and modifying these assertions, I argue that the individual narrative units of the film constitute, if not a classically structured plot, at least a conceptually cohesive set of stories, one assembled from *repetitive* and *repressive* elements. The heterogeneity perceived by these writers erupts less from narrative invention than from surface embellishments—colors and textures that falsify, trivialize, or underscore the instability of the opera's hetero-romantic relations. By

relating the film's sequential structure to its *mise-en-scène*, I hope to demonstrate how each episode, as a module-like block of repeated motifs contributing to the overall thematic, is nevertheless made distinct through Powell's visual kitsching of narrative.

As elaborated above, *The Tales of Hoffmann* consists of a trio of stories framed by a prologue and an epilogue.[17] The only "official," mandated breaks in the narrative economy are the momentary opening and closing of episodes, nodal points casting the spectator back to a nearly (if not completely) zero-degree state of ontological stasis. These nodal points are partially masked by Powell's efforts to maintain dramatic continuity by bridging episodes visually. For example, the vibrating springs sprouting from Olympia's head at the end of Act I dissolve into the concentric ripples in the currents of Act II's Venetian canal.

Furthermore, *The Tales of Hoffmann* as a whole is organized in such a way as to accent narrative and thematic repetition and containment. Each tale—parenthetically bracketed as a dramatic block of *sexual interest*, *emotional intensification*, *eventual sublimation*, and *horrifying revelation*—recapitulates in serial form the dominant ideological constraints of Hoffmann's perception of the feminine Other, thus underscoring the dramatic uniformity of the three sequences. The terms of spectatorial engagement each episode provides, as focalized through Hoffmann's point-of-view, correspond to this incremental logic of male desire. Thus, at the conclusion of each episode, Hoffmann is once again annexed to the initial stage of an amorous affair only to re-enact his ongoing attempts to attain true love (which have already been predestined to fail). Understood in Freudian terms as an uncanny repetition-compulsion, the film is in fact a bundle of nested rhetorical repetitions emanating from Hoffmann's cynical yet expectant outlook on life and love.[18] As a creature of habit, this irrational man must undergo the trauma of separation and loss, an experiential condition (linked to the spectatorial reception of episode films) that will presumably bring him (and us) to a higher plateau of consciousness.

Complimenting the redundant disposition of the film is the concept of containment. Classical narration anchors and organizes cinematic space within what Sergei Eisenstein referred to as the "quadrilateral cage" of the shot in an attempt to contain and regulate "excess." This grows out of an Anglo-European essentialist agenda or conception of art that posits unity, coherence, and intelligibility as valuable attributes. Not only does Western culture invariably conceive of irrationality as the Other and condemn it to the periphery of thought; it systematically rebuilds and strengthens the constrictive boundaries that exteriorize all manner of superfluity. As an extension of this regulated form of containment, Hoffmann's love for the four women is judged to be a snare—his subjection, as it were, to repetition-compulsion. And yet the women (the coquettish cyborg; the vampish prostitute; and the simpering, consumption-afflicted damsel) are themselves slaves to male masters. As fetishized objects of Hoffmann's gaze, they are tethered at both ends to the psycho-phallic demands of the narrative economy. The "woman as instrument, man as instrumentalist" configuration that has "developed visually and thematically throughout the film musical tradition" (Altman 187) is scrupulously imaged in each act and—indicative of the overall sense of narrative containment—is musically replicated in Olympia's song of love. In this regard, historian Peter Conrad argues:

> *The doll Olympia is a clockwork nightingale. The coloratura of the aria she delivers at Spalanzani's reception is the machine's*

demonstration of its oiled and calibrated technique, her pitch losses the winding down of her engine. Compliantly chirping "Oui," she is at the same time a docile creation of sexual cybernetics, a toy manipulated by the man who desires her. (26)

As Olympia's aria becomes increasingly repetitive, it becomes apparent that she is trapped inside the melodic line—the ornamental coloratura of her vocal flights signifying nothing so much as an attempted escape.

In the film, Moira Shearer's body is a site where, to borrow Henri Bergson's famous quote, "the mechanical is encrusted on the living." Although Olympia tries to transcend the phenomenal limitations of her mechanical body through noumenal vocal registers, she is bound by the limitations of her voice-box and doomed to a "yes"/"no" precinct in which not even dance—the ultimate means of physically inscribing oneself into a particular time and space—can exempt her from masculine hegemony. Nevertheless, Olympia's movements are excessive, potentially transgressive, and for that reason her body—the locus of activity within the frame, an object of fascination whose balletic performances are staged as *spectacle*—is made to bear the brunt of her master's punishment.

The film's misogynistic positioning of women (virgin, whore, celestial creature, doll, erotic object, *femme enfant*), in addition to the overriding heteronormativizing nature of its narrative, can thus be likened to what Judith Butler refers to as "the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (141). As narrative cells, each episode could be said to seal spectatorial desire inside a heterosexual bubble. Yet the constrictive boundaries of this "straightscape" partially exclude Hoffmann's hormonally transgendered confidante Nicklaus, a mezzo-soprano Other whose kitsched body—as a site of radical performativity and social costuming—is an embedded figure of combined domination and liberation.[19]

In the standard staged version of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, it is obvious that Nicklaus is Hoffmann's muse; for the muse appears before Hoffmann does in the tavern and then assumes the guise of Nicklaus.[20] Yet, as someone who supposedly embodies what is chiefly recognized in Greek mythology as a patron goddess of the arts who acts as a guiding spirit or source of inspiration for the hero, Nicklaus is not only transgendered (as a male character played by a female actor) but also unusually mute throughout the film. As a knowing presence, as the opera's sole bearer of knowledge, Nicklaus only occasionally interjects on Hoffmann's behalf, hence the poet's ongoing consternation. Nicklaus's vocal androgyny carries over to his/her costume, which cannot sufficiently conceal, or keep in check, his/her femininity. As such, the film's strategy of gender containment is exploded by a quotation-marked masquerade. With Nicklaus, the dividing line between "male" and "female" dissolves, leaving an epicene creature systematically positioned outside the circumscribed zone of heterosexual desire. Throughout the film, Nicklaus is cast into convenient marginality, and is occasionally told to be quiet. A telling moment occurs during Olympia's dance: Nicklaus inadvertently steps into the balletic circle concentrically drawn by Olympia (whom Nicklaus had earlier referred to as "a dead thing"), and has to be quickly pulled out of the dancer's path by Cochenille. This instant, so small that it might go unnoticed by many spectators, is similar to what Roland Barthes describes as a *punctum* moment, the epiphanic flash that occurs when a seemingly trivial detail in an

image attracts the eyes, pricks the senses, de-centers the action, and disrupts the overall *studium* of a scene (*Camera Lucida* 40-47).

Ushered along the narrative trajectory through an imposed communal relationship with Hoffmann, the spectator shoulders the mobilized, though regulated, gaze of the *kitschmensch* nomadically wandering from one sumptuous spectacle to the next. As we travel from Nüremberg to Paris to Venice to the Greek isles back to Nüremberg again, we sense, through the film's florid exhibition, numerous changes in semantic cues—aesthetic discrepancies from act to act. Michael Powell, working with scenic designer Hein Heckroth and art director Arthur Lawson, transformed Stage H at Shepperton Studios into what Kracauer might have called a "distraction factory"—a pleasure dome wherein the mass ornament of repetitive and synchronized movements fastens spectators to their own conditioned responses vis-à-vis the regimentation involved in mass production.[21] Speaking specifically about the film, Kracauer felt that "the opera atrophies, and what remains is a parasitic mise-en-scène which stuns the mind by dazzling the eyes" (*Theory of Film* 56). What Kracauer fails to acknowledge is how this "parasitic mise-en-scène" actually "stuns" the film's narrative, arresting it for the purposes of engendering a kind of kitsched critical reception. The "straight" pleasure generated in *The Tales of Hoffmann*, although ostensibly tied to the voyeuristic drive inscribed in the classical apparatus, is leavened through extreme retinal stimulation, the frenetic hovering between multiple points of visual interest.

Furthermore, the design and color of the film—indeed, its very artifice—undo the strictures of heteromasculine power. *The Tales of Hoffmann*'s attention-grabbing visuals are much like the garish colors of Vincente Minnelli's *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945), which distance spectators from the action and, as Rick Altman states, "seem to draw attention to themselves and say 'Feast your eyes on me (here and now, because you'll never see anything like me in real life)'" (188). The most obvious sites of the film's blending of the gaudy and the sublime are the bodies of Moira Shearer, Frederick Ashton, and Léonide Massine—three indisputably well-trained ballet dancers whose images are crosshatched by the paradoxical presence of artificiality and authenticity. As dancers and choreographers, they are figures of technical mastery, yet their physical prowess within the filmic frame hinges conspicuously upon the over-embellishment of their makeup and costumes.

Powell and Heckroth's decision to associate each act and actor with a predominant color scheme allows the distinctive qualities of the episodes to be articulated as a variety of surface designs and textures. Indeed, as Nanette Aldred states in her essay "Hein Heckroth and The Archers," it is through "visual discontinuity of colour and style that each separate episode is constructed" (199). "The Tale of Olympia" is yellow and diaphanous, connoting frivolity and transparency. Silk draperies, chiffon veils, a sweep of muslin, and cellophane chandeliers frame a golden set decorated with very few pieces of furniture, save for the rocking settee supported by four white swans on which the automaton lies. The petal-browed Victorian maidens (actually, guest marionettes) who watch Olympia dance are decked out in flounced yellow crinolines. And Massine's olive-skinned Spalanzani is the flashiest figure of them all—a featherweight, perfumed creature wearing a bizarre wig and enormous, floppy yellow bow tie, whose felicitous gestures and pantomimic flourishes emerge from Massine's balletic mastery as it is barely "contained" within his costume.

"The Tale of Giulietta," lacquered red and raven black (with touches of purple), is even more elaborately designed, although its tonal effects suggest a prevailing sense of "death and purity (ibid). The exotic embellishments of the gothic sets find their way to Giulietta's face, which is adorned with tiny jewels and silver spangles. Dapertutto likewise "gleams with desire," while Schlemil, a ghost whose bleached face betrays an absence of life through makeup, is freighted with figural paraphernalia (on his black uniform hang silver tassels and epaulettes). "The Tale of Antonia" is ice blue and, although the most "realistic" of the stories, is quite phantasmal in its ability to express the cold state of death through marble and granite surfaces. Every character and setting is colored and textured in idiosyncratic ways, to say the least.

Operating against the regulated heterosexuality of the film's narrative organization, the kaleidoscopic chaos of decorative fripperies and spangled ornaments fashions what can be termed a "queerscape"—one superimposed atop a standard map of sexual desire. Conceived by Gina Marchetti as a transcendent mode of critiquing the tyranny of traditional gender formulations and the sexual orthodoxy that drives hetero-directed desire,[22] "queerscape" evokes a radically altered viewing position, one cut free from the temporal dictates of a classically constructed, excess-free narrative economy. Like other potentially queered episode films, such as *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), *Invitation to the Dance* (1957), and *Black Tights* (1960), *The Tales of Hoffmann* invites questions about kitsch's disruptive potential. For instance, how might cinematic kitsch offer, inside both a systematically contained narrative economy and a larger sphere of cultural production, an emancipatory "escape-hatch" from ascetic rigidities of form and airless solemnities of content? And how do operas and operettas—with their extravagant mélange of dramatic, sonic, and visual components—function as repositories of queered kitsch (the most liberating of its incarnations)? These questions are little more than initial inquiries that might, if elaborated, lead to more profound insights into the cinematic kitsch and the nature of the motion picture medium.

Although the Archers shared screenwriting, directing, and producing credits, critical consensus (drawing from archival records, historical documents, and interviews) supports the claim that, while Emeric Pressburger was chiefly involved in scriptwriting, Michael Powell was the creative force most responsible for the *look* of their films. As such, it is possible to speak specifically of Powell's centrality to *The Tales of Hoffmann*—the duo's most visually inventive work—and to furthermore separate his contribution to the finished product from that of Pressburger. Emphasizing the visual elements of *The Tales of Hoffmann* is not meant to diminish Pressburger's significance to this film in particular and to the Archers' output in general.[23] However, by isolating those diegetic elements most tethered to a kitsch aesthetic, by focusing attention on the liberating effects of Powell's visual imagination, we can locate moments of rupture or resistance in the narrative that foster ideological emancipation and/or spectatorial participation in the necessarily "playful" process of meaning-making.[24] While sometimes derisively labeled an "eccentric decorator of fantasies" prior to the critical reevaluation of his career in the 1970s, Powell developed a cinematic style amenable to the liberating, as opposed to debilitating, potential of ornamental kitsch.

In his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," Roland Barthes consolidates the various principles of structural analysis, condensing them into a basic distinction between the *functions* of narrative—enchained events providing the simple unfolding of plot—and the *indexical* information relating to the identity of characters and notations of atmosphere.[25]

Functions and indices are aligned hierarchically ("critical-ancillary, structural-ornamental") in a way that privileges the first term and sees the second as the collection of paradigmatic possibilities that can be dropped into the open slots of a linear, syntagmatic narrative chain so as to accessorize the action. I have attempted to highlight how, in *The Tales of Hoffmann*, kitsched ornamentation—as the indexical "fleshing-out" or exfoliating of various sexual identities and gendered subject positions within the text—can invert this and other hierarchical orders.

In bringing this essay to a close, I do not wish to suggest that the "style" of *The Tales of Hoffmann* completely undermines its "content." Nor am I trying to divorce the heteroerotic disposition of its narratives from the visual arrangement of emplotted elements. In fact, costuming and makeup, colors and textures, as well as the resplendent set designs, all contribute to stage movement and, hence, to the narrativized action. I argue, however, that the cosmetic coating of the film "kitsches" the repetitive and containing operations of its episodic plot, providing additional intervals of relative "freedom" besides those prescribed by the structure (the interstices between tales). Like Coppelius's magic glasses, which—when worn by Hoffmann in a moment of aesthetic contemplation—"transform the world," this film stimulates the resistant yet receptive spectator's imagination and fulfills cinema's potential to show "the different kinds of reality that exist behind surface appearances" (Aldred 200). If we are to continue to explore the kitschy dimensions of opera-films as well as episode films in general (with their natural predilection for miniaturization and materialization, abundance and excess), it will be necessary to follow Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous advice put forth in the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), when he implores his readers, "Don't think, but look!" With regards to *The Tales of Hoffmann*, I might add: Look, but with a thinking eye.

Notes

[1] To get a sense of the mixed critical reception such paradoxes engender, we need only compare *Variety*'s positive review of the film to the harsher review from Paul Rotha in *Public Opinion*. *Variety* calls it "distinguished…The Jacques Offenbach fantasy has been transformed to the screen with great imagination and taste…." Rotha, on the other hand, feels that *The Tales of Hoffmann*, like the equally opulent *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1951), exemplifies "the fashionable decadence that ferments within the luxurious compost heap of smart cinema;" consolidating these two poles, Geoff Andrew says the film displays a "kitschy element in its equation of Cinema and Great Art" yet is "sumptuous spectacle" nevertheless. See: "Tales of Hoffmann," 5-6; Paul Rotha, "Seen and Heard: The Strange Case of 'The Tales of Hoffmann'," 24; and Geoff Andrew, "The Tales of Hoffmann," 1033.

[2] Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'," originally printed in *Partisan Review*, is collected in *Against Interpretation*.

[3] One such person is Tomas Kulka, provides an extensive treatment of the aesthetic and structural properties of a phenomenon that has too often lent itself to socio-historical relativism and radical subjectivism.

[4] For a comprehensive elucidation of the camp effect, see Andrew Ross's essay "Uses of Camp," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, 135-170.

[5] Broch's essay and a later extension of his argument in a 1951 lecture are collected in Gillo Dorfles's *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 49-76.

[6] This movement is similar to what Celeste Olalquiaga describes as the "dialectics of kitsch," which openly acknowledges the "contradiction between a desire and the preclusion of its unfolding" while transiting "between an irretrievable past and a fragmented present, at home only in the certainty of its own impossibility" (68).

[7] For an elaboration of "kitsch as a repetitive system," see Sam Binkley's same-titled article in *Journal of Material Culture*, 131-152.

[8] This bivalency can be linked to the bourgeois/peasantry dialectic that distinguishes plentitude from scarcity. John Berger, in his essay "The Eaters and the Eaten," addresses two distinct modes of acquisition made visible through the act of eating—the "peasant way" being centripetal, centered on the act itself whereas the "bourgeois way" is centrifugal, "centered on fantasy, ritual and spectacle." John Berger, *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 27-32.

[9] Compared to *The Tales of Hoffmann*, Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute* (1974), Franco Zeffirelli's *La Traviata* (1982), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1982), and Luigi Comencini's *La Bohème* (1988) all seem tame, glacial, minimalistic. Not even the Lubitsch- and Sternberg-directed operettas *The Merry Widow* (1934) and *The King Steps Out* (1936), nor Michael Powell's later adaptation of Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle* (1964), come close to matching the garish, flamboyant textures of *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

[10] Offenbach was the king of *opéra bouffe* whose *La Vie parisienne* operetta and various other *offenbachiades* exuded a "divine frivolity," the power of which not even Nietzsche was immune to. Wishing to compose something more substantial than the light, comic operettas that gained him fame well outside the walls of the *Opéra comique*, Offenbach went to work near the end of his life producing a bonafide opera based on the stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann. Offenbach died after completing its piano score, leaving most of the orchestration duties to Debussy's teacher Ernest Guiraud. For more information of Offenbach, consult Peter Gammond's *Offenbach: His Life and Times*.

[11] The most vocal proponents of the film have been Martin Scorsese and George Romero, hardly the kind of advocates we would associate with queer cinephilia.

[12] Vicente García Márquez, *Massine: A Biography*, 332.

[13] This is not meant to disregard the musical dictates of *The Tales of Hoffmann*'s production. It is widely known among historians that the film's music was recorded prior to any shooting. When the time arrived to roll cameras, the actors (apart from actual opera vocalists Robert Rounseville and Ann Ayars) lip-synched the playback, interpreting their borrowed lyrics in mime and ballet. The images of the film were to some extent coordinated to the music, rather than vice-versa. This method was certainly not new at the time of the film's production. For instance, in addition to *Fantasia*, *Citizen Kane*'s famous breakfast montage was edited around the music of Bernard Herrmann. Also, the lip-synching in *The Tales of Hoffmann* is much less distracting than that of the omnibus film *Aria*, the wraparound narrative of which features actor John Hurt mouthing the words to "Vesti La Glubba" (from *I Pagliacci*) as sung by Enrico Caruso. The soundtrack recording of Caruso pops and crackles like an old record, and this creates a distancing effect that is in keeping with some of the other contributors' Brechtian approach to opera.

[14] In opera, it is not unusual for women to be cast as boys or young men. Famous mezzo-soprano "pants-roles" are found in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, Humperdink's *Hansel and Gretel*, Gounod's *Faust*, and Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*.

[15] Hillier's notion of "remaking the world" is especially fascinating when we see, at the very end of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, a hand rubber-stamping a "Made in England" logo on the score. By forcing a link between contradictory concepts ("Englishness" and "the operatic," discounting, of course, the work of Benjamin Britten), the hand, in a kitsch context, signifies not the ability to *make* but rather the capacity to *pilfer*, *corrupt* and *transmogrify*. Bevis Hillier, *The Decorative Arts of the Forties and Fifties: Austerity/Binge*, 45.

[16] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 100. Mary Ann Caws puts a slightly different spin on this image of dismemberment, saying that the Surrealist woman is one who is, "Headless. And also footless. Often armless too; and almost always unarmed, except with poetry and passion. There they are, the surrealist women so shot and painted, so stressed and dismembered, punctured and severed: Is it any wonder they have (we have) gone to pieces?" (*The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter*, 53).

[17] Interestingly, the Archers break away from the traditional episodic arrangement of the opera by inverting the order of its second and third acts.

[18] Repetition has been accorded an honorary position in the language of music. Best exemplified in the leitmotifs of Wagner (the composer whose work Offenbach detested), such recapitulations of tonal patterns and sonorities impart cohesion to potentially digressive passages.

[19] Opera is a field dominated by sopranos playing female romantic leads opposite tenors cast as male romantic leads. According to nineteenth-century conceptions of femininity, sopranos signify all that is "normal." As castrati eventually disappeared from the scene, female mezzo-soprano roles were developed as a category in which—in addition to the token mothers and nurses—all of the other, less socio-culturally acceptable women could be conveniently lumped together. Mezzo-sopranos often express their sexual identity through anger, antagonism, acts of violence, and supernatural trickery. Quite literally, these "middle" women—these descendants of Carmen—are the operatic equivalent of cinematic femme fatales occupying a go-between space flanked by the absolute sonic ranges of femininity and masculinity. As a multivalent vocal entity, the mezzo-soprano deploys her darker tones as a means of traversing the musical and sexual modalities that plot the traditional politics of gender.

[20] At the outset of the film's production, director Powell, having never seen the opera staged, admitted to Sir Thomas Beecham his failure to understand what Pamela Brown's role would be, a confession recounted in a humorous passage from Powell's autobiographical *Million Dollar Movie*:

> "Sir Thomas, I don't understand about Nicklaus. Is it a boy or a girl?"
> "It's a boy. A fellow student, a friend."
> "But it's a mezzo-soprano part."
> "Yes. It's a girl in boy's clothing."
> "But is it a girl?"
> "No, it's a boy. A young man. Hoffmann's muse, if you like."
> "Yes, I like that" (96-7).

[21] Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*.

[22] Marchetti developed this idea in "Counter-Media and Global Screens: Recent Work by Shu Lea Cheang," an unpublished manuscript presented at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference, March 2000, Chicago, IL.

[23] Indeed, Pressburger's contributions to the Archers' output have often been overshadowed by his more frequently cited creative partner. For more information on this enigmatic screenwriter, see Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter*.

[24] This is something that director Powell continued to nurture in his post-Archers return to balletic and operatic film, the Spanish-English co-production *Honeymoon* (*Luna de miel*; 1959), a flamenco-filled travelogue starring *Hoffmann* alumnus Ludmilla Tcherina).

[25] Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Tex* , 79-124.

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