Episode 4: Phantom of the Paradise and Pop Culture Bleed

Hello, and welcome to Re:Adapted, where we take a work and explore why we keep telling the same story over, and over, and over. I'm your host, Kris Pepper Hambrick. If you've been enjoying the show so far, please let someone know or rate the show wherever you're listening so others can find it!

This season, we're looking at a long-time favorite of mine, *The Phantom of the Opera.* Over the past few weeks, we've talked about the novel and the film versions from 1925, 1943, and 1962. In the course of that discussion, we've seen how studio interference has altered the character of the Phantom and the impact of the story. Ironically, *Phantom of the Paradise* is the first version that was financed independently and thus did not suffer from corporate interference, and yet or perhaps therefore, it's the first version which makes explicit the demonic force of said interference.

This episode is going to take a slightly different format, because this film isn't really an adaptation of *Phantom of the Opera*. Am I cheating, because I love this movie? Maybe, but not really. Also, it's my podcast. But the structure of and inspiration for this movie are definitely that of Phantom, and the characters, while named Winslow, Phoenix, Beef, Swan, et cetera, are drawn from those of the novel and, strangely enough given the fact de Palma says he wasn't basing his film off the later adaptations, the '62 film. But it's also not Phantom in that it's an amalgam of so many elements of western culture that it may be useful to just go through them, in chronological order. Some of these same elements were also present in Leroux's mind when he wrote Phantom, but the explicit zeitgeistiness of *Paradise* is part of the point. It's both an adaptation and, perhaps at least in part unwittingly, a commentary.

De Palma first got the idea and wrote a treatment for *Paradise* in 1969, based on a conversation he had where the idea of a phantom in the Fillmore (a pair of short lived but very culturally

prominent rock venues in San Francisco and New York) came up. He also cites the experience of hearing a Beatles song in an elevator in muzak form, and musing on the way art can be commodified and "taken away" from the artists. So already, we've got our first "update"—not opera, but a rock venue.

In the late sixties and early seventies, Brian De Palma was part of a group of up and coming film school kids raised on Hollywood but also the auteur theory of the French writers and directors. Along with Spielberg, Lucas, Coppola, and many others, he represented a generation that benefitted from the crumbling studio system and erosion of the self-censorship code in Hollywood to rise to prominence with more independent, edgy, and outsider filmmaking. The director became the primary mover in cinema, as opposed to the producer or studio. After several student films and experimental videos, he made small independent films (many with Robert De Niro) that espoused a revolutionary mindset and flashy techniques, such as split-screen. After a creatively (and financially) disastrous fling with corporate Hollywood, he made the psychodrama *Sisters* and then, *Paradise,* before going on to become one of the biggest directors of his time with *Carrie*, *Scarface*, and *The Untouchables*, to name a few.

For my money, *Paradise* is one of his most out-there creations, so I'll try to make this as brief and comprehensible as I can. It's only an hour and half long but it's also a lot. We open on a smallish rock venue, with a 50s throwback group called the Juicy Fruits performing as a gangly, bespectacled man pastes his own banner over theirs outside. He takes up unauthorized residence at the piano and begins to play a mournful, but melodic, ballad. Up above, unseen, an impresario named Swan discusses business with his lacky, Philbin. Swan seems to control vast swaths of the music business and he hears something he likes in this interloper, Winslow Leach. But just the music—not the man.

Philbin tells Winslow he can get his music, a cantata based on the story of Faust, in with Swan, but when Winslow doesn't hear back, he tries to get in touch. He's ejected from both business

and residential properties, but in the course of trying to figure out what's going on, he learns that Swan is auditioning a chorus for the solo work and that his name isn't on the music. He also meets a pretty young ingenue, Phoenix, with whom he's immediately smitten.

Disguising himself in drag, he again tries to gain audience with the mysterious Swan, but is again thrown out and this time, framed for drug possession and sent to Sing Sing, where his teeth are removed and replaced by metallic dentures. Adding insult to injury, he hears his own song on the radio, mutilated into a surf rock parody, and snaps, somehow escaping prison and making his way to the record pressing plant, where his sabotage ends badly in an accident with the record press mutilating his face. Winslow escapes into the river.

Back at the Paradise, Swan's plan is to open his new venue with Winslow's music. Winslow's plan is ruin Swan's plans, but now very stylishly decked out in a black leather suit, cape, and bird-like mask. Winslow bombs a rehearsal by the now Beach Boys-inflected Juicy Fruits. Swan's plans change and he hires what appears to be a queer glam rock screamer named Beef and a backup chorus that includes Phoenix. He also makes a deal with Winslow: work with Swan, and he can write whatever he wants, for Phoenix. Just to make it super official, he has Winslow sign a contract! There are some suspicious clauses in it and it requires a signature in blood, but like anyone faced with a Terms of Service agreement, Winslow just clicks "accept."

Winslow gets to work as Swan contrives to keep him locked and drugged up. When Winslow finally figures out that he's been tricked (again), he breaks out of a metal door *and* the brick wall Swan has had installed and threatens Beef in the shower, like Norman Bates but with a plunger. Beef is talked into going on anyway, and Winslow electrocutes him onstage. The crowd goes wild, and to calm them down Swan sends Phoenix out to sing a love ballad. This works, somehow.

He then brings Phoenix home with him, to have her sign a contract too and make love to her while watching Winslow watch them on a closed-circuit camera. Winslow stabs himself multiple times in the chest which must be more entertaining that sex because Swan leaves Phoenix to go gloat at his rival, who is not actually dead, because, oops, he's still under contract. Winslow then stabs Swan but is told that Swan, too, is under contract. Oooh!

Swan, inspired by the reaction Beef's onstage death got, decides the only way out is through and plans a gala re-opening for his palace consisting of a staged wedding to Phoenix which will end in her being assassinated live on television. Winslow discovers this by breaking into the secret room Swan keeps disappearing into, and discovers he's taped all his contract negotiations—including the original one, back when he was a young pop star, *with the devil*. Who has agreed to keep him young and successful, as long as he keeps this tape and watches it every day, to remind himself how lucky he is.

Winslow gets a brain cell for once and figures out that the tape is the key, so he starts a fire and burns the "contract," then races out to save Phoenix. At the last minute, he diverts the assassin's bullet into Philbin, then removes Swan's mask in front of the reveling crowd to reveal a face that's burned and scarred, reacting to the destruction of his devilish contract. Phoenix reacts in horror and back away, only to be faced with the mangled face of Winslow, whom she doesn't recognize. Both Winslow and Swan begin to feel the effects of their stab wounds, now that their contracts are coming due. Winslow dies, Phoenix recognizes him, and as she mourns, the crowd continues to party around them, caught up in the spectacle and the violence.

The common line about de Palma's later work is that he is a Hitchcock pastiche artist. This is, as usual with these sorts of comparisons, unkind to both directors. And in the case of *Paradise*, it ignores a whole slew of influences that got put into a campy, comic-book colored blender. So let's start at the

beginning, shall we? In 1587.

Or possibly even before, but the first written version of Faust appeared in that year. The exact origins are debated, but the basic story is of a scholar who sells his soul for worldly pleasures and knowledge. Famously interpreted as plays by Christopher Marlow (1604) and Goethe (1808 AND 1832), and as an opera by Gonoud from 1859 that plays a part in the plot of the original *Phantom*, it was also filmed in 1926 by the German Expressionist F.W. Murnau. De Palma was clearly familiar with this old tale, and it became the basis not only of the phantom character's own rock opera but the plot that eventually engulfs him, Swan, and Phoenix.

But de Palma adds an additional wrinkle into the devil's contract with Swan, one drawn from Oscar Wilde's 1891 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* In that book, a young man, Dorian, gets his portrait painted. Newly realizing that his beauty will fade, Dorian wishes for the portrait to age in his stead. His wish granted, Dorian remains young and beautiful and uses these traits to run amok as a libertine, living only for earthly pleasures. Meanwhile, the portrait not only ages but acquires the mark of all of Dorian's considerable sins, and he keeps it locked away in an attic. When the consequences of his lifestyle finally catch up to him, Dorian destroys the portrait with a knife—his servants find an unrecognizable old man next to a now-pristine portrait of the young Dorian as he once was. This trope is used in *Paradise* as the way Swan can monitor his bargain, and the reason he resists being photographed and filmed. It also furnishes Winslow's final revenge.

While Oscar Wilde was theorizing about aesthetics and morality in England, in Paris a theater troupe was experimenting with a form of horror that shocked the senses of the time: the Grand Guignol. From 1897 to 1962, the Grand Guignol pioneered what was then considered 'naturalistic' horror in the form of short plays that featured gory special effects, low class characters, and themes like murder and madness. Held in a former chapel, the audience

went in order to be shocked by the entire experience; the gothic architecture, the gore, the evocation of the horror of every day human experience, but twisted into melodrama. 'Grand Guignol' then became a term applied to various over the top horror films, especially those that deal with gore and extreme situations. Notably, the horror of the Grand Guignol was not escapist or supernatural; the horror was in the grisly depiction of supposedly everyday crimes. In the case of *Paradise*, the legacy is less in the film's gore and more in the way the audience *in* the film is invited to revel and even participate in very real crimes on stage. It's not Grand Guignol *itself,* but rather, the Paradise is a modern-day Guignol revival, and Swan is creating theater not out of special effects, but actual murder.

Meanwhile, modern horror film was a gleam in the eye of the German Expressionists, but many cite 1920's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as one of the first, foundational works in that genre. Directed by Robert Wiene and written by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, it tells the story of Carligari, a sideshow hypnotist, who uses his power over his subject, Cesare, to commit vile acts. The surreal, cartoonish style are still influential today, and shows up in both Swan's press conference introducing Beef as well as the entire "Super Like You" sequence. Also in that sequence, Frankenstein is heavily referenced in Beef's sewn-together appearance as well as the theme of the song creating a superman from the body parts of audience members—a theme also essential to another work we'll get to in a bit.

But artistic movements and works are not the only inspiration here. One prominent cultural figure that must be discussed is music producer and impresario Phil Spector, who Swan is heavily patterned after. Swan's name in the original script was actually Spectre, with an 're' like the ghost. (Phil's name is spelled SPECTOR.) This was way too obvious, because even without the name, Swan is unmistakably drawn from life. Spector was born in 1939 and began his recording career in a group he formed named the Teddy Bears, though he quickly began writing and producing on his own. He wrote his first number one song at age 19. At 21,

he formed his own record company. He's one of the first people to become famous *as* a producer, a role which is typically a behind the scenes one. His style was dubbed the "wall of sound," an operatic, densely layered soundscape you can hear in songs like "You've Lost that Loving Feeling" by the Righteous Brothers and "River Deep-Mountain High" by Ike and Tina Turner. He was also known for wielding a great deal of artistic control, thus becoming known as a part of the artistic formation of these songs along with the writers and performers.

By the mid-70s, he was known for a few other things. Namely, his eccentricities were becoming more prominent. Growing bored with his own company in 1967, he retreated from public life for awhile but was still famous enough to appear playing himself on sitcoms. In the early 70s, he worked on Beatles and solo Beatles projects, but by this point his drug intake and erratic, sometimes violent nature was inhibiting his work. While producing John Lennon's album of rock and roll covers in 1973, he at one point fired a gun in the studio. Later, after years of seclusion, he was convicted of murder in 2003 and eventually died in prison, in 2021.

Of course, no one knew in late '73 that he was going to become an actual murderer, and they would not have known about the fact he would continue to pull out his gun as a way to control and manipulate artists from Leonard Cohen to Debbie Harry to the Ramones. But it was certainly known that he was volatile, reclusive, and abusive to his wife Ronnie, a singer with her own group whom he kept in virtual isolation during their marriage. At the same time, he was an acknowledged 'genius' with a reputation for hits, and thus, comeuppance was slow to come. There's no doubt whatsoever, though, that Swan is Spector, just possibly a lot more in control at this point in his career and with an overt connection to the devil rather than a demon-haunted psyche. And his career trajectory mirrors the slide of the optimism of the 1960s into the darker reckoning of the 70s.

In much the same way, the Altamont Speedway Free Festival also

mirrors that slide and is often cited as the dark parallel to Woodstock. Happening four months later, it was an attempt to replicate the peace and love from that other event. Famously, Woodstock's infrastructure had broken down but the community had appeared to come together to provide food, water, and care to those who had gathered in upstate New York. While things had not gone according to plan at Woodstock, the organizers and attendees had proven themselves flexible enough that it was largely regarded as a defining moment in the peace and love movement of the 60s, its legacy lasting decades. In stark contrast, poor planning on the part of the Altamont Festival, last minute changes, and a negative mood led to violence and four deaths, three accidental. One of the most egregious errors was the fact that the local Hell's Angels had been hired to provide security, but without training and with access to beer (amongst other things), this proved deadly; one concert goer, Meredith Hunter, pulled out a gun while The Rolling Stones were on stage and was killed by one of the motorcycle gang. This was all caught on film by the Maysles brothers, who were there filming a documentary, and thus in December of 1970 the breakdown of the hippie dream became visible to people all over the world.

This is explicitly mirrored in de Palma's depiction of events at the Paradise, as he shot the ending scene with cinema vérité cameramen with the intent it would look like Altamont. Swan's security detail are dressed like a biker gang. And this is just another of those moments in pop culture that de Palma drew from to show a dark side to the creative dream, as he saw a grim Grand Guignol spirit infiltrating real life.

Another stage production that drew heavily from the Guignol tradition was the band Alice Cooper, which I mention not because I know for certain de Palma was drawing from their aesthetic but because, like much of what I'm about to relate, it illustrates a cultural zeitgeist that is very much of a piece with *Paradise*. Vince Furnier—who most of us know as Alice Cooper—started the band in 1964 for a high school talent contest where they dressed as the Beatles and performed a parody of "Please Please Me." As the

Spiders, they had a little local success and moved to LA. Changing their name again, they decided to choose something utterly innocuous in order to contrast with their increasingly dark stage show; and thus was born the name Alice Cooper. Believing other bands weren't exploiting the potential of their stage shows, they adopted increasingly ornate gimmicks involving gory effects, snakes, dummies, and the like, mixing rock with vaudeville, magic, and drag. Infamously, at the 1969 Toronto Rock Festival, someone threw a chicken on stage. Unfamiliar with the protocol, Furnier threw the chicken back, supposedly thinking it could fly. According to some reports the unfortunate bird was torn apart by the crowd—though stories vary.

Whether or not de Palma was modeling the Undead section of his film after Alice Cooper or just Caligari, the fake dismemberment, goth makeup, and general atmosphere of parts of *Paradise* are closely in line with the Alice Cooper vibe, and since their first big hit was in 1971 it's certainly possible that this was one of the things de Palma was looking at when projecting where rock was heading. It's quite easy to imagine looking at an Alice Cooper concert where Furnier is tearing apart baby dolls and deciding the logical end to that form of entertainment, after Altamont, was more literal. It's certainly in line with the sort of moral panic acts like Alice Cooper were fomenting among those who did not see it in a humorous light.

A band influenced by Alice Cooper and pioneering elaborate face makeup and stage shows would seem to be a direct line to or from the Undead, but the dates for KISS just don't really match up. While *Paradise* began filming in November of 1973, KISS had indeed formed and donned the iconic makeup back in March. However, KISS had only begun recording their first album in October, and had their first industry premiere in December, before beginning to tour in February of the next year. Despite a close resemblance, it would seem that rather than directly influencing each other, KISS and *Paradise* were actually responding—in very different ways—to the same influences in the zeitgeist.

Similarly, I cannot actually trace any relationship between *Paradise* and *The Rocky Horror Show* or the film version, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.* The tone of these films is of course wildly different, but they are often spoken about as having a sort of kinship for people especially of a certain age. Their relationship to camp, while different, may be a factor, as is the cartoonish visuals, musical pastiche, and glam style. However, like KISS, the calendar reveals that, again, these were just manifestations of what was in the air. Rocky Horror was first produced in London in 1973, and came to LA in 1974 before being adapted for film in 1975. I will point out that Rocky Horror is the work of someone discovering *himself* through glam's identity-expanding options, where *Paradise* is someone looking from the outside *at* glam and using it as a means of commenting on commercialism, so the parallels are mostly style.

While it's *possible* that someone involved with the film saw KISS in New York or Rocky in London, no overt connection has ever been revealed in interviews, and I think it's highly likely that all of these bands and works are independent reactions to what was going on in the culture.

So where does this fit within the context of Phantom of the *Opera*'s cultural trajectory? It's an interesting one, not really an adaptation in the strictest sense but very much a part of the original story's journey. De Palma doesn't transfer much of anything from Leroux or even Lon Chaney. What he does is create a pastiche of influences in American culture and capitalism: a melange of the Faust myth, Dorian Gray, Frankenstein, Grand Guignol, and real world people and events all hung on the loose framework of the Phantom story. While 'pastiche' can mean an homage or imitation of one artist's work, I here am using the following definition from Wikipedia: *A pastiche is a work of visual art, literature, theatre, music, or architecture that imitates the style or character of the work of one or more other artists. Unlike parody, pastiche pays homage to the work it imitates, rather than mocking it. The word pastiche is a French*

cognate of the Italian noun pasticcio, which is a pâté or pie-filling mixed from diverse ingredients. Metaphorically, pastiche and pasticcio describe works that are either composed by several authors, or that incorporate stylistic elements of other artists' work.

I had always thought of pastiche as a way of honoring an author or artist—in the world of Sherlock Holmes novels and films, you have 'pastiches' which attempt to honor the style and characters of Arthur Conan Doyle in a brand new work. This is distinct from 'parody,' which mocks or otherwise pokes fun at a work or genre. But pastiche can also mean a medley, a hodgepodge, or 'incongruous mixture' as one definition puts it. In this way, an artist or author builds upon their influences and remixes them into a new form, in dialogue with the referenced works and also the audience's preconceived notions of them. Quentin Tarantino, for example, has made a career out of highly stylized films that certainly have his own unique voice, but draw overtly from westerns, Hong Kong film, and various other genres in a way you are meant to derive meaning from. Again, this makes *Paradise* not a true adaptation, but a cultural melange of what was floating in de Palma's orbit. Which brings us to another term: zeitgeist.

The fact that *Paradise*, Rocky Horror, and glam rock all somewhat resembled one another stylistically isn't just because they were drawing from the same influences; the point is that those influences all had cultural currency to multiple people working at the same time. I think part of this has to do with the erosion and, possibly, commodification of the hippie spirit as represented by Altamont, the continuing trauma of the Vietnam War, and the apparent failure of many of these movements to gain visible political headway. Unlike Alice Cooper or Rocky Horror, *Phantom of the Paradise* is a critique of where de Palma sees the culture heading; though perhaps an ironic one given the criticism he would later sustain for the violence of his films of the 80s.

But in a way, POTP illustrates my point exactly that works illuminate the spirit of the age in which they are created, because

that is essentially what it is also *about*.

Zeitgeist is a German word literally meaning 'time-spirit' coined by philosophers in the 18th and 19th centuries to connote the "spirit of the age; the taste, outlook, and spirit characteristic of a period." Essentially, art is inextricable from culture because artists are products of their time and place. And this is why, according to this philosophy, you get what is called 'multiple discovery': scientific advances or literary works that are uncannily similar, despite there being no connection between their progenitors. In other words, the spirit of the age, the movements of thought and culture, will give rise to ideas and works that have certain kinship, without any direct connection.

Along with zeitgeist and pastiche, another framework for understanding *Paradise* is post-modernism, which is a framework or mode of criticism which rejects the certainty of any one meaning, asserting instead that reality is a "mental construct." In this, it was a rejection of modernism and empirical, Enlightenment-related modes of discourse. Beginning as an aspect of literary criticism, it's become diffuse in its meaning and usage over the years, but works associated with post-modernism are often characterized by irreverence, pop culture references, self-referential or 'meta' commentary, moral relativism, and play with mixing genres, styles, and themes. At best, it can be said that a philosophy which acknowledges that what we see as reality is shaped by our culture and background is a useful addition to the debate. At worst, taking the denial of any objective truth too far can lead to a rejection of the point in seeking truth at all. But to boil this down and use the words of my favorite Doctor Who blogger, Elizabeth Sandifer, it's "taking signifiers out of their context but trusting them to function anyway."

De Palma's tendency to borrow themes, shots, and even the composer of Alfred Hitchcock movies definitely places him within this discussion, as would the sheer madcap amalgamation of sources and inspiration in *Paradise*. And indeed, even the plot and themes of this film lend themselves to a post-modern

interpretation: everything is a simulacrum, nothing is real for long without becoming commodified and subjective, and meaning is void in a world where people are now attuned only to the next visceral thrill.

Which brings us to what *Phantom of the Paradise* ultimately means in the long arc of the Phantom's ur-story. It would be easy, upon first viewing, to dismiss it as a drug-fueled 70s aberration, but I think that would be missing the way in which it completes one stage of the Phantom's journey and, in fact, tells us something about the meta-story of the artist in society. Because the point of this story is in no way the romance; despite his obvious affinity for Phoenix, the focus is shifted almost entirely onto the idea of *creation* and authenticity. Despite saying in interviews that his film wasn't based on the later films, de Palma directly lifts the "ripped-off composer" element *only* present in '42 and '63 and makes it the central theme.

Those previous two films did this largely within the context of the studio system, and perhaps only accidentally touch on notions of corporate ownership of creative product in order to motivate the main character's revenge narrative. But *Paradise* was made entirely outside the Hollywood system, by independently raised funds, and then sold to Fox for distribution. It's a story about an artist who finds himself in the clutches of the machine, made actually *outside* that machine rather than within it. In that way, I do think it has something to say about the Phantom-as-creator, though in a sense this is that secondary story I mentioned last episode. This isn't the last time we'll touch upon the Phantom's art as motivation, but it is, in a way, the culmination of that trajectory; this version is not at all about romance or redemption. It's entirely about the incompatibility of true creative genius with a world run by studio heads and tyrannical producers; in other words, the dollar.

While this isn't remotely what Leroux's story is about, I do think it's an interesting path to take that original story on. It's another version of the way an individual's 'freakishness' is set upon by

society only this time, the deformity is merely an outward manifestation of that cruelty, the *consequence* of the phantom's inability to be part of the mainstream, rather than the cause. This does, of course, make it in some sense a different story. However, as a response to the growing disillusionment of the post-flower power era, it represents that brief time period in which a lot of art broke free of corporate control as film school kids and garage bands found their way to the masses, before being reined in and commodified once more. In the film, Winslow loses his voice and has it reconstructed for him by Swan in the studio—only now, he literally is singing *with Swan's voice*, his identity completely subsumed by commerce.

Everyone working on this film, perhaps aside from Paul Williams, was a scrappy up-and-comer, pulling together inspiration from all corners to make this comic-opera tragedy. And even Paul Williams was cast delightfully against type, having mostly played juvenile roles long past the age he should have because of his stature. So maybe this was a little payback of his own. The costumer, Rosanna Norton, hand-sewed a lot of the coats and costumes you see; one of them that Beef wears was actually her personal winter coat. Jack Fisk, the set designer, enlisted his soon-to-be wife, Sissy Spacek, as set-dresser. William Finley and Gerrit Graham, Winslow and Beef respectively, were long time collaborators from de Palma's student days. Jessica Harper went on to do Shock Treatment, the Rocky Horror sequel, and Dario Argento's Italian horror classic *Suspiria*. The Juicy Fruits were comprised of improv and mime performers who were recruited to create this malleable band as they went.

So it seems that, both in form *and* content, *Phantom of the Paradise* speaks to the concerns of artists in an increasingly commodified environment, disillusioned about their ability to work within the system but in some sense powerless against it. At this point, the Phantom himself is almost entirely a victim, his deformity artistic rather than physical, who must be consumed before he is finally ostracized. Again, this is not Leroux's Erik and Christine. On the other hand, it feels to me like the purest

expression of the social and artistic concerns raised, but not truly addressed, by the Rains and Lom versions. In those works, it's just a plot point, a mechanism to get the Phantom to seek revenge and create tension. By 1974, it's an existential drive to determine how creation can authentically occur in an age when anything can be bought, and entertainment now knows no limits in terms of sensationalism or violence.

In a way, Brian de Palma seems to have become a victim of this exact cycle. While to me, *Paradise* and *Carrie* are films which have a lot to say about the individual in society and the dangers of violence, his later, glossier films edge further into territory it's easier to see as itself profiting off that violence. *Scarface*, *Dressed to Kill*, and *Body Double*, to name just three, trade in sensationalism, transmisogyny, and regular misogyny, without (for this viewer, anyway) enough of a wink to the audience to signify he's in on it. Using a plunger to shut up a gay Carlotta figure in the shower is funny to me; using a two-foot-long drill bit to literally screw a female victim into the floor with the sole purpose of inciting the male protagonist to action isn't. Tony Montana's huge pile of coke in *Scarface* is pretty funny, but it's not enough to mitigate the way fans seem to think "say hello to my little friend" is actually *cool*. And the sensitive evocation of an abused teen girl finally finding her power in *Carrie* is nowhere to be found in the treatment of the villainous transgender psychiatrist played by Michael Caine in *Dressed to Kill*. Perhaps it's simply that his films only find sympathy with certain *types* of othering.

But enough of my extracurricular De Palma critique. I still believe that *Phantom of the Paradise* has a lot to say both about the state of the arts in the mid-70s and the valid, if over-dramatized and literally demonized concerns of creators. Rather than an adaptation of Leroux's *Phantom*, then, I see *Paradise* as a separate thing: a work that *uses* previous works, include *Phantom*, to say something new. While that makes it different from the other films we've talked about so far, it bears pointing out that this type of work doesn't exist *without* those previous

narratives. *Paradise* would be a different film without the references to Faust, Oscar Wilde, Phantom, Frankenstein, Phil Spector, and the others. Like *The Wide Sargasso Sea* or *Amadeus*, or fanfiction, it's using familiar people or characters to make a statement. And without the references in those allusions, De Palma's story might have been very different, lacking the resonance brought by our recognition of these other elements and bringing our own background and knowledge to what they might mean in the greater scheme of things.

Not everyone agrees, of course. Reviews at the time were fairly scathing. In the New York Times, Vincent Canby wrote, "Faust, The Phantom of the Opera, The Picture of Dorian Gray, rock music, the rock music industry, rock music movies and horror movies. The problem is that since all of these things, with the possible exception of Faust (and I'm not really sure about Faust), already contain elements of self-parody, there isn't much that the outside parodist can do to make the parody seem funnier or more absurd than the originals already are." Gene Siskel gave it two stars and complained, " "what's up on the screen is childish; it has meaning only because it points to something else. To put it another way, joking about the rock music scene is treacherous, because the rock music scene itself is a joke."

The issue with these reviews, and others that dismiss it as being a bad parody, is that in my view it's not actually a parody at all. It's a fundamental misreading of the text as parody versus satire, in that it's not a parody of phantom or Dorian Gray or even glam rock, but instead uses those things as a vehicle for telling another story about consumerism and corporatism. But I don't want to leave you with the impression it was universally panned; while it wasn't successful at the box office, it found favor as a sort of cult classic and, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, ran for four months and then off and on until 1976. In the past few years, there have been numerous reunion conventions celebrating the film, and its Rotten Tomatoes score is a healthy 81%. It just depends on who's watching, I guess.

All that said, most of our upcoming episodes will have little cause to return to the imagery of *Phantom of the Paradise*; it's certainly an outlier in the pantheon though memorable enough to make it into the Simpson's parody of Phantom figures. Most of our discussion will center back onto the romance, and the 19th century setting, though there will be some echoes of the Faustian bargain coming up. However, as we'll discuss, the increasing validation of strong, arguably adolescent passions, including Winslow's single-minded and intemperate nature along with Swan's literal permanent youth, is certainly a thread we can follow through the culture of the 70s, 80s, and beyond. So now, we're going to take a hard right turn into the origins of the thing that introduced most of us to Phantom in the first place: Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1986 musical.

Until then, thank you for listening to Re:Adapted. This show was written and produced by me, Kris Hambrick. You can contact me on gmail, Facebook, TikTok, or instagram at readaptedpodcast, or on twitter at readaptedpod with comments, questions, and suggestions. Contact info and transcripts are also available at my website, readaptedpodcast.com. Until next time, all articles which have been excluded shall be deemed included. See you then!

Sources (that aren't like, google searches)

Coates, John. "The Making of Phantom of the Paradise: An Interview with Director Brian De Palma." *Filmmakers Newsletter*, v. 8 n. 4. Feb 1975.

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