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Graverobber, Individualized Chorus: The Greek Chorus Reinterpreted in Repo! The Genetic Opera

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The Greek Chorus Reinterpreted in *Repo! The Genetic Opera*

Repo! The Genetic Opera, a 2008 rock opera film written and composed by Terrance Zdunich and Darren Smith, takes place in a dystopian future where, in the face of epidemic organ failure, synthetic organs can be bought on credit. A consumer's failure to pay off these synthetic organs within a certain time frame results in an organ repossession, in which a repossession officer called a "repo man" forcibly removes the unpaid synthetic organ with medical tools and leaves the consumer to die (*Repo!*). The plot of the film follows seventeen-year-old Shiloh Wallace as she uncovers the truth about her mother's death, her supposedly-genetic blood disease, and her father's double life as a repo man (*Repo!;* Lionsgate). Numerous supporting characters encounter and interact with Wallace in her journey, including the opera diva Blind Mag and the fame-driven heiress Amber Sweet. One of these characters, a combination of drug dealer and exhumer called Graverobber, presents an interesting case within the structure of *Repo!:* throughout the film, Graverobber provides scene-setting, background information, and foreshadowing in monologues while remaining separate from the central events of the film. The nature of these monologues earns this character the label of "Greek chorus" according to the definition of the modern chorus proposed by Alexandre Bádue as any character who comments on the action of a plot from an outsider's perspective (Bádue 9). While Graverobber fits the role of a Greek chorus according to both modern and ancient parameters, his character features much deeper individuation than the choruses of the twentieth century. As such, Graverobber represents a shift toward fully-personifying choruses in the twenty-first century.

1. The Tradition of the Chorus

The chorus represents an integral aspect of Greek drama and Greek life. The Greek chorus, a group of performers who danced and sang in unison alongside the actors of a play, provided scene-setting, foreshadowing, and responses to the actors' actions onstage within both comedic and tragic forms of Greek drama (Dugdale 74-5). Greek culture regarded these choruses as necessary for promoting peace through orderly collective action, and considered the participation in choral performance a requirement for a proper education and a positive social standing (Zarifi 238; Billings, Budelmann, and Macintosh 1). Despite the variety of choral

forms in antiquity, the tragic chorus is often considered the quintessential form of the Greek chorus by modern theoreticians and artists who utilize the chorus as a dramatic device (Billings, Budelmann, and Macintosh 2). As such, this discussion will focus on the characteristics of tragic Greek choruses to ensure the most applicability possible to the modern adaptation of choruses. Tragic choruses act as both participants and witnesses to the action of a drama, able to interact directly with the heroes of a drama while providing the "emotional barometer for a play" from a separate perspective from the other characters (Bádue 109; Dugdale 77). These choruses function with collective identities, collective memories, and collective, generic names which denote nationalities or roles, such as "sailors" or "Trojan women" (Dugdale 77-8; Gould 386). The narratives presented by tragic choruses are filtered through these collective identities, remaining relevant to the collective character of the chorus while commenting on the experience of that chorus within the drama, which allows fallibility in the reports and responses of the chorus (Gould 326-8). Through its responses and asides, the Greek chorus both connects the audience to the plot of the drama and shapes the audience's perception of the drama by directing attention to specific plot points and providing scene-setting and background information relevant to the drama based on the perspective of the collective character of the chorus (Bádue 111; Gould 386).

The figure of the Greek chorus maintained varying levels of visibility in European opera throughout the genre's history (Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca). The American musical, a descendant of European opera and operetta among other influences, also contains the figure of the chorus, with differing roles and purposes depending on the needs of the musical and the period in which the musical was first written (Dunbar 243). Here, the role of the chorus in American musicals will be explored to ensure the maximum applicability to the discussion of *Repo!* because the rock opera genre holds more similarity to the Broadway musical than the traditional opera (Rockwell). The choruses of the early twentieth century, such as the Gaiety and Florodora girls, amounted to "glamourized versions of the *fin-de-siècle* female chorus line," often commodifying the female form, as in the case of the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes (Dunbar 243). Rodgers and Hammerstein's "book-based" musical form enhanced the characterizations of these chorus lines, such that by the middle of the twentieth century, choruses became "psychologically believable characters" (Dunbar 243). Popular choruses of midcentury were "foot-stomping" and "folksy," as in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals such as the 1943 *Oklahoma!* and the 1945 *Carousel*

(Dunbar 244). Hammerstein's foray into using a classical form of the Greek chorus in the musical *Allegro* in 1947, which featured a chorus who solemnly watched and explained the dramatic events of the life of a small-town doctor, fell flat with the midcentury audience, who preferred entertaining choruses over somber choruses (Dunbar 244, 251). In spite of the difficulty that Hammerstein faced when presenting a traditional Greek chorus in a modern work, George Furth and Stephen Sondheim were able to solve "the problem of the chorus in *Company*" by maneuvering the chorus to fit the social environment of the work's premiere in 1970 (Dunbar 258).

Many other musicals originating from the middle and late twentieth century also feature choruses, such as Boublil, Schönberg, and Natel's 1980 *Les Misérables*, Lloyd Webber, Hart, and Stilgoe's 1986 *The Phantom of the Opera*, MacDermot, Ragni, and Rado's 1967 *Hair,* and Lloyd Webber and Eliot's 1981 *Cats* (Dunbar 243; "Les"; "Phantom"; "Hair"; "Cats")*.* In addition to these musicals, Weill, Rice, and Hughe's 1947 *Street Scene,* Sondheim, Wheeler, and Bond's 1979 *Sweeney Todd,* and Sondheim and Lapine's 1994 *Passion* are all notable for their use of choruses in ways that align with the traditional form of the Greek chorus while also serving the aesthetic needs of the modern musical drama. For example, *Street Scene* utilizes a chorus of an unnamed group, the Maurrants' neighbors, to narrate the plot of the musical through gossip, similar to Greek choruses in antiquity (Bádue 104). *Sweeney Todd* and *Passion,* on the other hand, incorporate choruses which make use of a rotating group of named characters: while ancient Greek choruses do not use named characters, the fluidity of the choruses in *Sweeney Todd* and *Passion* lends these choruses an amorphous nature which obscures the characters' individual personalities when those characters participate in choral singing (Bádue 104-5). The choruses in all three musicals sing directly about the musicals' main characters and comment on those characters' actions: in *Street Scene,* the neighbors summarize a murder, in *Sweeney Todd,* the chorus elaborates on Sweeney Todd's "resolution to kill Judge Turpin," and in *Passion,* the chorus repeats the main character's feelings about his environment, a military outpost (Bádue 105-7). *Street Scene* uses a chorus-leader, a device from ancient Greek choruses in which one member of the chorus steps away from the group and speaks on behalf of the entire chorus, in the form of Mr. Kaplan, one of the neighbors in *Street Scene* (Bádue 108-9). *Passion* and *Street Scene* also feature choruses that gain insight from watching the events of their respective plays' plots, a hallmark of Greek choruses in antiquity, who would explicitly express the moral of a drama at the end of the work (Bádue 113-114). In

all three of the discussed musicals, the choruses displayed aspects of Greek choruses in antiquity, something that typically clashes with the aesthetic of Broadway, as in *Allegro*'s case. The creators of these musicals, however, use these choruses in such ways that support the dramatic needs of the twentieth-century dramatic musical, which allows the antique form of the chorus to function successfully in a modern context (Bádue 114).

2. Graverobber as Chorus

Much of the original literature surrounding *Repo!,* such as the film's official press release and interviews with Zdunich, describe Graverobber as the "Greek chorus" of the production. Zdunich mentions the two-man, ten-minute operas from which *Repo!* grew in several interviews, citing Graverobber as a key character in these operas (most notably *The Necromerchant's Debt*) who narrated and offered commentary on the goings-on of a corrupt futuristic society (Lionsgate; Messinger; Gabriel). Zdunich further states that the Graverobber of the film resembles the Graverobber of the ten-minute operas, despite the character's development over time, acting as a "disenfranchised observer" through his monologues in the film (Gabriel). These interviews reveal that the creators of *Repo! The Genetic Opera* intended for Graverobber to function as an outside perspective to the action of the film, placing the character in the realm of the classification of "Greek chorus" according to the modern definition of the chorus (Bádue 9).

The bulk of Graverobber's dialogue supports the classification of the character as a Greek chorus in both modern and ancient terms. In Graverobber's first appearance in the movie, for example, he speaks directly to the camera and explains the role of repo men in his surroundings, as well as sets the atmosphere for the film by referring to a generalized "fear of the repo man" in all citizens (*Repo!*). His next appearance, as the primary vocalist in the musical number "21st Century Cure," provides additional background information about the current status of the world of *Repo!,* introducing the city's black market and the drug Zydrate, a painkiller meant for organ surgeries that graverobbers farm from dead bodies and sell secondhand (*Repo!*). This scene is the first in which Shiloh Wallace and Graverobber interact, and while Graverobber occasionally engages with Wallace directly through eye contact and proximity, the majority of the information presented in "21st Century Cure" is not specifically aimed at Wallace, as evidenced by Graverobber looking away from Wallace while recounting most

of the number (*Repo!*). This disengagement from the other character present in the scene results in "21st Century Cure" performing a primarily storytelling function for the audience, contributing to Graverobber's role as a Greek chorus. "21st Century Cure" also serves to moralize early on in the film, a trademark of Greek choruses in antiquity: in this number, Graverobber dismisses the current social atmosphere's penchant for unnecessary organ replacement by singing "Why care for these petty obsessions / Your designer heart still beats with common blood" while collecting Zydrate (*Repo!*). Graverobber's other large musical number, "Zydrate Anatomy," informs Wallace, and by proxy the audience, about the specific circumstances surrounding the Genetic Opera, the event Wallace must attend in order to receive answers to her questions (*Repo!*). This scene sees Graverobber interact directly with two characters, Shiloh Wallace and Amber Sweet, as he relates the information embedded into the libretto. This interaction between the chorus and other characters, especially protagonists, occurs in Greek drama, strengthening Graverobber's claim to the status of Greek chorus (Bádue 109). Graverobber's strongest chorus-like performance, however, occurs in the final scene of the movie, where he once again directly addresses the camera. In lieu of describing more details about the setting and social atmosphere of *Repo!,* he offers a moralizing few lines that find counterparts in both ancient and modern choruses:

> Sometimes I wonder why we all don't move on
> Because we all end up in a tiny pine box
> a mighty small drop and a mighty dark plot
> and the mighty fine print hastens the trip to our epilogue
> (*Repo!*).

In the context of the film, these lines convey a sense of moving on from past misfortunes and failed ambitions. Their inclusion at the end of the film places Graverobber firmly inside the traditions of both antique and twentieth-century choruses.

3. Graverobber as Character

The majority of the content of Graverobber's dialogue in *Repo! The Genetic Opera* establishes the character as a Greek chorus, considering both ancient and modern choral traditions. Discrepancies between culture and a widespread scarcity of specific information about the Greek chorus in antiquity prevent a

direct comparison between Graverobber and antique Greek choruses, however (Billings, Budelmann, and Macintosh 5). For this reason, the discussion of Graverobber's unique characteristics and the implications of those characteristics will center around comparing Graverobber with the choruses of twentieth-century musicals whose cultural environments of origin most closely match the cultural environment of origin of *Repo!*

The first of Graverobber's characteristics that set him apart from twentieth-century choruses is his visual distinctiveness. Graverobber is the only character in *Repo! The Genetic Opera* who sports stereotypically Gothic makeup in the twentieth-century sense: while many characters wear either white foundation or dark eye makeup, Graverobber is the only character to wear both with black lipstick, the preferred aesthetic of twentieth-century Gothic attire (*Repo!*). The color scheme and amount of clothing Graverobber wears sets him apart from both the opera-goers of polite society and the drug users of the underground as well: the color scheme of Graverobber's wardrobe clashes with the colors found in the wardrobes of the polite society members, but the multiple heavy layers of his costume contrast with the sparser attire of his underground customers (*Repo!*). These aspects of Graverobber's appearance separate his character from the remainder of the film's cast, lending Graverobber a memorable appearance within the film's setting and preventing the character from fading into the background. He is also the only "graverobber" the audience sees onscreen. Signage throughout the film, as well as the graphic novel-esque prologue of the film, references "graverobbers" as a group, but no other graverobbers appear in the entirety of the film (*Repo!*). Even the graverobber pictured in the prologue bears a striking resemblance to Graverobber the character, such that the graverobber of the prologue most likely represents the Graverobber of the film proper (*Repo!*). The use of Graverobber as the sole example of a known career in *Repo! The Genetic Opera* adds to the distinctiveness of the character, which allows him to stand out among the film's cast. Through visual uniqueness, Graverobber portrays an identifiable character while performing the role of the chorus, a departure from twentieth-century practices, whose choruses blend with their works' settings and casts more thoroughly.

Another aspect of Graverobber's character that sets him as an individual involves his relationship with Amber Sweet. The bulk of the onscreen depiction of this relationship can be seen in "Zydrate Anatomy," where Graverobber and Sweet spend the most time directly interacting (*Repo!*). Before Sweet enters the scene, the audience sees Graverobber sell Zydrate to multiple unnamed addicts in

a back alley. During these sales, Graverobber sneers at the addicts, clearly disgusted, and stays a few inches away from them when making sales. When Graverobber administers Zydrate to one of the addicts, he pushes the addict to the ground and forcefully injects the Zydrate, maintaining the "upper position" by remaining sitting while the addict lays supine (*Repo!*). In comparison, Graverobber's reactions to Sweet show familiarity. Graverobber still expresses disgust when he sees Sweet approaching, and uses similarly forceful behavior to subdue her. Graverobber moves much closer to Sweet than he does to the other addicts, however, and allows her to remain standing while he kneels to inject the Zydrate (*Repo!*). The differences between Graverobber's treatment of other addicts and his treatment of Sweet, along with the short scenes depicting sex between Graverobber and Sweet interspersed within "Zydrate Anatomy," suggest that Graverobber and Sweet have a preexisting relationship, presumably a dealer-addict relationship with sexual overtones (*Repo!*). The events of "Zydrate Anatomy" clearly portray that Graverobber and Sweet are familiar with each other, such that Graverobber is shown to have a background in the environment of *Repo!* beyond the setting itself. Graverobber's preexisting connection with an established character strengthens the individuality of his own character, enabling Graverobber to better represent a fully-fledged character while serving the role of the chorus.

Both Graverobber's striking appearance and relationship with Amber Sweet work to individuate his character from the other cast roles in *Repo! The Genetic Opera.* Neither of these characteristics would indicate an alteration of chorus tradition in the twenty-first century alone, however. The defining aspect of Graverobber that hails a shift in the role of the chorus in the twenty-first century is the fact that Graverobber is the only character who participates in typical chorus activities. In the twentieth-century works discussed previously, choruses perform in groups, and while the participants of choruses might include named characters which perform individual roles in the work, the chorus itself remains a collective presence. In *Repo!,* Graverobber is the sole chorus member, because every scene in which he provides background information features Graverobber as the only vocalist who provides that information. Most of these scenes are performed by Graverobber alone as well. The exception, "Zydrate Anatomy," includes a group of addicts who echo the prominent words of Graverobber's lines as well as Wallace and Sweet, but the two named characters do not contribute to the information presented in the musical number, and the group of addicts only repeats single words rather than truly singing along with Graverobber's lines, such

that its members do not function as chorus members (*Repo!*). In addition, because Graverobber is the only chorus member, he cannot fit the chorus-leader role of ancient choruses because that role requires the presence of a group to represent. Graverobber's singularity as a chorus of one separates the character from the previous traditions of ancient and twentieth-century choruses. This singularity also highlights the individuality of Graverobber's character by allowing his role to stand in sharp relief to the other characters' roles through the one-on-one comparisons enabled by Graverobber's presence as a single voice.

4. Conclusion

Choruses have remained a salient aspect of theater across time periods, beginning in ancient Greek drama, reviving with the beginning of European opera, and continuing through contemporary American musical theater. The chorus as a dramatic device evolved over time to best suit the needs of the dramas it served and continues evolving as drama develops into the twenty-first century. The role of Graverobber in the rock opera film *Repo! The Genetic Opera* signals one such evolution in chorus use, as the character's visual distinctiveness, preexisting relationship with an established independent character, and sole participation in chorus activities leads to a deeper depiction of an individual personality than is seen in twentieth-century American musical theater choruses. While further implications of Graverobber's characterization have yet to manifest in other forms of twenty-first century drama, Graverobber himself represents a possible move toward personifying the chorus in the twenty-first century.

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