

Love Song

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*Oh, my love, my darling,
I've hungered for your touch
A long lonely time...*

So the melody goes, unchained since 1955 when it was sung in a now forgotten B-film only to reappear in countless covers ever since, returning to the cinema decades later in the film, *Ghost*; an exquisitely painful love story. *Unchained Melody*¹ became one of the most classic love songs to haunt the silver screen.

Rewind to 1955, to that forgotten film:

*Unchained*² is set in an experimental 'honour' prison in the USA in the 1950s. Prisoners are left *unchained* if they comply with the rules of their sentence. The protagonist is condemned for striking a man he suspected of stealing his property. He aggressively rejects the prison's offer of limited freedom and wallows in the unbearable pain of separation from the woman he loves.

Silence falls upon the men's dormitory, the chatter ceases, not for fear of being beaten black and blue, but for the song of a black man who captures their sorrow with his blues: *Lonely rivers cry, wait for me, wait for me*.

Although the singer, Todd Duncan³, was an operatic baritone, he loved to sing 'spirituals', the origin of the blues that have continued to sing a song of sadness to our day, haunted by the ballads of the slave deprived of his liberty.

If this *blue note* resonates beyond the cotton fields, even awakening those sleeping between their white sheets to the hatred that can be clothed in them, is it not because it resonates with the structure of the subject that has no colour?

"...from the moment the subject is placed within the signifier, it cannot destroy itself," says Lacan. "It enters into this intolerable enchainment [...] which means it cannot conceive itself as anything other than forever resurging into existence".⁴ All speaking beings are thus slaves to the signifier, each one enchained by *the words of his own sentence*.

And so the melody returns, singing forever is *a long lonely time*. This solitary pain of existence" bears down on the convicted man who is desperate to escape. But *time can do so much*, replies his fellow inmate, leading him to question his violence and *read* his life like a sentence. He grew up alone on a ranch, free to roam with only his own rules to guide him, until the encounter with this woman.

¹ *Unchained Melody*, by Alex North and Hy Zaret, 1954. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToiWlHZbXLo>

² *Unchained*, film directed by Hall Bartlett. YouTube : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CE_es014R4A&t=97s

³ *Todd Duncan - Unchained Melody (Original) 1955*, YouTube : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G11mDi_LXe8

⁴ Translation by author. See also Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI: Desire and its Interpretation*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink. Cambridge: Polity, 2019, p.89.

If the *blue note* evokes the solitary pain of *existence*, the love song veils it with its metaphor, where *one* becomes *two*. *He* finds *her*, but the Other sex can only be possessed as an object on the screen of his fantasy, where he is anxious that she be stolen by a rival. The imaginary rival fades when he hears that a woman has her own desire, prompting the song's question: *Are you still mine?*

The dramatic climax reaches the threshold of a *passage to the act*, thwarted by a logical impasse: escape and he will be on the run forevermore, outlawed from the exile he has to bear in order to belong to the group of fellow men. The wall that can never be crossed is sexual difference itself, a life sentence. And so he turns back to join his fellow *inmate*, his Afro-American 'brother of another mother'. The black and white image then sinks into oblivion, as would the film and its message.

Fast forward to our times: The prison with no bars has long gone; or rather, on the contrary, it is our reality; an increasingly unchained world haunted by the remnants of love's metaphor whose melodies are to be recomposed anew.