

ARTICLES

A 'Wounded Cinema': Failed Utopias, Décor Leitmotifs, and the *Homo Minnellianus*

An empty classroom. Standing behind her desk in the right foreground, Miss French (Martha Hyer) goes through some books, her back to the camera. Meanwhile, in the left background, a woman in pink enters, closes the door, and introduces herself as Ginny Moorhead (Shirley MacLaine). The shot / reverse-shot that follows directly opposes the two characters: the teacher is framed in a medium long shot against a window through which a white, Greek-style portico (an imposing symbol of knowledge) is visible. The camera is placed just below eye-level, from the outset strengthening Miss French's superior position in the conversation that is about to occur. Meanwhile, the light emanating from the windows behind her casts a golden hue on the young teacher, bestowing upon her a distinct auratic quality. Ginny, on the other hand, appears in a full shot at the back of the room, standing between two blackboards on which pristine, white cursive handwriting (indicative of learning and discipline) can be seen. As she advances towards the teacher, the camera repositions itself to keep the two characters equidistant from the edges of the frame, moving forwards and rightwards ever so gently. Costume and the use of colour further stress their differences: Ginny's tight, low-cut pink dress, cropped reddish hairstyle, and heavy make-up contrast with the



Fig. 1: Miss French (Martha Hyer) in a medium long shot, just below eye-level, against a Greek-style portico symbolising intellectual superiority.



Fig. 2: Hesitant Ginny (Shirley MacLaine) enters the classroom in a full shot.

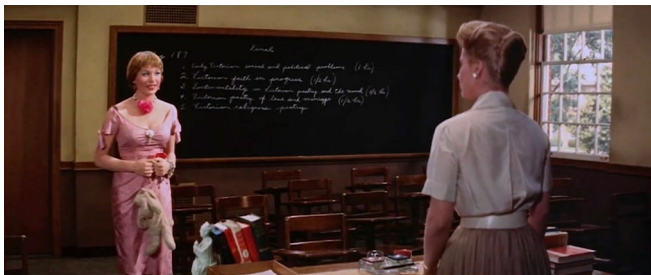
nude pastels of the teacher's attire, her seamless complexion, and her blonde hair in a perfectly coiffed updo. Miss French's pale-yellow blouse and beige skirt, neatly separated by a thick white belt, are capped off with a delicate string of pearls adorning her neck. A recognised symbol of class status, propriety, and femininity, the small, milky white pearls are visually matched by Ginny's mock-pearl necklace, in which big white beads alternate with smaller pink ones. A large artificial bright pink flower springs from the necklace's right side and is emphasised by a similarly large but lighter-coloured pink flower attached to the left side of her very thin pink belt. In between the two bold flowery ornaments, a small white embroidered flower detail draws attention to Ginny's wide oval décolletage. The cheap accessories and appliqué are in tune with the sui generis light brown bunny-shaped bag she holds as she tentatively walks into the classroom, and which she places on the tablet-arm of the student chair-desk combo after asking Miss French's permission to sit. These markers of childhood are not only unexpected in a grown woman but create a very clear visual counterpoint to the serious tone of their exchange. 'I want him to have what he wants, even if it means you instead of me' encapsulates Ginny's frank and

sympathetic approach to the love triangle situation in which she finds herself. Further troubling her childlike ways and accentuating the woman-child duality is a persistent black bra strap that peeks from underneath the off-shoulder neckline on her right side. Next to the pink, satin-like fabric of the dress and the different shades of pinks and reds that bring youthful, if excessive, colour to her presence, that hint of black sorely stands out, overtly disrupting the colour pattern of the character and drawing attention to the tainted innocence that defines her life.

The film is *Some Came Running* (1958) and the scene is emblematic of American director Vincente Minnelli's cinema: it is the conflict between two disparate personal worlds, two antithetic ways of apprehending and facing reality that structures and guides the narratives. As Gilles Deleuze remarks, '[t]he plurality of worlds is Minnelli's first discovery, his very great position in cinema' (1989: 63). Indeed, from his first film, *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), to his last, *A Matter of Time* (1976), the tension between incompatible dreamworlds is arguably the most striking feature of Minnelli's work. Going back to that classroom, a host of other aural and visual elements opposes the two women, underscoring the film's

layered tonal dimensions and its preoccupation with social performances of identity, gender, and class. In his study of tone in film, Douglas Pye discusses how this device is indissociable from interpretation and how tonal qualities and complexities can serve as productive critical tools to explore a 'film's shifting textures' ([2007] 2014: 7, 18). Focusing specifically on *Some Came Running*, Pye analyses in insightful detail the multifaceted ways in which Minnelli dramatises 'emotional discomfort' and alienation, namely by opposing 'seemingly relaxed and tense bodies' (49): the schoolteacher's inhibited, 'stiff and stilted performance' (48) and Ginny's vulnerable, 'emotional openness and trust' (55) convey nuanced and highly effective tonal registers that decisively contribute to the film's 'deepening mood of fatalism' (39).

In their classroom interaction, differences in name usage, diction, linguistic expression, respective modes of address, and general demeanour denote a tonally rich scene where 'embarrassment, pathos, pity, emotional engagement and critical detachment, mingle with extraordinary intensity' (Pye [2007] 2014: 54). The naïve trespasser uses a diminutive (Ginny) to refer to herself and attempts to maintain a formal register throughout by appending 'Miss' to Gwen French's



name. The social distance attached to the title is nonetheless immediately undermined by her informal style, poor grammar, and heavy Chicago accent, which starkly contrast with Miss French's proper enunciation and restrained speech. Furthermore, the uneducated 'hostess' has a childlike quality to her voice, which frequently changes volume as well as tone, whereas the teacher is as poised vocally as she is physically. Ginny appears utterly out of place and her inadequateness becomes even more painfully obvious through the thoughtful use of ambient sound. As Ginny first walks up to Miss French, right after entering her classroom uninvited, the unladylike noise of her approaching footsteps disrupts the otherwise silent room while the chunky silver bracelets on her left wrist jiggle and jingle audibly as she gestures. The significance of these sounds to the scene's 'tonal colouring', to borrow Pye's phrase, is stressed by the absence of non-diegetic music ([2007] 2014: 43). She then sits down, noisily and eagerly pulling up a chair as close as possible to the imposing teacher's desk. While she speaks, her nervousness is patently clear and is conveyed visually long before it is confirmed via the dialogue towards the end of the scene. As she addresses the teacher, Minnelli's tight framing and MacLaine's compelling acting skilfully intensify the unease of a scene that was already emotionally uncomfortable. Framed in a medium close-up, Ginny's body betrays her acute awareness of her disenfranchised status: she inelegantly scratches her bare shoulder, her forehead, and the back of her hand, fidgets with the flower on her necklace (all the while casting shadows on her skin), touches her nose, raises her eyebrows, shakes her head (making her long earrings dangle), sighs, points, and finally cries, in a close-up shot, half-covering her face – first with her right hand and then with her left – her red nail polish matching her lipstick and her bracelets sliding down her arm.

These little, understated actions lend a sustained pictorial and sonic liveliness to the shots: all of Ginny is light, colour, and movement. Miss French, on the other hand, wears studs on her ears, a golden watch on her left wrist, and keeps her hands still for most of the scene, moving her head and her eyes very subtly as she replies to Ginny's personal and intrusive questions. Her speech is likewise carefully controlled almost until the very end of their exchange. After Miss French reassures



her she is not interested in Dave Hirsh (Frank Sinatra), the man with whom they are both in love, Ginny prepares to leave. Relieved, but still sniffing, she looks at Miss French and says, 'I haven't got nothin' ...' – adding, seconds after getting up from her seat, head tilted forward, eyes looking down, in a half whispered, confessional afterthought – '... not even a reputation.' 'I'm sure you have a reputation, Miss Moorhead', is Miss French's cutting retort, which she utters projecting her voice slightly higher than she had up to that point. The teacher's offhand remark and 'momentary breakdown in politeness' feel, as Pye observes, 'especially unpleasant' ([2007] 2014: 55). Ginny momentarily freezes and looks straight at Miss French: clutching her bunny-purse in a medium shot, she



does not look offended, but equal parts hurt and genuinely surprised. We can sense the teacher's silent prejudice, her haughty little outburst somewhat releasing the tension that had been building from the moment Ginny first mentioned Dave. Her bittersweet and disarming reply – 'Well ... that's one thing don't bother Dave none' – is met with an uncomfortable glance from Miss French, whose demeanour changes: she becomes more curt and urges Ginny to leave before her next class comes in. During this pointless remark (Ginny was already on her way out), she moves her head from the right to the left and then up at Ginny. Paired with the slight change in speech tone, pitch, and volume, this is the most movement we see in her counter shots. Setting, décor, costume, make-up, sound, shot composition, camera movement, lighting, colour, and acting: everything in the frame seems to place an insurmountable chasm between 'the woman who knows nothing but understands everything', and 'the woman who knows everything but understands nothing' (Costa 2003: 165).¹

V. F. Perkins describes Minnelli as a 'governor of the action', a role which, to this day, is still 'most consistently neglected by the film theorists' ([1972] 1986: 77). The overall dismissive attitude towards his work and the generalised reluctance to take

Minnelli seriously derives primarily from the auteur theory, specifically the idea that Minnelli was more a stylist (*metteur en scène*) than someone deeply involved in the creative process of filmmaking (*auteur*). On that account, the significance of his cinema, beyond its widely acknowledged stylistic excellence, has been undervalued. Underscoring this critical neglect is the fact that Minnelli is especially remembered for his colourful film musicals. As Albert Johnson observes, if 'a director's interests [...] are identified with a particular genre, it is extremely difficult for critics to accept his experiments with other material' (1959: 32). When discussing Minnelli, however, we are not talking about mere 'experiments', a term which relegates his non-musical works to a subaltern position. Minnelli's filmmaking career spanned more than thirty years, during which time he completed thirty-four films, as well as many sequences for other directors, and his films are relatively evenly distributed between three genres: he directed thirteen musicals, thirteen melodramas, and eight comedies. It is therefore counterproductive and inaccurate to consider his oeuvre solely in light of his musicals. Aware of the over-emphasis being given to this genre at the height of the auteurism debates, *Movie* defiantly adopted an original approach and defended Minnelli as an auteur, centring the discussion almost exclusively on his 1960s melodramas (Elsaesser [1969-1970] 1981: 11). This position, however refreshing, is not entirely satisfactory either: we should not split Minnelli's authorial text, which is the ensemble of his work, into one film genre and from there alone extrapolate his contributions to cinema history and aesthetics.

In the wake of auteurism, key film scholars saw in Minnelli's keen attention to décor and his elaboration of a singular visual vocabulary both an eloquent articulation of core diegetic dilemmas and a biting commentary on the contemporary social reality. In the late 1970s, Andrew Britton (1977) and Robin Wood (1979) focus on *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) to investigate the horror politics of American family life as disclosed through Minnelli's aesthetic choices. Britton uncovers the many disturbing ambivalences in the cultural myth of the family that run through the film and stresses its gothic, horror, and noir undercurrents, positioning Tootie (Margaret O'Brien) as a precursor to the devil children in *The Exorcist*

(1973) and *Carrie* (1976). Like Britton, Wood develops a psychoanalytic reading that locates the return of the repressed in the heteronormative nuclear family, arguing that *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the slasher horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) foreground a variation on the same type of familial horrors. Writing in *Movie* in 1990, Edward Gallafent shifts attention to the bourgeois family in *Home from the Hill* (1960) and identifies generational conflicts and threats to the patriarchal order that taint the American myth of 'home', equated with stability and community. Douglas Pye (2007), in turn, offers a close analysis of class, gender dynamics, masculinity in crisis, and social performance in *Some Came Running* through a careful investigation of mood and tonal qualities. Pye's detailed readings dialogue closely with the formal-aesthetic analyses conducted by Joe McElhaney, whose work has been crucial to a reappraisal of Minnelli, and who states that the director's films 'give voice to some of the basic conditions and repressive aspects of the culture of which they are a part' (2004).

In line with these groundbreaking explorations of the significance of Minnelli's oeuvre, I suggest that his output deserves further critical scrutiny and recognition. There is a poignant timeliness and urgency in his films which, I argue, appear as projections of a culture increasingly disrupted by deteriorating communities, fragmented identities, and disjointed experiences. The estranged, broken self that emerges from these tensions is especially relevant to our global age, where reality and illusion mix and meld with unparalleled uncanniness and rapidity. McElhaney claims that 'what we have in Minnelli's films is not simply a style, [but] rather [...] a vision, if not a philosophy, of (and for) cinema' (2009: 5). The 'painful to watch' encounter between Ginny and Miss French (Pye [2007] 2014: 54) epitomises such a 'vision' in its dramatic staging of Minnelli's most distinctive stylistic traits and narrative preoccupations. In other words, it displays a thoroughly cinematic language that makes décors speak. The *mise-en-scène* mobilises Minnelli's particularly disenchanted outlook on dreams and love, conveyed cinematically through sharp visual and aural counterpoints between discordant worlds. I propose here that Minnelli's philosophy hinges on the representation of alienated individuals who consistently

fail to fully partake in or escape reality. In each film, the director weaves complex stories of erasure and forlornness into his visuals, allowing for a questioning of the recurring association of utopian oneirism with apolitical escapism. This article follows the example of the pioneering critics who challenged the still widespread assumption that Minnelli's films are chiefly concerned with carefree entertainment, happy endings, and gleeful characters that suddenly burst into song. I aim to continue their work and discuss Minnelli's style as uniquely dramatising the interface of aesthetics and politics.

In interrogating the socio-political relevance of the Minnellian utopia, I claim that we should not 'peel away the tinsel', as Jane Feuer advocates (1982: ix), but should instead engage closely with it, with the surface of the moving images: the tinsel (the aesthetics) is where the uniqueness of the medium resides, in the bringing together of the visual and the aural, technique and technology, style and substance. In this article, I contend that Minnelli's musicals, comedies, and melodramas construct a striking aesthetic of utopian disenchantment, favouring images in which the negotiation between reality and dream is not only urgent but ontological at its core, for the characters define themselves (their selfhood and identity, along with their interpersonal relationships) in relation to it. Ultimately, the balance between experience and expectation, or desire and the real, remains ever elusive – it is on this point, I suggest, that Minnelli's films become political and resonate with underrepresented groups: in their failure to achieve utopia, the characters show us 'glimpses of discontent with prevailing social structures', and the 'fervency' of their continued belief in an imagined better place 'can speak of oppression and speak to the oppressed', as Kenneth MacKinnon astutely observes (2000: 46). MacKinnon is analysing generic traits and roots the film musical's subversive property in the idea that 'the cruciality of [the genre's] wishfulness' lies in the dream's 'rarity of actualisation', in the sense that quotidian life never quite matches 'the fantasy of escape' (40, 46). While many musicals may accrue appeal and power from this mismatch, I argue that MacKinnon's words are especially fitting to characterise Minnelli's musicals and comedies, for in them we can see a sustained concern with outcasts, all of whom Minnelli frames as incorrigible dreamers, establishing

a tight socio-political connection between these typically 'lighter' genres and his melodramas. Those individuals whose feelings and aspirations are not accommodated by their circumstances can see themselves reflected in the ambivalent, or downright distraught, experiences of the characters. This political resonance does not derive merely from the interstitial portrayal of 'longings and absences' (45), but from an overt aesthetic representation of intense displacement and frustrated ambitions. Exploring Minnelli's films through the lens of failure and utopia permits a reconsideration of his work's significance while providing a layered reading of the *homo minnellianus* as an avatar for minorities.

To illustrate the powerful charge of politicised utopia, I will refer to a selection of Minnelli's films, focusing more closely on two productions that have received little scholarly scrutiny in English-language criticism – the musical *Brigadoon* (1954) and the melodrama *Some Came Running* (1958). My analysis is anchored in and will pivot around the classroom scene that opens the article and which encapsulates Minnelli's singularly dystopian construction of cinematic oneirism. After probing the role of dreams and décor in the first section, I will draw on *Brigadoon* to examine the transmutation of utopia into nightmare, along with the implications of this shift, and will then explore the distinctive features of the prototypical Minnellian hero. Overall, as I will argue, Minnelli's inclination towards the depiction of the unsuitability of the dream raises doubts about its desirability. The result is a poignant commentary on the human condition in contemporary societies.

Décor leitmotifs

'What are dreams made of? Where do they come from?', Flaubert (James Mason) asks at the beginning of *Madame Bovary* (1949). In Minnelli, they are built through the décor and made of the relentless hope that imagination (or desire) and everyday life can be conciliated. Even when her plans go awry, 'in Emma there was a terrifying capacity for pursuing the impossible', Flaubert elucidates, and so '[t]he dream did not end. She had learned to be a woman for whom experience would always be a prison, and freedom would lie always beyond the horizon'. Like so many of Minnelli's heroes,

Emma (Jennifer Jones) lives in her own world, progressively alienated from reality, and strives to embellish and tailor the insipid world of actuality to suit her dreams of 'high romance and impossible love', vividly present throughout the film: even the decadent hotel room where she meets with her lover seems like a picture out of a book, with its enormous bed in the shape of a gondola. The crammed rooms Emma navigates



illustrate what Kay Young calls 'suffocation-by-thing' (2004, 69), effectively representing the two clashing worlds she inhabits as she is engulfed by her own ambitions. Her décor, marked by an excess of want and of things, intrudes upon the décors of those she meets: she does not simply inhabit her surroundings, but transmogrifies them so that they mirror her confabulations.

In Minnelli's films, the camera typically allocates each protagonist what I shall call a 'décor leitmotif', that is, stylistic patterns that repeat and accompany a specific character, indicating their presence, enriching diegetic events, and offering insights into character psychology. The mise-en-scène of objects in *Madame Bovary*, for instance, engenders a discourse that exceeds the diegesis, allowing for a metavisual commentary on the dangers dreaming poses to Emma's happiness and sanity. Minnellian dreams derive from the imperative urge to make happiness happen – against all reason and all odds – and

this ardent desire or 'fervency', to borrow from MacKinnon, materialises in the heroes' individualised décors. *Madame Bovary* makes evident how the persona of its dreamer-heroine is formed in relation to the décor, which dramatises matters of identity and class. To Emma, artifice becomes authenticity. In *The Pirate* (1948), the décor likewise interweaves oneiric voyages and real journeys, rendering ordinary events fantastic. 'I realise that there's a practical world and a dream world. I know which is which. I shan't mix them', Manuela (Judy Garland) innocently states at the beginning of the film. Predictably, however, she cannot help but imagine the thrilling adventures of Macoco, the fearless pirate, and picture herself beside him. Her dreams are set against balconies and windows, a décor leitmotif which creates a proscenium arch over her, doubly signalling the make-believe and her longing for a more exciting elsewhere. Tellingly, it is from her balcony that she watches, smitten, as Serafin (Gene Kelly), pretending to be Macoco, performs a bold ballet to woo her. A dissolve on a medium close-up of Manuela in between window shutters indicates the passage from reality to imagination. Minnelli's roving camera then stresses the virtuosic choreography of the dance displaying the pirate's masculine prowess as the colour red floods the screen, replacing the yellowish overtones of daily existence. As the depiction of Manuela and Emma indicates, Minnellian characters repeatedly fail to maintain a clear



separation between the actual and the virtual, so that routine actions, such as hunting in *Home from the Hill*, choosing new drapes for a psychiatric clinic in *The Cobweb* (1955), or cooking in a moving vehicle in *The Long, Long Trailer* (1953) acquire a somewhat surreal dimension.

Contrasting décor leitmotifs advance the narrative by reflecting the collision of irreconcilable lives and loves, as in the series of Daisy-Melinda's (Barbra Streisand) flashbacks in the musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970). The film tells the story of Daisy who, in a hypnotherapy session with psychiatrist Chabot (Yves Montand), recalls her supposed past life as Lady Melinda Tentrees, a nineteenth-century coquette wrongly executed for espionage and treason. The disconcerting shot / reverse shots situate her in the past (commenting on her own life) and place the psychoanalyst in the present. Although temporally and physically unsynchronised, he gets lost in Melinda's dream and falls for her. Stressing the impossibility of Chabot's *amour fou* is the fact that the couple never sings together and their décors never coincide: at one point, Chabot's formal office is opposed to the sumptuousness of the Brighton Pavilion where Melinda dines. At the other extreme, the coincidence of décors can also add a richer dimension to the diegesis. In *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1963), widower and radio station executive Tom (Glenn Ford) meets and courts sophisticated fashion designer Rita (Dina Merrill). His son, Eddie (Ron Howard), however, is not fond of Rita but has taken a liking to their new neighbour, Elizabeth (Shirley Jones). Tom eventually proposes to Rita but abruptly changes his mind in the film's coda. Rita is a lonely, independent woman whose last shot in the film consists of her being unceremoniously left by Tom over the phone. She is lying in bed with her poodle, in a room featuring the same colour scheme as Eddie's and Elizabeth's homes, implying that perhaps they were not that different after all.

In Minnelli, each character is one with their own décor, and the problems arise only when one's décor collides with or tries to metamorphose into someone else's. João Bénard da Costa comments that *Gigi* (Leslie Caron), in the eponymous 1958 film, decides to convert herself to the décor (with the appropriate dress) and performs so perfectly at Maxim's that Gaston (Louis Jourdan) cannot stand it and rejects her along



with the décor (1987: 382). Conversely, a similar action in the comedy *Designing Woman* (1957) has the opposite effect: 'I figured if I put on my new suit maybe I could join the club. I couldn't. I guess I didn't speak the language', regrets Mike Hagen (Gregory Peck). Successful social interaction involves a seamless embodied performance in which one's décor is not erased; rather, self and environment are in tune and come together in organic synchronicity. Achieving such a balance remains, for the most part, utopian in Minnelli. The ineptitude of the heroes to adapt to their surroundings, especially in dinner party sequences, is recurrent and crystallises the pervasive social maladjustment of non-conformist characters that runs through his work. The sanity and survival of the heroes therefore depends on the careful protection of their personal environment (their dream and their décor) from outside disturbances. This explains why Minnellian characters are constantly rearranging the performance space. In *Designing Woman*, the first thing Marilla (Lauren Bacall) does after entering her new husband's home is to move the furniture around, immediately imposing her décor on his. Tom (John Kerr), in *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), comments that he put drapes on his room's window because he 'tried to

make it look more like a home'. In this sense, the dissymmetry between reality and oneirism, as well as between one's dream and the dream of the other, is mirrored in the fight of décor against décor.

The arresting effect of forcing décor leitmotifs together is apparent in Ginny's impromptu visit to Miss French. In that empty classroom, Ginny's monologic interaction and her fidgeting and fumbling at things suffuse the frame with movement, even while the camera remains stationary. She looks radically misplaced, a character out of time and place who never experiences life as the other characters do; a strange creature that seems to have just landed in a foreign, hostile environment that systematically refuses to accommodate her. As Jean-Loup Bourget states, 'the Shirley MacLaine character, who seems to come out of a musical, should never meet Martha Hyer's' (2009: 66). The two décors – bright colours and movement; muted hues and stillness – are so completely opposed that they violently clash. After the initial shock, however, Ginny's dynamic décor slowly encroaches on the teacher's and takes over the scene, so that she leaves the classroom believing that her fears were unfounded and that she and Dave can have a future together. When the dream and

ordinary life mix, two antagonistic worlds merge and transcend one another, transforming the cinematic world in such a way that the mise-en-scène produces 'an overall impression of unreality' (Elsaesser [1969-1970] 1981: 21). In that classroom, the earnestness of Ginny's dream pushes against Miss French's determination not to dream. The two poles engender an alternative realm – the space of utopia.

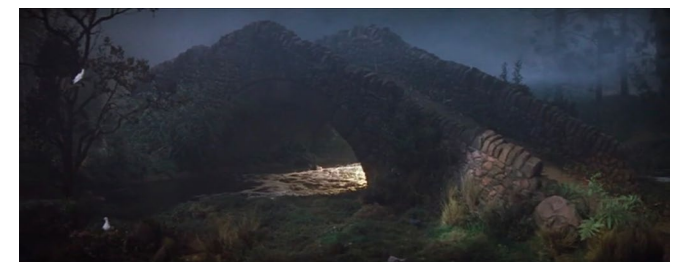
Utopia as death

Richard Dyer postulates that the film musical only shows utopia, a utopia that is implicit in the narrative as well as in the numbers, both of which are usually removed 'in time and space [...] to places [...] where it can be believed [...] that song and dance are "in the air"' (1981: 187-88). Yet, if we define utopia, with Louis Marin, as 'the name of the "neutral" [...], the gap between [...] two continents' (1993: 411), then its connotations are no longer entirely positive or mystical. *Brigadoon* constitutes a useful case study of utopia's peculiar contours in the Minnellian canon for the way it dissociates between 'two continents', delineating a dark, liminal quality in the idealised realm.

The film opens with a low-contrast establishing shot that gradually cranes out through the mist covering vast Scottish

moors. Following a dissolve, the mist starts to clear and a downwards movement to the right reveals two wandering hunters. Contrary to what would be expected, the camera does not stay with them; instead, the image again dissolves into a shot of the scenic landscape. Movement fills the frame as a flock of birds takes flight. Gliding to the right, the camera stops briefly before an ancient-looking bridge – a mythical, magical bridge that cannot be crossed without punishment. This is the longest shot in the opening sequence and sets an ominous tone for the film given the pervasively gothic connotations of bridges, familiar from such films as Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).² Next, the camera slowly cranes up to reveal a stream of water running underneath it, its surface reflecting the sunlight now spraying through the trees. The three following shots move in on grazing cows, tree branches, a town square, and lastly a house. The image then cuts to a series of shots of people waking up. The gradual clearing of the mist and Minnelli's characteristically elegant mobile camera, inspired by Max Ophüls' 'dancing' camera movements (Minnelli 1974: 122), give us the feeling of witnessing the awakening of the village itself, not just its inhabitants. These opening shots encapsulate the utopian oneirism of a film which revolves around the mysteries of time, space, love, and death – core preoccupations of Minnelli's cinema.

The film has been criticised mainly for its exaggerated artificiality. Nonetheless, the fact that it was shot in a studio set and is deliberately artificial, unreal (or surreal) seems to me to reinforce the believability of the magical dreamland, the dystopian reverie the characters enter almost by chance. The village is a world of décor, façade, and colour; verisimilitude would have detracted from the authenticity of the dream. The chromatic organisation of the sets accentuates the dreamlike atmosphere of the Highlands, chiefly due to the ubiquity of yellows, browns, and greens. *Brigadoon*'s studio look therefore suits the depiction of an imaginary place by paradoxically emphasising the undeniable impossibility of its existence. Indeed, as Tommy (Gene Kelly) and Jeff (Van Johnson) will learn after chancing upon unmapped Brigadoon while on a



hunting trip in Scotland, it is no ordinary day, but the one day out of every century in which the mysterious village comes back to life. In an unexpected reversal of the usual protagonists in a Faustian pact, with God replacing the devil, Brigadoon's enchantment is the result of a deal struck between God and the village's minister in 1754, only two days (or two centuries) before the story begins. At the minister's behest, the spell was cast to protect the village from the outside world, with the caveat that none of the inhabitants leave the village or else it would vanish forever into oblivion, taking everyone with it. The villagers must therefore protect themselves at all cost and destroy (meaning 'to harm' or 'kill') whoever tries to break Brigadoon's law. At first sight, Brigadoon is a welcoming and harmonious rural community – a safe haven of peaceful heathery fields. Yet, as the action progresses, a closer look detects the extraordinary precariousness of its equilibrium and uncovers Brigadoon's ultimate paradox: that the ideal and its underside, the dream and the nightmare, are inseparable and inescapable. The village is, in essence, a material representation of Bentham's panopticon prison: a closed space where people are under permanent surveillance. Harry (Hugh Laing), the man who eventually tries to escape the nightmarish paradise, revealingly describes Brigadoon as 'the dimensions of [his] jail'. For if Brigadoon appears to be, on the one hand, a world to escape into, on the other it is a cursed place, closer to Giovanni Piranesi's 'dream prisons' than to Busby Berkeley.

Tommy soon falls in love with Fiona (Cyd Charisse) and considers staying in Brigadoon. Caught in Tommy's dream, the sceptical Jeff, however, never loses sight of what is real and what belongs in that dream-jail. Significantly, it is him who ends up killing Harry, mistaking him for a grouse, which proves he never forgot that hunting was the reason he was in Scotland. The violence of the chase which leads to Harry's tragic death is reminiscent of the boar hunt in *Home from the Hill* and the horse chase sequence in *Undercurrent* (1946). Minnelli's unchained camera partakes in the action, directly involving the audience in the drama with its roving crane shots through the trees and over the characters as the villagers try to prevent Harry from leaving. It is only after Harry's accidental shooting that the camera finally stops. In front of a



tree, in the middle of the frame, Harry lies dead as the villagers gather around, silent, torches in hand. For the remainder of the sequence, the camera is static and kept at a distance from the action, as if to abstain itself from commenting on the images, leaving that role to the spectator. It eschews commonplace melodramatic effects by not moving in on Harry's father, present at the scene, or on any of the other characters.³ Minnelli opts for a visually neutral, but politically relevant vantage point: Harry's arbitrary death and the villagers' unphased reaction expose Brigadoon as a macabre society that unwillingly destroys itself under the pretence of shielding itself from the perversities of contemporaneity.

François Guérif relates Minnelli's oneirism with the social world, writing that the dream 'corresponds to a personal reality [...] whereas reality might represent a social imaginary' (1984: 16). This is clear in the representation of Brigadoon as cut-off from the world for its own protection to preclude its contamination via social, scientific, and technological progress. The nonconformity to society's rules, as noted, ends in tragedy for Harry, who can no longer stand that transcendental fantasy and is devoured by it. Broken-hearted after the woman he loves marries someone else, he needed to leave to live again, but Brigadoon could not let him. Brigadoon is thus



saved by death, but is also doomed by it. The central themes of isolation and death, and the narrative's direct likening of God and the devil (with the former facilitating a pact that effectively requires human sacrifice), strengthen the gothic overtones of a film that is not about the survival of the fittest but of the most obedient, the most subservient to the dominant power structures.

After Tommy's decision to leave Brigadoon, Minnelli introduces us to noisy New York City through a high-angle shot which moves downwards and dissolves into a crowded bar. The bar's overwhelming cacophony and the lack of space for bodies to move freely without brushing or colliding signals a distance to Scotland that is more than geographical. The camera tracks slowly across the packed space, allowing

us to eavesdrop on numerous bits of random conversations. To further highlight Tommy's unbelonging, this sequence also differs from the rest of the film in that it does not have its own musical score, borrowing it instead from the bewitched village as Tommy recollects excerpts of three songs he heard there ('Heather on the Hill', 'Waitin' for My Dearie', and 'Go Home with Bonnie Jean'). New York appears just as claustrophobic to Tommy as Brigadoon was to Harry. The sequence



demonstrates the dystopia of the real world (through Tommy's eyes), whereas Brigadoon reveals the dystopia of the imaginary realm (which Tommy, devoted to the dream, cannot see). The denouement in Scotland reinforces Brigadoon's dystopian uncanniness when Tommy wishes back the village and it resurrects again from the mist, ghostlier than ever. Thus, the village that comes out of the fog one day every one hundred years can apparently be conjured at will, through the sheer transformative power of love. Yet the spell is not broken, unlike in traditional fairy tales, and fantasy wins over reason. The final reappearance of Brigadoon corresponds to the summoning of the Minnellian utopia, according to which an ideal space and time is in fact the absence of a real space and of chronological time. Happiness means erasure.

Bellour claims that *Brigadoon* contains, 'in its principle and its mythical scenario [...] a *panic* of which the whole [Minnellian] oeuvre is more or less made' (2009: 405). This panic subverts the apolitical light-heartedness typically attributed to film musicals in foregrounding escapism to criticise the present state of society. Bourget explains this apparent paradox, observing that a utopia 'is not escapist in the derogatory sense of the word; rather it calls the viewer's attention to the fact that his own society is far removed from such an



ideal condition' (1973: 193). Minnelli first signalled this in the musical genre and expanded it afterwards to his melodramas and comedies, positing that utopia's immanence to reality serves to underline oppressive structures that stifle creativity, freedom, and happiness. As Edward Rothstein reminds us, in 'the monotonous world of utopias [...] virtue and horror run together' (2003: 4). The Minnellian mise-en-scène captures the struggles of this co-existence and aligns oneirism with fragmentation and fear, positioning dreaming as acutely dystopian. In this way, utopia proves an effective vehicle for an elegant attack on societal conventions and on a superficially picture-perfect America that shuns difference and sensitive, strong-willed individuals.

Drawing on the mise-en-scène to construct and convey a socio-political critique is a defining trait of Minnelli's work, in which the surface possesses a powerful depth. Martin Scorsese joins Bourget, Britton, Elsaesser, Gallafent, McElhaney, Pye, Wood, and other attentive film scholars and critics who have analysed this central yet underrated element of Minnelli's films – the social consciousness that runs surreptitiously through his cinema. In the British documentary *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*, the American filmmaker places Minnelli among the

'smuggler directors', whose films combine style with a hidden subversive discourse offering a biting reflection on social issues (Scorsese and Wilson 1995). Going back to *Brigadoon*, a compact work on the human condition in modern societies emerges, as Minnelli depicts the whole world as a prison and the individual as unable to be truly free, having to forsake life in order to live. Tommy's failure to carry on with his quotidian life, seeking temporal-spatial erasure, culminates in the choice of death over life.

His re-entering the strange village at the end of the film is strikingly reminiscent of Michel (Gérard Philipe) opening the forbidden door to rejoin his beloved, Juliette (Suzanne Cloutier), in the Land of Oblivion in Marcel Carné's *Juliette ou la clef des songes* (1951). In this Brigadoon-like realm, all the villagers have lost their memory and are consequently protected from the corruptive perils of remembering. Michel first accesses *le pays de l'oubli* in a dream while spending the night in prison for stealing from his employer in order to take the titular Juliette, a customer and the woman he is in love with, on a romantic weekend. In Oblivion, however, Juliette does not remember Michel and ends up marrying someone else. When Michel awakes to find his love is also unrequited outside the dream, he decides that the only pathway to happiness

is eternal forgetting. The crossing of the final threshold at the end of Carné's film is more overtly telling of suicide than *Brigadoon's*, in that the street door Michel opens and which would supposedly take him back to the amnesic, disenchanted village and to Juliette bears the ominous warning: 'No trespassing. Danger'. The narrative overlap with the ending



of *Brigadoon* is nevertheless too obvious not to consider the darker imagery and underlying message of a film that, for all its wonders, 'offers as a solution, a disappearance' (Douchet 2004: 60). Blessings and curses, happiness and tragedy, appear as the two sides of the same coin. Tone likewise connects the endings of the two films. *Juliette's* final scene, in which Michel's face is gradually bathed in intense white light as he carefully opens the door, tonally matches the ending of *Brigadoon*. The French director hides the world beyond the door, reducing it to light and to Juliette's acousmatic voice whispering to Michel. All the while, Carné focuses the viewer's attention on the hero's face by framing it in a tight close-up that annuls the surrounding space. Minnelli, in turn, refuses the emotional engagement which the prototypical close-up of the protagonist couple's embrace would elicit, opting instead for an unusual point of view – an extreme long shot that reduces *Brigadoon* to mist and the reunited couple to uncanny expressionist figures, moving slowly and theatrically towards each

other, arms outstretched. Tommy's return to Scotland means that, like Michel, he has chosen to alienate himself forever from society and renounce his everyday world so that he can remain, literally, with the girl of his dreams. In this sense, narrative resolution lies in the imagination or, more accurately, in death.



The Minnellian *homo aestheticus*

Referring to the work of Howard Hawks, Peter Wollen writes that his films exhibit the same thematic preoccupations, motifs, style, and tempo. He believes that we can therefore identify 'a *homo hawksianus*, the protagonist of Hawksian values in the problematic Hawksian world' (1969: 81). Drawing on Wollen, I suggest that in Minnelli's films we can identify a *homo minnellianus* – a *homo aestheticus* possessed of an idea, an obsession, and invariably haunted by the lack of something, by an imposing void, an overwhelming absence. Tommy, Ginny, and Emma Bovary, for instance, exemplify the fateful hold such obsessive yearnings can have on one's mind and actions. One way of coping is via creativity, a point underscored by Minnelli's prolific portrayal of artists across genres: eighteen of his thirty-four films centre on painters, writers, actors, filmmakers, and designers who find in art a way to convey their utopian longings and, in the process, reveal their true selves, hidden behind workaday routine. Whenever the script does not feature characters directly associated with the arts, Minnelli builds them so as to disclose a prominent and potentially dangerous sensitivity that inevitably collides with their mundane lives.

Minnelli's heroes are profoundly dissatisfied with middle-class life and bourgeois values, manifesting 'a need to reject all forms of society' (Douchet 2004: 59). Different iterations of this desire recur in Minnelli's cinema. As in *Brigadoon*, disappearance from the community is Manuela's answer to her dreary reality in *The Pirate*, which offers masquerading as the solution for happiness. She takes refuge in the fantastic world of the theatre company, 'choos[ing] the imaginary over reality' and 'enchant[ing] the real by travesty or ignoring it' (d'Almones 2005: 101), as epitomised in the 'Be a Clown' number – that joyous ode to make-believe – that closes the film. *The Sandpiper* (1965), in turn, centres on a mother and son voluntarily alienated from urban life in order to protect themselves from it. A typical form of disappearance, then, concerns the characters' hopeless immersion in the cinematic dream-image and their imperative need to live *within* that image, forever denying reality.⁴ In this respect, and in keeping with their artistic proclivities, Minnellian protagonists are close to

Marguerite Yourcenar's Wang-Fô (from *Oriental Tales*, 1938), the painter who saves himself by disappearing into the depths of his picture. This happens figuratively in *Brigadoon* and literally in *An American in Paris* (1951), in which Jerry (Gene Kelly) in a daydreaming episode, enters one of his drawings. Emerging in sharp contrast to the oneiric, the public sphere (the space where one's décor meets the décors of others) is presented as fundamentally futile, damaged, and corrupted. The world of actuality lacks the wondrous textures and hues



of the utopia: the dream has depth, while the real 'is mere appearance' (Bourget 2009: 77-78).

The inability or unwillingness to conform to the social domain determines the characters' perseverance never to give up their dreams. In *Some Came Running*, it is Ginny's unwavering ability to dream, paired with a captivatingly pathetic naïveté, that allows her to transcend social barriers and prompts her to seek out Miss French. 'I was so scared! You don't know how scared I was, 'cause I know you could take him away from me if you want to', she admits. But she fails to notice the immense gap separating her dream from Miss French's. This blindness is the reason Minnellian characters stand out as representatives of a particular type of paroxysm of existence: they are always too much and pursue their aspirations recklessly, their actions marked by an overwhelming excess which bestows upon them a kind of supernatural aura. Whether they are suffering or celebrating, they appear to be 'a little more than human beings actually are, or can be' (Galling 1964: 133). Throughout *Some Came Running*, the camera discloses Ginny's impossibly beguiling gullibility and blatant displacement, alternately placing her at the margins of the frame (and the community) or preventing her from blending



to her surroundings as she navigates the unyielding boundaries between Dave's middle-class life and her lower-class background. Significantly, Dave fails to notice her on different occasions. Unsurprisingly, their sudden wedding is intensely dystopian, with every ritual broken or subverted, from vows left unsaid to Ginny's final gesture of love – taking a bullet meant for Dave – an act which appears less heroic than misguided. Her death in her white bridal dress in the middle of a busy fairground at night discloses a bitterly sarcastic commentary on the impossibility of love. Ginny's sacrifice exposes as well conservative middle-class morality, which crushes the dynamic forces that challenge established conventions and institutions, including marriage. Ginny's campy, colourful presence breathes life into the film, and yet – Minnelli's camera tells us – there is no space for her to exist, her divergence from the norm too evident, too distracting, too excessive.

Ginny's untimely death at the film's denouement calls attention to another singularity of Minnelli's cinema: where available, the conservative, formulaic 'happy ending' is only happy insofar as it represents a compromise between utopia and its actual possibilities in the real world. This compromise can be perceived even in Minnelli's most optimistic musicals.



An American in Paris provides a striking example of a highly unlikely happy finale. Most of the film, in fact, is about mismatches with 'only a small portion of the text [...] dedicated to [...] the Kelly / Caron romance' (Altman 2010: 20-21). Moreover, the vibrant final ballet does not resolve narrative problems because Jerry does not get the girl by the end of the dance. It is a dance of loss – a dream of loss – and the film



ends on a somewhat forced note. The portentous ballet, which sees the progressive shift of utopia into its opposite, is thus overtly at odds with classical Hollywood musical comedies, and the abrupt delivery of the customary happy ending, with a close-up of the protagonist couple's passionate embrace filling the screen, is thoroughly rushed – an 'emergency exit', in Douglas Sirk's phrase (Wood 2003: 62). The term aptly defines a clichéd epilogue, 'an imposed conclusion that arrives [...] with little more than coincidental narrative motivation, and whose major role is to mask the fissures of the unresolved problem text that has preceded it' (Bruzzi 2012: 9). The implausibility of the final twist does seem like an attempt at masking diegetic 'fissures'. Furthermore, paired with the fact that it quickly follows Jerry's rhythmic and chromatic confabulations to the chords of Gershwin's tone poem, it raises the question of whether he ever awoke from his daydream. Even *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) ends with the feeling that St. Louis might not be as utopian as the Technicolor characters paint it.

After much anxiety around a promotion that would involve moving the whole family to New York, Lon Smith (Leon Ames) at long last decides to pass on the prestigious position and stay put, thus giving up his professional aspirations. His assertive 'We're gonna stay here till we rot' articulates a critique of postcard American family life and exposes the entropy that characterises the protagonists' humdrum lives,



reinforcing an ideology that regards change and modernity as a threat to proper American family values. Robin Wood notes how the film's tensions remain unresolved and describes the superficially happy ending as 'a considerable let-down' (2006: 205). Indeed, the camera consistently displays myriad subversive, uncanny references that taint the white-picket-fence image of the Smiths, from canted angles to expressionist lighting and outbursts of childhood violence. These make the happy ending, at the very least, ambivalent – if not straightforwardly satirical.

The *homo minnellianus*, we can conclude, is intrinsically defined by failure. Their systematic failure to fit in, achieve their goals, and reach a blissful realm where they can seclude themselves from oppressive communal environments vividly foregrounds the disheartening experience of 'those who feel out of kilter with their environment' (MacKinnon 2000: 44), suggesting that the utopia the characters yearn for is a 'space [that] belongs to the underprivileged' – to those who have

faceted discrimination and whose voices have been ignored or silenced. In this sense, Minnelli's paradoxically dystopian utopias become political: truly living lies beyond dominant social structures and values. Utopia requires the characters to repress their individual selves in favour of a community at odds with their will and their inability to do so posits social interaction as perilous, for it may lead to the corruption and destruction of the dream. In this context, the few heroes who succeed in existing within utopia, namely Ginny and Tommy, pay the price with their lives. Utopia is never a protected realm free from the constraints of society, but rather an unsettling and menaced elsewhere-elsewhen, its peace continually disrupted. Minnelli places his heroes in an inadequate, precarious environment and fills them with an oneiric utopianism never to be fulfilled *in toto*. If, in some cases, the characters ultimately achieve happiness it is because they settle for less than what they had hoped for: contentment replaces happiness. As Flaubert's voice-off effectively sums up in *Madame Bovary*: 'One kind of dream, another kind of life.'

Minnelli's idea

Serge Daney claims that bad cineastes have no ideas and good cineastes have too many. But 'the great cineastes (especially the inventors) have just one idea' ([1983] 1986: 41). According to Deleuze, Minnelli's '*idée fixe*' is that the dream 'concerns, above all, those who do not dream' and that, by correlation, 'each of us is more or less a victim of the dream of others' ([1987] 1998: 138). Deleuze hereby highlights the trail of devastation and sorrow the dream, and the dreamer, leave in their wake. I would add an important caveat, though – that the first and most hopeless victims of the dream are the dreamers themselves. Minnelli created a cinematic universe where to kill the dream is to kill the dreamer – not the other who was caught in it. Philippe Azoury helpfully complements Deleuze's point by clarifying what Minnelli's dream is about. Given his 'genuinely depressive and wounded cinema', Azoury asks 'how the image of Vincente Minnelli as a colourful apostle of the fake, a blazing colourist, and a flamboyant mannerist has persisted for so long, like a misunderstanding', concluding that it is because 'colour and love, darkness and pain, express in his

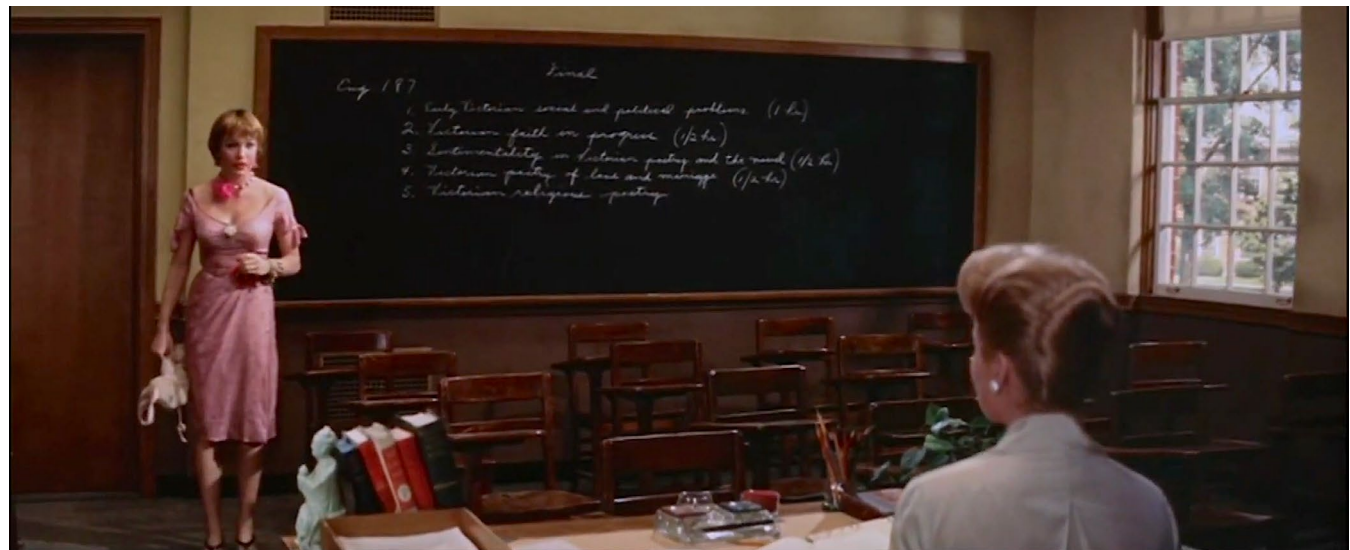
work the same idea about love as illusion' (2005). His dream, then, is about failure, about the impossibility of love outside utopia, and is therefore irreparably disenchanted. In the end, Minnelli warns us, dreams are fundamentally dangerous.

Perkins notes that '[t]he director does not have to subvert the script in order to make a recognisably personal impact' ([1972] 1986: 76). Minnelli's work attests to this. In a cinematic way, he makes the moving images speak: his films hinge on an unsettling re-conceptualisation of the role of utopianism as materialised in the mise-en-scène and in the construction of wistful misfits through décor leitmotifs. Minnelli's canon coheres in its unapologetic privileging of film style, which brings forward an intergeneric aesthetic where the décor generates meaning; it is not a mere background to the action nor used simply to stress narrative aspects: style and substance are indivisible. Paradigmatic in this regard is that strained classroom encounter between Ginny and Miss French.

As soon as Ginny intrudes upon the schoolteacher's décor and sits down, a medium close-up frames her against the empty student chairs and the lower third of the long blackboard, devoid of writing. Further emphasising her learner status is a group of pencils in a cylindrical holder to the bottom right side of the screen. Miss French, in turn, remains throughout positioned against the window looking out onto a white scholarly building and green trees. The student and the teacher are cinematically defined and opposed. When Ginny stands up to leave, the camera moves and hesitates with her, as it has since she first walked in. It reveals her nervousness, her unease in that environment, in that décor. Miss French's framing, on the other hand, is as static as she is impassive. By the end of the scene, the camera slowly pans left until the framing matches that of the beginning. Only now the position of the two women is somewhat reversed. Ginny is framed against the sentences written on the blackboard and her 'knowledge' is in this way visually placed at the same level as the teacher's. Tellingly, the latter is now sitting while Ginny is standing. The power dynamics have changed and Ginny's status has been elevated to Miss French's. Two irreconcilable décors that should never have met are put into sharp counterpoint. Ginny brings her whole world into that classroom, with a bright pink flower around her neck and a worn-out bunny-shaped

purse in her hands. As the scene unfolds, her décor increasingly haunts Miss French's and finally ends up swallowing it. 'There is absolutely nothing between Mr Hirsh and myself', she resignedly assures Ginny. Miss French is afraid to dream

and, finding herself suddenly caught in Ginny's utopia, chooses to silence her reverie. This is the reason her counter shots have no movement: Minnelli's camera always privileges the dreamer.



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¹ All texts cited from the original French and Portuguese were translated by the author.

² Minnelli's aesthetic often displays gothic overtones, a connection highlighted and discussed by Andrew Britton ([1977] 2009), Robin Wood (1979), and Edward Gallafent (1990).

³ Joe McElhaney remarks upon Minnelli's conscious use of 'restraint' and a distant camera when handling certain scenes, which denies the viewer the expected proximity to the actors, but allows for his dynamic framing to emerge, as viewers take in more nuanced movements, subtle gestures, and the décor as actively contributing to the development of the plot. See McElhaney (2003).

⁴ The topic of disappearance or erasure of the self recurs throughout Minnelli's oeuvre. As an example, he paints the annihilation of the individual by education (*Gigi*), Hollywood (*Two Weeks in Another Town*), performance (*The Pirate*), mores and morals (*Tea and Sympathy*), war (*The Clock*), politics and Nazism (*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*), work (*The Bad and the Beautiful*), society (*The Sandpiper*, *Goodbye Charlie*), mental illness (*The Cobweb*, *Lust for Life*), marriage (*Undercurrent*), time (*The Band Wagon*, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, *A Matter of Time*), capitalism (*The Long, Long Trailer*), and love (*Brigadoon*, *Some Came Running*).