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Introduction
Why Minnelli?

In 1945, after viewing a premiere of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* sponsored by the United Nations in San Francisco, Orson Welles wrote a lengthy and amusing commentary on the different styles of Soviet and American movies. Soviet montage, Welles argued, had developed out of economic necessity: "Because of the inferiority of Russian film stock, lenses, and other equipment, the camera must assert itself by what it selects, and by the manner of selection." Meanwhile, the more lavishly appointed, technically advanced Hollywood cinema had developed a "merchant's eye," devoting itself to "star-hogging closeups" and to "lovingly evaluating texture, the screen being filled as a window is dressed in a swank department store."[1]

Welles was speaking about Hollywood in general, and he was neither the first nor the last critic to equate American cinema with a shop window.[2] But suppose we wanted to choose a single filmmaker of the period who most exemplifies the "swank" tendency he was describing: who among the many possible candidates would be the most intriguing selection? It seems to me that the best answer would be Vincente Minnelli, who began his long career at MGM in 1943 and became one of the most successful and admired workers in what Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno termed the "culture industry." Over the next two decades, Minnelli made important contributions to some of the most celebrated entertainments in history, including *Meet Me in St. Louis, Father of the Bride, An American in Paris, The Bad and the Beautiful, The Band Wagon, Lust for Life,* and *Gigi.* Ultimately recognized as a Hollywood auteur, he won several awards and exerted a modest influence on the Italianate strain of contemporary cinema, especially on the films of Bernardo Bertolucci and Martin Scorsese. Ironically, however, Minnelli's first professional employment, long before coming to Hollywood, was as a designer of display windows for the Marshall Field

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department store in Chicago. Significantly, he once directed a charming comedy entitled *Designing Woman,* and one of his melodramas, *The Cobweb,* involves a crisis that breaks out in a mental institution when new drapes are selected for the common room.

Minnelli was born into a theatrical family that toured the Midwest in the first decade of the century. His first ambition was to paint, but he worked by turns as a department store decorator, an assistant to a portrait photographer, and a designer of stage settings for the Balaban and Katz chain of movie palaces. He then moved to New York, where he created sets and costumes for Radio City Music Hall, soon becoming a designer-director of Broadway shows. Cosmopolitan in his tastes, he made friendships with George and Ira Gershwin, S. J. Perelman, Oscar Levant, and many of the cleverest talents who worked in the heyday of American musical comedy. Eventually he was brought to Hollywood by former songwriter Arthur Freed, who had assembled a remarkable unit for the production of musical films at MGM. He remained at that studio until the sixties, specializing in musicals, domestic comedies, and melodramas, while growing increasingly famous. He seems to have been happy with the studio's many big-budget producers, designers, and stars. Essentially a *bricoleur,* he kept files of clippings showing different styles of paintings or illustrations, which he liked to go through for inspiration. Like many commercial artists, he particularly admired the surrealists and was among the first Hollywood directors to use their motifs in a self-conscious way. "The accidental juxtaposition of people and things makes for surrealism," he told a *Time* magazine interviewer in 1945. "The surrealists are the court painters of the period. They sum up an age which is at best utter confusion."[3]

Minnelli's interest in painting is evident throughout his career, but part of the drive and brio of his work came from his awareness that movies are a temporal as well as a spatial medium. He loved flamboyant color, costume, and decor, but he never allowed these things to freeze into static compositions. A master of changing patterns and complex movements, he filled his pictures with swooping crane shots, voluptuous plays of fabric, and skillfully orchestrated background detail. Among his contemporaries, only Roubin Mamoulian was his equal at making films in which characters passed so effortlessly from speech into song, from walking into dancing.

Stylistically and thematically, Minnelli's films might be described as late, commercialized expressions of romantic idealism – an attitude born of a culture that had fully assimilated the nineteenth century's striving for "autonomous" art into a capitalist mode of production. Repeatedly he operated on the fault line between bourgeois ideology and extreme aestheticism,

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making the MGM motto – *Ars Gratia Artis* – sound almost plausible. In fact, the imagination, or one of its surrogates, such as show business or dreaming, was Minnelli's favorite subject. His central female characters – Jennifer Jones in *Madame Bovary,* Judy Garland in *The Pirate,* and Lana Turner in *The Bad and the Beautiful* – were women who lived in fantasy worlds, finding happiness only when they exchanged dreams for self-conscious artifice. Meanwhile his leading men – Kirk Douglas in *Lust for Life,* Fred Astaire in *The Band Wagon,* and Frank Sinatra in *Some Came Running* – played writers, painters, or performers. (If they were not artistic types by profession, they were usually dandies or sensitive youths, like Louis Jourdan in *Gigi,* John Kerr in *Tea and Sympathy,* and George Hamilton in *Home from the Hill.*) By the same token, Minnelli's films generally took place in exotic or studio-manufactured settings, where the boundaries between fantasy and everyday life could easily be transgressed. Most of his pictures – including his most brightly colored musicals – had vaguely "Freudian" overtones, and even when they were set in small-town America, they tended to burst into remarkable oneiric passages, such as the terrifying Halloween sequence in *Meet Me in St. Louis,* the berserk carnival in *Some Came Running,* and the mythic boar hunt in *Home from the Hill.*

Although Minnelli was sometimes preoccupied with a kind of vulgarized psychoanalysis that could be adjusted to the demands of the Production Code, he was among the least macho or phallic of directors, and, together with several of his collaborators in the Freed unit, he brought a rarified sense of camp to musical numbers, making several pictures that were adventurously stylized and ahead of popular taste. To a degree, such films ran against the grain of dominant attitudes, establishing Minnelli as what French critic Louis Marcorelles would later describe as an "Oscar Wilde of the camera." In the last analysis, however, Minnelli's sophistication belongs to the world of *Vogue, Harpers,* and *Vanity Fair.* His musicals are always hymns to entertainment, and his movies about artists never abandon MGM's plush standards of glamour and style.

To study Minnelli's work is therefore to examine the relationship between dandyism and mass culture, or between aestheticism and consumer society. Another way of stating the issue would be to say that his films are a mixture of *Kunst* and kitsch. At every level, they problematize the old and perhaps never valid distinction between authenticity and commercialism, reminding us that the Kantian aesthetic faculty was born during the industrial revolution.[4] Consider, for instance, a famous scene from *The Bad and the Beautiful,* a movie about movies whose very title is symptomatic. Anyone who has seen that film will remember the moment when the actress Georgia

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Lorrison (Lana Turner) drives to the home of her producer-lover, Jonathan Shields (Kirk Douglas), hoping to celebrate a film they have just made together. Swathed in mink and bearing champagne, she enters Shields's mansion only to find that he is spending the evening with a starlet (Elaine Stewart). The dialogue between the three characters is only slightly better than a contemporary soap opera, but the scene is nonetheless indelible. Its special power has something to do with the grand staircase in the hallway of the mansion, with the hysterical pitch of the acting, and with the subtly vertiginous movement of camera and players. It also derives from the vivid contrasts of the black and white photography: Douglas's blond hair echoes Turner's, but he moves in and out of inky shadow while she stands in light, her mink stole radiating whiteness. Above these two, at the top of the Gothic stairway, stands Elaine Stewart, dark tresses spilling over her bare shoulders, garbed in a skin-tight, black velvet gown that makes her breasts look like the bumpers of a fifties Cadillac.

Here, in all its erotic fascination and dramatic extravagance, is the perfect instance of what Welles described as a "loving evaluation of texture, the screen being filled as a window is dressed in a swank department store." And Welles's comment seems even more scathing when we note that *The Bad and the Beautiful* explicitly invites comparison with *Citizen Kane*. Produced by Welles's former associate John Houseman, it takes the form of a biographical narrative that is told from the point of view of several characters who once knew a "great man," and it contains numerous scenes that are directly parallel to *Kane,* Welles's most famous achievement. Unfortunately, a straightforward comparison between the two films shows how much Houseman and Minnelli were willing to serve their masters. Like Minnelli's musicals, *The Bad and the Beautiful* is intended to glorify Hollywood (especially producers), forgiving the sins of its central character because of his supposed devotion to artistic "quality." Unlike *Kane,* it is an exemplary studio movie – a sumptuous, stylish entertainment, and the kind of thing critics feel superior to even while they enjoy it.

I would nevertheless insist that *The Bad and the Beautiful* is some kind of masterpiece, perfectly keyed to Kirk Douglas's stardom, and filled with cinematic invention; in fact, few films have given me more pleasure. The larger purpose of my book is to explain this paradox, showing how it affects my response to several of Minnelli's best-known pictures. At the same time, I want to demonstrate a kind of symbiosis between Minnelli's artistry and a rationalized, midcentury entertainment industry.

Given my general aims, I have not attempted a film-by-film account of Minnelli's considerable output. Instead, I offer a comprehensive opening

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chapter that provides a commentary on several important matters: the director's cultural environment, the institutions where he worked, the generic and stylistic qualities of his films, and the critical discourse surrounding his career. This chapter forms the background for an analysis of five movies, representing a cross section of his work. For some of Minnelli's admirers, the five examples I have selected will be disappointing. I confess that two of his most successful pictures – *An American in Paris* and *Gigi* – leave me relatively cold. Despite a great many incidental virtues, the first of these films is a somewhat leaden spectacular, and the second strikes me as a patently sexist fantasy about "little girls." By the same token, I have forsaken discussion of several titles I wanted to say more about, including *Designing Woman* and *Home from the Hill.* I console myself for such losses with the thought that most of the pictures I have chosen would appear on anyone's list of favorites. I hope my observations will quicken the reader's curiosity and stimulate more writing about Minnelli. One of my purposes, however, is to extend the implications of my remarks beyond the director himself, providing insights into the romantic imagination, American show business, and commodity culture in general.

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Figure 1. Vincente Minnelli as a designer at Radio City Music Hall. (Photograph courtesy of Lee [Mrs. Vincente] Minnelli.)

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1

The Aesthete in the Factory

On the facing page is a publicity photograph of Minnelli, circa 1934, in his office at the newly constructed Radio City Music Hall, where he had recently become a designer of "presentation shows." Nearly everything here is sleek and *moderne,* in keeping with the atmosphere of Rockefeller Center. The office furniture was probably created by Donald Deskey, who was described in advertisements for the Music Hall as "the first American-born designer in the modern field,"[1] and the glossy, black-and-white decor suggests the Astaire–Rogers musicals at RKO, a studio partly owned by Rockefeller interests. Like those musicals, Minnelli's work at Radio City offered the Depression years a dream world of sophistication and streamlining; gone forever was the pseudo-Gothic, Victorian past and, with it, most traces of the factory system. Notice, however, that the sense of modernity depends on a mix of styles, some of them aggressively futuristic, others drawn from "primitive" society and slightly earlier times. At the upper left of the frame, two small pieces of African statuary stand next to a contemporary, art deco sculpture, and Minnelli himself looks like a fin-de-siècle painter transported to Metropolis.

The African motif can be found everywhere in Minnelli's early work, and I plan to discuss it later in this chapter. For now, I am more interested in his elegant attire, his liquid eyes, and his pale wrist supporting his cheek. Some viewers of the photograph may ask themselves whether Minnelli was gay. By his own account, he was a heterosexual who disliked crude American notions of masculinity. His films tend to confirm this attitude, although he worked in a milieu where "backstage" homosexuality was fairly common, and his best pictures – all of them made during the most restrictive era of the Production Code – are marked by the sort of "excess" that could not speak its name. Whatever his sexual inclination, his public image offers an

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answer to a well-known problem posed by Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation* (1966): it shows us how to behave like a dandy in the age of mass culture.

Actually, Minnelli's rather aestheticized pose recalls a tradition that dates back to Paris in the 1820s – a period when entertainment first became big business, and when Theophile Gautier announced the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*.[2] Aestheticism and commodification are in fact two of the interdependent "faces" of modernity, and Minnelli often appeared to recognize their ironic relationship. His pictures frequently offered art as a refuge from bourgeois prejudice and industrial alienation; but they also suggested, however inadvertently, that every art is compromised and impure, a product of the very forces it tries to escape. This implicit awareness of a tense affinity between art and commerce may account for the particular tone of his work. Andrew Sarris has noted that Minnelli had an "unusual, somber outlook for musical comedy,"[3] and many critics have commented on the dark spirit in his nonmusical films. In this respect as in others, he resembled the original French dandy, who was both elegant and prone to melancholy.

From Shops to Palaces

Before commenting further on such matters, it may be useful to glance briefly at Minnelli's early life, showing how his career was influenced by the growth of commercial modernity. For a man who became an important force in musical theater and the most flamboyant stylist in Hollywood, he had relatively humble beginnings. The fifth child of a French mother and an Italian father, he was born soon after the turn of the century in the American heartland. (Christened "Lester Anthony Minnelli," he later adopted his father's name, "Vincent," as a *nom du théâtre,* adding the final "e" at the advice of a numerologist.) His parents were itinerant vaudevillians who, during the summer months, helped operate the Minnelli Brothers Tent Show, a touring company that brought middle-class culture to the provinces, playing small towns in Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. The movable tent seated five hundred patrons, offering music, dances, and pirated versions of Broadway melodramas. Minnelli's father conducted the orchestra, played French horn, and composed Sousa-like marches; his mother, who was the daughter of Parisian circus performers, worked reluctantly as a dancer, singer, and actress.

As a child, Minnelli acted with his mother in *East Lynne,* although in some ways his upbringing was untheatrical. In the winter months, he usually lived with relatives in Chicago or in Delaware, Ohio, where his paternal

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grandfather, "Professor Minnelli," headed the music department at Ohio Wesleyan University. He attended various schools and was frequently moved from place to place, but his life was never truly chaotic. His devoutly Catholic mother disliked small-time show business, and the tent theater was soon killed off by competition from movies. In 1915, the family settled in Delaware, a college town pervaded by down-at-heels Victorian gentility. The typical household decor, Minnelli later recalled, consisted of "bilious green overstuffed sofas, tiny rosebuds in its ceilings and wallpaper, and pongee curtains which were serviceable year round."[4]

This environment held no charm for the young Minnelli, who, like Emma Bovary, was a dreamer, troubled by what he called a "vague hunger for sophistication."[5] In his autobiography, he says that he once became violently ill after helping a local farmer slaughter a cow and wash maggots from the carcass. (One thinks of George Hamilton in *Home from the Hill,* almost retching when he finds the disemboweled body of a dog lying in the woods.) Understandably, Minnelli much preferred reading in his father's library, acting in school theatricals, and painting pictures in the "studio" he had fashioned in a backyard chicken coop. At one point he obtained a job with a local sign painter, designing show cards for shop window displays, and he was ultimately hired to paint the advertising curtain for a Delaware movie house.

After graduation from high school, Minnelli thought of attending a university, but because his family had little money, he moved to Chicago instead, where he lived briefly with his maternal grandmother and sought work as a commercial artist. Not long after arriving in the city, he found an opportunity:

> Equipped with my portfolio of watercolors, I set out one morning. As I approached the intersection of Washington and State, I was seduced by an elaborate window display. The background was a Florence garden; in the foreground stood some merchandise, artfully arranged. I looked up at the store sign: MARSHALL FIELD.[6]

Minnelli became the fourth assistant decorator at Chicago's leading department store. The Marshall Field windows were "considered the finest in the country, looked up to even by New York," but Minnelli, who was already inspired by the stage designs of Hardin Craig and Robert Edmund Jones, saw them as a theatrical space and hoped to bring them "into the twentieth century."[7] Unfortunately, much of his work was routine. He was never assigned to the high-fashion State Street store, but he soon took charge of the Wabash Avenue branch, which displayed furniture, antiques, and

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decorative accessories. As in *Meet Me in St. Louis,* the windows in this store changed with each season. Minnelli and his crew would sometimes spend all night arranging the furniture just so, and then draw back the curtains suspended over their work to reveal a dramatic setting appropriate to the time of year.

If, as Walter Benjamin once remarked, "the department store is the *flâneur*'s last practical joke," Minnelli must have been amused. His regular income enabled him to wander the city, sampling jazz and night life. For a while he took classes at the Art Institute, where he saw a fine collection of impressionist paintings. He attended the theater regularly, viewing all the major shows from New York, and at one point he played a role in an amateur production of a Eugene O'Neill one-act drama, which was sponsored by a radical bookshop on Clark Street. Eventually, he began taking a sketch pad along to the theater, visiting backstage and making drawings of the actors and costumes in the manner of Ralph Barton in *Vanity Fair.* On one of these occasions, when he was peddling watercolors based on his drawings, he met the society photographer Paul Sloane, who hired him as an assistant.

In Sloane's work, the worlds of fashion, theater, and painting coalesced. Sloane specialized in glossy portraits of actors or celebrities – pictures that could be reproduced in newspapers or magazines without losing their aura of glamour and refinement. Following a practice dating back to sixteenth-century aristocratic portraiture, he placed figures against drapery and sometimes costumed them in theatrical or period dress. He expended considerable effort on lighting and camera angles, and he employed painters to subtly retouch the photos in his laboratory. Minnelli was good at the retouching process, and even though he claimed to have no special aptitude for cameras, he knew how to control the photographic mise-en-scène, arranging subjects in artfully relaxed poses. Like Guys, Sargent, Charles Dana Gibson, and other illustrators of turn-of-the-century sophistication, he could make clothed figures seem both à la mode and casual, both idealized and empirically true.

The job in the photographic studio brought Minnelli into contact with an influential world of theatrical personalities and Chicago socialites, and it fueled his artistic ambitions. He still harbored a desire to become a painter (in Paris, if possible), and he was increasingly alive to the fashionable intellectual movements of his day. He was particularly intrigued by Freudianism and the surrealists, including Duchamp, Ernst, Dali, Cocteau, and Buñuel; his deepest affinities, however, were always with prewar art. In Paul Sloane's library, he encountered a biography of James McNeill Whis-

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