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## MINNELLI'S YELLOWS: ILLUSION, DELUSION AND IMPRESSIONISM ON FILM

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**Abstract:** This article takes up the very current concern with colour on film in order to revisit the films of "the most committed colourist of mid-twentieth-century American cinema" (Coates 2011: 14): Vincente Minnelli. In particular, it concerns Minnelli's use of yellow as a visual effect in *An American in Paris* (1951), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946) and *Lust for Life* (1956). The point I wish to make is two-fold: first I argue that Minnelli uses the particular colour of yellow to suggest the ambivalence of aesthetic illusions/delusions and, second, I argue that this is directly influenced by Minnelli's oft-mentioned but little-discussed interest in Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Decadence.

In making this argument, the article looks closely at the cultural and aesthetic significance of yellow in the nineteenth century, Minnelli's interest in these areas (such as his study of James Abbott McNeill Whistler), and the way in which yellow appears variously as a signifier of aesthetic revelry in his films.

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"I realize that there's a practical world and a dream world" Manuella tells her aunt in *The Pirate* (1948), "I know which is which. I shan't mix them, I promise." Of course, it is not long before Manuella begs her aunt to visit the Caribbean sea, revealing her insatiable lust for the dream world of "Mack the Black" in a trance, later casting aside her fiancé for Serafin when she believes him to be the legendary pirate, and ultimately joining his troupe to "Be a Clown" in defiance of the "practical world". In short, the distinction between the "practical world" and the "dream world", and in which realm Manuella belongs, is not as clear as she would have Aunt Inez believe. Such is true of the most captivating figures in Vincente Minnelli's films. Moreover, Minnelli's persistent concern with the nature of dreaming and aesthetic reverie goes

beyond the level of narrative concern: it patterns his visual aesthetic.

It is the ambivalence of imaginary worlds that Minnelli's use of the colour *yellow* -- in lighting, costumes and set design -- comes to signify. The prevalent use of yellow defines the "Chocolat" sequence of the "American in Paris" Ballet, "Coffee Time" in *Yolanda and Thief* (1945) and the "Limehouse Blues" sequence in *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), and it saturates the screen when Vincent van Gogh begins to paint in colour in Arles in *Lust for Life* (1956). Meanwhile, off the screen, Minnelli illustrated his idiosyncratic dandyish style by often wearing a yellow sports jacket with a black turtleneck jumper. Especially given the rarity of yellow on film (Coates 2011: 87), Minnelli's penchant for this colour is indeed worthy of remark but little, if ever, is it remarked upon.

It is fortunately no longer true though that "[e]ven scholars particularly sensitive to questions of style have attempted to sidestep questions about the meaning of color" (Price 2006: 5). To some extent Angela Dalle Vacche's "A Painter in Hollywood: Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris*" (1992) and Scott Higgins' "Color at the Center: Minnelli's Technicolor Style in *Meet Me in St Louis*" (1998) put Minnelli's use of colour on the critical agenda. Very recently the more general critical absence has been addressed with *Color, The Film Reader* edited by Angela Dalle Vacche and Brian Price (2006), *Colour* by Steven Peacock (2010), *Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image* by Paul Coates (2011) and -- to anticipate a future publication -- *Color and the Moving Image* edited by Simon Brown, Sarah Street and Liz I. Watkins (2012). As these publications insist on the significance of colour in our discussions of cinema they ask once again to think about "the most committed colourist of mid-twentieth-century American cinema" (Coates 2011: 14): Vincente Minnelli. In this article I want to approach this subject in a slightly different way to these studies, which focus on the theory of colour, by considering Minnelli's yellows via the influences of late nineteenth century Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and Decadent arts and culture. The point I wish to make is two-fold: first I argue that Minnelli uses the particular colour of yellow to suggest the ambivalence of aesthetic illusions and, second, I argue that this is directly influenced by Minnelli's oft-mentioned but little-discussed interest in Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Decadence.<sup>1</sup>

To say that Minnelli had an eye for color would be a gross understatement. He dreamed of becoming a painter and to this end devoted himself to the study of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism whilst working as a costume and set designer on Broadway in the 1930s, and rising to the position of Artistic Director of Radio City Music Hall. Once he joined the Freed Unit at MGM in 1940 he had unprecedented opportunity to bring his interest in colour and set decoration to the musicals he directed as this was just the time when "Technicolor was allowing studios greater freedom in the use of their process" (Higgins 1998: 5). He took full advantage of this freedom, exercising strong influence over the production design of his musicals, especially in the area of colour (Higgins 1998: 1-2). To some extent Minnelli uses yellow as what Scott Higgins has termed a "color accent" (1998:14); a striking visual touch in contrast to the other colors onscreen. Yellow color accents are used for example in Garland's dress in "Who Stole My Heart Away" from *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946),<sup>ii</sup> in "Niña" from *The Pirate*, in "Coffee Time" from *Yolanda and the Thief*, in Fiona's marigold dress in *Brigadoon* (1954) and in the yellow silken pillow that Dave Hirsh puts under Ginny's head as she lies dead at the end of *Some Came Running* (1958). But Minnelli's yellows require further explanation. The yellow wash across his cinematic canvas during numbers such as "Concerto in F" in *An American in Paris* and "Beauty" in *Ziegfeld Follies* is qualitatively distinct from these "color accents". These are audacious splashes of a single colour or shades of the same colour across the whole screen.

Minnelli takes up the way that yellow had become an ambivalent visual signifier for aesthetic experience in Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Decadence. Furthermore, he makes the colour yellow central to his nuancing of the association between colour film and "spectacle and fantasy," already established by the early 1940s (Neale 2006: 18). His yellows appear onscreen most significantly to indicate the transition from 'reality' into an imaginative space, promising unbounded possibility. As I sketch Minnelli's interest in nineteenth century aesthetics and explore examples from *An American in Paris* (1951), *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Lust for Life*, I would like to argue that yellow operates as an ambivalent visual signifier for the way "Minnelli is torn between a celebratory view of art [...] and one that sees it as a terrifying disease...." (Dalle Vacche 1992: 63).

### **i. Minnelli, Impressionism and Decadence**

Minnelli had a keen interest in Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Anglo-French Decadence. These artistic movements, which encompass Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Van Gogh and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec defined the colour yellow as a multifaceted symbol. In their works and in contemporary late nineteenth century culture yellow becomes strongly associated, on one hand, with exoticism, aesthetic excess and pleasure, and, on the other, with the frivolous rejection of reality for absinthe-induced revelry and moral degradation, not to mention the threat of racial and sexual otherness.

For Minnelli the influence of these artistic movements was focused through James Whistler, a painter, designer and critic at their nexus. Of Whistler, Minnelli wrote:

here was a man -- and an artist with whom I could identify... his many facets enthralled me. He was a pioneer in interior design, introducing blue and white décor. He had an affinity for yellow, painting the walls of his house in its most modest shading. (1975: 50)

Whistler's "affinity for yellow" slips imperceptibly between his interior designs and canvas paintings, as is illustrated by paintings such as *Harmony in Yellow and Gold: The Gold Girl Connie Gilchrist* (1873) and the dining room he designed for Frederick Leyland, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (1876-1877). It was Whistler's aesthetic that inspired Minnelli to paint the walls of his own house in yellow (McElhaney 2004: unpaginated). Consideration of the broader aesthetic confluences of Whistler and Minnelli suggests though that Whistler's significance as an influence is complex and multifaceted, expanding far beyond interior design tips.

One expects that Minnelli admired the artistic and personal audacity of Whistler, characteristics never more apparent than in Pennell's biographies, which he recalls reading in the early 1930s (1975: 49-50).<sup>iii</sup> Whilst personal audacity was not Minnelli's style, artistic audacity certainly was and the lessons he learnt from Whistler's (and more generally Impressionism's) reconception of colour are important elements in understanding his stylistic audacity on film. Like Whistler, Minnelli defined a new visual language in his art form and in particular his use of

yellow is significantly linked to his desire to define a new visual language for the colour musical; a desire anticipated by his parody of early Technicolor as set and costume designer of the 1936 *Ziegfeld Follies* (Minnelli 1975: 80-1).

Minnelli's particular interest in Whistler's yellow harmonies<sup>iv</sup> is inextricably linked to the broader significance of yellow in late-nineteenth century culture where it was a prevalent and multi-faceted presence. As indicated above, Minnelli knew this cultural history. Before arriving in Hollywood he not only studied Whistler and his paintings, but he also read Ronald Firbank's fin de siècle novels (Gerstner 2009: 253), he studied late nineteenth century interior design and costume for a number of productions and in 1930 he illustrated *Casanova's Memoirs* with drawings he described "in the Aubrey Beardsley style" (1975: 58). As Minnelli takes up the colour yellow he is consciously engaging with the ambivalence of yellow in late nineteenth century art and culture in which it was symbolic both of exciting illusion and destructive delusion, his own most abiding artistic concerns.

At the outset, the basis of yellow's ambivalence requires some explanation. Yellow was variously celebrated and denigrated when it was used as the colour of the dust jackets for a series of controversial French novels, including *A Rebours* by Joris-Carl Huysmans (1884) and *Aphrodite* by Pierre Louys (1896). These novels came to signify immorality and, more than this, drew analogies between imaginative revelry and destructive delusion. The French Impressionist painters reappropriated this analogy between yellow, immorality and imaginative escape and it was mainly through Impressionism that yellow was celebrated as a symbol of departure from the banal workaday world into the illusions of imaginative experience. Of this tendency, Degas' *Ballet Dancers on the Stage* (1883) offers an early example, as do the paintings by Whistler mentioned above. It is though in the paintings and posters of Toulouse-Lautrec -- mostly famously used by Minnelli in the "Chocolat" sequence of the "American in Paris" ballet -- that yellow is fully appropriated as a visual symbol of imaginative reverie. Toulouse-Lautrec's yellows are bright, strong and solid, as in his Japanese-style wood-block posters, *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine* (1896) and *La Goulue* (1891). His yellows shun the high arts, which are the domain of Degas and Whistler, to depict instead the can-can girls of the Follies Bergere and impromptu dancing in a bar or dandies drinking reality into oblivion with gay abandon.

Toulouse-Lautrec's vivid yellows subvert the censorious views of those who judged the French yellow-back novels in order to create an amoral pleasure-world, separated in space and time from banal reality and its rules.

Impressionist painters also presented yellow as a colour of sickness and degradation, brought on by alcohol-induced departures from reality into delusion. The earliest and most famous example is Edgar Degas' *L'Absinthe* (1876), which features a man and woman slumped in an empty bar with an empty carafe and the remnants of yellow absinthe in a glass. The yellow of the absinthe is reflected in the bar decor, the woman's bright yellow lace blouse and the yellow window onto which her shadow is cast. Thus it uses yellow to show that the flip side of Toulouse-Lautrec's abandonment of social restraint in the pleasure of illusory experience is delusion and exile from society. The relationship between yellow and madness, which plays a significant role in Minnelli's *Lust For Life*, evolves from this. The prevalent yellows of Vincent van Gogh's late works, such as in *Le Café de Nuit* (1888) and the *Tournesols* (*Sunflowers*) series (1888-89), embody the ambivalence of an aesthetic 'madness' that at once yields artistic triumph and personal destruction.

The British journal *The Yellow Book* exploited the popular associations of yellow with immoral pleasures and aesthetic illusion. With its bright aureolin-yellow covers, when it was published between 1893 and 1897, it became the very symbol of Decadence. Its defiant yellow covers with illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley celebrate art and literature as spaces in which the individual may escape the various constraints of morality. Of this Vincente Minnelli knew much. His avowed interest in Beardsley and the expertise shown by his erotic Beardsleyesque illustrations for *Casanova's Memoirs* were not left behind when he moved to Hollywood: the satyr statues that preside over the ballroom in "This Heart of Mine" in Minnelli's *Ziegfeld Follies* are clearly copied from Beardsley's cover illustration for the first issue of *The Yellow Book*: a black pen and ink drawing of a masked satyr set against the journal's yellow cover. So although Tony Duquette was the film's set designer, there is at least circumstantial evidence to suggest that, in this case, as in many others, Minnelli exercised his will to an instrumental role in the set design and costuming (Minnelli 1977: unpaginated; Higgins 1).

The analogy between yellow and ambivalent alternative worlds extends to its association with sexual and racial *otherness*. When Oscar Wilde was arrested for sodomy in April 1895 it was widely reported that he was reading a yellow book; one of those little yellow French Decadent novels and the colour became identified immediately in the press with homosexual deviancy. The palpable influence of Chinese aesthetics in the golden yellows of Whistler's *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (1863-4) and the celebration of absinthe intoxication depicted by Toulouse-Lautrec's Japanese wood-block prints, and alluded to in *Lust for Life*, also have a negative underside: "yellow peril" or "yellow fever", the racist phrase that gained common currency at the fin de siècle to denote the pernicious influence of East Asian immigrants and imports (for example, absinthe and opium) in the West. Both in terms of sexuality and race, then, yellow came to suggest departures from contemporary moral and cultural norms into morally questionable alternative realms of sexual deviancy and racial otherness.

Bearing in mind Minnelli's knowledge of late nineteenth century culture and aesthetics, the ostentatious presence of yellow in his cinematic palette is visually and conceptually significant. The conflict between exciting aesthetic illusion and destructive aesthetic delusion symbolized by fin de siècle yellow prefigures this same conflict, which Dalle Vacche (1992: 63), Joe McElhaney (2004: unpaginated) and Ed Lowry (1982: 61-2) have pointed out defines Minnelli's films. Minnelli's yellows cannot therefore be understood simply in terms of The Color Advisory Service's guide that "[w]arm colors (red, yellow, orange)... call forth sensations of excitement, activity and heat" (Higgins 1998: 2). Neither can they be properly explained as 'color accents' alone because they are far more prevalent than this would suggest in works including *An American in Paris*, *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Lust For Life*. It often takes over the screen as a single colour harmony. Moreover, yellow becomes a motif for the issue at the centre of Minnelli's films: the troubled nature of aesthetic illusion. It is through this colour that Minnelli explores what Dalle Vacche identifies as his own indecision as to whether to take "a celebratory view of art" or "one that sees it as a terrifying disease" (1992: 63). With some knowledge of Minnelli's interest the fin de siècle we can see that this is intimately related to in the ambivalences about racial and sexual otherness, and amoral pleasures symbolized by yellow in works and discussions about aesthetics in that period.

## **ii. Daydreaming in yellow in *An American in Paris***

In *An American in Paris* yellow features prominently and singularly in all three of the dream sequences: Lise's imaginary dance to "Embraceable You", Adam's narcissistic 'Concerto in F', and the "Chocolat" section of Jerry's dream of the "American in Paris" Ballet. In these scenes yellow symbolizes of the opening of an imaginative realm in which dreams and musical performance are fused. But more ambivalently Minnelli's yellows here pick up on the fin de siècle connotations of yellow to suggest that this imaginative realm may simultaneously be a space of delusional madness and homosexual deviancy.

The identification between yellow and imagination begins subtly in the daydream catalyzed by Henri's description of his fiancée Lise, to the music of "Embraceable You." Here Lise dances in a golden dress with matching ballet shoes and in another her figure in black is contrasted with a monochrome lemon set and the lemon book she reads. These colour washes disrupt the "integration" of narrative and musical numbers that Higgins has identified as a significant effect of Minnelli's use of color accents (1998: 5). The way in which single colours saturate the screen signals a division -- and potentially problematic schism -- between "reality" and "illusion."

The "Concerto in F" advances this exploration of real and imaginary worlds through the colour yellow, as frustrated composer Adam imagines his own masterpiece played by an orchestra in which he plays all of the instruments. As Adam's face fades into his daydream, yellow is foregrounded as the only colour left onscreen, contrasting with the blacks and whites of the orchestra. With its appearance here yellow visually indicates the separation from reality; recalling its earlier appearance in "Embraceable You" and the association of monochrome colour-washes with "spectacle and fantasy." Unlike the apparent innocence of Henri's daydream though, "something maniacal and dark is in Adam's reverie... art takes over the self and plunges it into extreme forms of egoism" (Dalle Vacche 1998: 77-78). The maniacal egoism of Adam's daydream is not lightly connected to the yellow-jaundiced set and lighting of the concert hall. The scene does bear some resemblance to Dufy's painting *Le Concert Rouge* (1946) as Angela

Dalle Vacche has suggested (76). However it is crucial that sickly yellow and not red -- as in Dufy's painting -- defines Minnelli's tonal painting on the big screen. The decision to replace Dufy's passionate, angry red canvas with this shade of yellow creates a world-weary malaise in visual contrast to the vigour of the concerto music, for which red would have been a more apt visual corollary. It harks back, beyond Dufy's almost contemporary painting to the fin de siècle yellow of self-destructive mental illness. For it is the shade of Degas' *L'Absinthe* and it suggests how the line between illusion and delusion has become blurred; Adam's creative narcissism borders dangerously on mania. Moreover, it retroactively casts a sickly pallor onto Henri's evocation of Lise in "Embraceable You" that symbolizes his delusion that she is in love with him.

The "American in Paris" Ballet is the painter Jerry Mulligan's great imaginative masterpiece. In a familiar trope of Minnelli's cinematic palette the riot of colour in this ballet appears as a striking visual contrast to the "reality" that has preceded it -- the black and white costuming of the Beaux-Arts Ball and Jerry's pencil on paper sketch of Paris -- and as a result it visually highlights the transition from inadequate reality to idealized illusion. Ironically, it is having just articulated his artistic failure to Lise that the grief of losing her catalyses this fusion of Dufy, Renoir, Utrillo, Rousseau, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec. In common with Adam, who is able to conjure his "Concerto in F" in a daydream but cannot write his symphony in reality, Jerry's problem is not a lack of imaginative vision. Rather it is his inability to bring these visions from ephemeral daydreams into tangible artistic works. Adam and Jerry resonate with others of Minnelli's protagonists: Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary* (1949), Dave Hirsh in *Some Came Running* (1958), Vincent Van Gogh in *Lust for Life* (1956), who are all frustrated aesthetes, hankering for an aesthetic dream world impossible on the terms of the reality in which they are imprisoned. In this balletic homage to French Impressionism, the "Chocolat" sequence is the "the climax of the ballet" (Dalle Vacche 1998: 75), putting into motion Toulouse-Lautrec's 1896 sketch *Chocolat Dansant dans un Bar* in 27 shades of yellow. The sequence opens with a still of Toulouse-Lautrec's sketch -- black ink and white paint on yellow paper -- and fades into a tableau of the same scene with Gene Kelly as Chocolate, dressed in a skin-tight yellow body suit and hat against a yellow backdrop of the same sketched figures.

All told, critics have been imprecise in referring to this as the "Chocolat" sequence because though it begins with the figure of Chocolat, as Toulouse-Lautrec sketched him, dancing in a Parisian bar, he moves from that setting to the stage of *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine* (1896) to dance with Lautrec's muse Jane Avril,<sup>v</sup> and finally into the audience, which comprises the central figures from *Aristide Bruant dans son Cabaret* (1891), *Au Moulin Rouge* (1892) and *Yvette Guilbert* (1895). Strikingly, what unites the sketches, posters and paintings on which the Chocolat sequence is based is the dominance of Toulouse-Lautrec's signature yellows, whether in his use of yellow paper or yellow paints or both together. The effect is quite different to that produced by the jaundiced screen on which Adam's fantasy "Concerto in F" is played out. Minnelli takes up Toulouse-Lautrec's celebration of deviant pleasure through the bright defiant color yellow. Minnelli takes up Toulouse-Lautrec's presentation of Paris as an amoral playground of music, dancing and intoxication and in so doing gives a subversive slant to the Hollywood musicals' construction of Paris "as a specific site catering to American needs through the concept of utopia [offering] energy, intensity, abundance and community" (Handyside 2007: 141-2).

The sexual deviancy suggested by fin de siècle yellows is operative in the sequence. It recalls the homoerotic overtones of Wilde's yellow daffodils, those immoral French novels and *The Yellow Book* in order to re-evolve the "homoerotic connotations" of Jerry's earlier appearance in the film (Dalle Vacche 1992: 66-7). In the midst of a narrative defined by "Minnelli's pessimism" (Dalle Vacche 1992: 63) this is a moment of exuberant self-possession in which the pursuit of the girl is -- temporarily at least -- forgotten. Jerry's skin-tight jonquil-yellow outfit intensifies the homoerotic spectacle of his solo dance: not only emphasizing his muscular physique as an object of lust but also clothing it exclusively in the colour of sexual ambiguity and debauchery. For most of the ballet, Jerry is dressed in the black and white colour coding of disillusioned "reality," like the Beaux-Arts Ball. Echoing the eponymous figure in Toulouse-Lautrec's 1892 painting *L'Anglais au Moulin Rouge* Kelly appears as a dark figure in this multicoloured world; a figure redolent of the monochrome world to which he must ultimately return, with his black modern polo shirt and slacks intensifying his earthy, quintessentially *American* masculinity.<sup>vi</sup> So in the "Chocolat" sequence Jerry's change of dress is not insignificant. It indicates that he has truly become a part of this aestheticized world of illusions.

In this palace of art Jerry is liberated from the constraints of his reality, its moral (black and white) judgements and -- crucially -- his heterosexual masculinity. In the "Chocolat" sequence we see at its height Minnelli's "camp emphasis on performance... implicating everyday life as performative, not least when it comes to thinking about gender" (Tinkcom 2002: 122). The sequence is to be understood as one of the "gay-inflected visual codes" that Matthew Tinkcom has argued silently subvert the marriage plot in Minnelli's musical films (118) and, in this way, the "Chocolat" sequence heralds a singular moment in the ballet -- right at its centre -- when the heterosexual marriage plot is seriously imperiled. The "Chocolat" sequence is not only the climax of the ballet but the climax also of the film's earlier homoerotic undertones. In this way, the pleasure and freedom expressed in the dance brings into question the moral judgements of a contemporary society (or at least a contemporary Hollywood film industry) on deviant modes of eroticism. Of course, such unfettered pleasure is only temporary: the painting disappears leaving a confused Jerry once again alone with only memory the sexual and artistic freedoms of the "illusion" created in his imagination. If the "American in Paris" Ballet disrupts the marriage narrative of *An American in Paris* it does not completely undermine it and the fact that we are returned to the black and white "reality" of the Beaux-Arts Ball for Jerry's reunion with Lise is telling. With this Minnelli suggests the impossibility of remaining in the highly aestheticized realm we glimpse. Whether its impossibility lies in the strictures of society or in a deeply held ambivalence about the danger of allowing the aesthetic realm usurp reality, is unclear.

### **iii. Yellow, otherness and disorientation in *Ziegfeld Follies***

*Ziegfeld Follies* fully exploits the camp potentialities of musical cinema, presenting an imaginary *Follies* show of unrelated song and dance numbers, and sketches, performed for Florenz Ziegfeld in Heaven. "Liberated from the constraint of cause/effect relations, even from the idea of events themselves, *Follies* plunges into the camp pleasures of texture, masquerade, and performance" (Tinkcom 2002: 126). Minnelli's use of colour washes in *Ziegfeld Follies* heightens this sense of liberation. The *yellow* colour wash in the "Limehouse Blues" ballet functions ambivalently though: it draws on yellow as a signifier of the Orient as an exotic

imaginative space -- recalling Whistler's *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* -- and as a signifier of racial otherness and sickness -- recalling "yellow fever."

Opening in the Chinatown of nineteenth century London at night, the camera tracks alongside the figure of Astaire (made up to look Chinese) through the street, past pub revelers and a group of Pearly Kings and Queens. It is into the blacks, browns and greys of this set that Lucille Bremer (also made up to look Chinese) enters from a smoky doorway steeped in golden light and wearing a cheongsam dress in daffodil-yellow. The scene presents Bremer and the amorphous Orient that she represents as an ambivalent imaginative escape. As Bremer walks into the dark centre of the screen the contrast between the colour accent of her yellow dress and the dark monochromes of the set open a grand imaginative realm, indicated by the shift from the diegetic music of the Pearlies singing "Knocked 'Em in the Old Kent Road" to the non-diegetic music of "Limehouse Blues" and Astaire's fixated wonderment at her. She is, at once, the exoticized other of Whistler's Chinoiserie, a bearer of "yellow fever" and -- as a Western woman playing Chinese -- a figure created by the prejudices that would create such a racist term. As such she is an exotic illusion and a dangerous delusion.

In the dream sequence the yellow color accent of Bremer's cheongsam dress becomes the dominant color of the set whilst Bremer is changed into contrasting red. The stylized set of a Chinese town is defined by a plain daffodil-yellow backdrop and dance floor, against which the reds of Astaire and Bremer's costumes and the blue silhouettes of Chinese dancers are contrasted. The tri-part colour scheme is the same as that in Whistler's *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*. It is though also the same as that used in parodies of Oriental otherness, such as in the original posters for Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* (1885). As Astaire and Bremer dance to the "Limehouse Blues" the saturated yellow backdrop visually symbolizes the way that Bremer's appearance in yellow has catalyzed this dream sequence. The expansion of yellow from a color accent to a colour wash in Astaire's dream is also disturbing. It is the yellow of degradation, implying the fatal sickness has rendered him unconscious and therefore created his delusion of dancing with Bremer.

#### **iv. Madness and inspiration in *Lust for Life***

Minnelli's biopic of Vincent van Gogh is perhaps his most ostentatious use of yellow. Yellow is the keynote colour of *Lust for Life* and it is used to explore the relationship between imagination and madness so prevalent in fin de siècle art and culture. Blacks, browns and greys define the sets of the film's first half, when van Gogh is searching for artistic inspiration, living in poverty and sketching in charcoal on paper; it is only when he begins to paint in oils and watercolours, and moves to Arles that the screen becomes saturated with colour. Amongst these colours yellows are the most prominent: "lemon yellow, sulphur yellow, greenish yellow, all under a sun blanched with heat," van Gogh's voice-over tells us. The yellow-walls of the house van Gogh moves into, the yellow jacket of the man whose portrait he paints, the yellow cornfields, the yellow absinthe he drinks to much, the four yellow sunflower paintings he hangs in Gauguin's room, all conspire to present an ambivalent yellow-tinted cinematic palette. For yellow heralds both van Gogh's period of intense artistic creation and the onset of the madness that will eventually end with his death.

A montage of images shows van Gogh painting with manic determination in the golden cornfields, framed by van Gogh's increasingly emotional voiceover and Miklos Rozsa's music shifting the mood from playfulness to exultation to intense mania. The golden, glowing lamps of van Gogh's painting *Le Cafe Nuit* become a visual symbol of this ambivalent psychological shift, as, in the following scene, van Gogh slumps in the deserted Cafe Nuit. Minnelli uses shot/reverse shot to pair van Gogh's tortured, drunken appearance with the luminous yellow absinthe on his table and the great golden spherical lamps that hang from the ceiling in front of him. After a further close-up of van Gogh swigging the absinthe and the pained expression on his face, a reverse shot shows that he is staring transfixed by the yellow lamps, their colour contrasted with the red walls of the cafe. This analogy between yellow and madness is developed when van Gogh cuts off his ear: the stationary shot reflects through a mirror on the lamp in his room and, behind it, on van Gogh's painting of *Le Cafe Nuit* (with its accentuated yellow lamps) as van Gogh sinks to the ground clutching his palette knife and the camera focuses on the lamps we hear the cry as he cuts off his ear. Yellow reappears; as oil paint squirting out of its tube when van Gogh is struck by madness at the asylum and as a great wash of colour when he shoots himself in a cornfield, in each case, thrown into relief by the greens and (conterintuitively) the reds which define the costumes and sets when van Gogh is not suffering a

bout of madness. As such, yellow suggests that imaginative other worlds are dangerously ungovernable: they can be an intensely creative escape from reality but they can destruct one's sense of reality. It is not the case that there is a causal relationship between imagination and the destruction of reality. Yet, though, the delusions of madness are the ineradicable underside of van Gogh's creativity, suggesting that the illusions and delusions of the imagination are dangerous territory in which one may all too easily lose control and no longer know the difference.

## **v. Conclusion**

Speaking of Emma Bovary in a 1977 interview Minnelli commented, "She fantasized everything! Her dreams were so much more realistic than reality. She dreamed big and wanted everything to be beautiful... Then it all ended bitterly. Illusion" (unpaginated). Minnelli's films are redolent with the poignancy of ephemeral illusion. Illusion features in *Ziegfeld Follies*, *An American in Paris* and *Lust For Life* as daydreaming and as art. More than this though, illusion features simultaneously as a space of emancipation from reality's morality in imaginative revelry and as a space of troubled sexual and racial otherness and madness. The depiction of art and dreaming (often fused together by Minnelli) is inherently ambivalent then, articulated through the narratives of Minnelli's films but, also, through his use of the colour yellow. These harmonies of yellow that wash across the screen are qualitatively distinct from the colour contrasts and "accents" identified by Higgins as a means to integrate narrative and musical numbers. On the contrary, Minnelli's colour washes heighten one's consciousness of a transition from 'reality' to illusion, and in so doing they function to critique the nature of this illusion.

Given the persistent presence of yellow in Minnelli's films and his avowed interest in Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Decadence I would suggest that the fin de siècle offers a richer source for understanding his aesthetic than previous comparisons to Jackson Pollock and Raoul Dufy (Dalle Vacche 64, 72ff; 76). Thinking about Minnelli's use of yellow in specific terms suggests that the cultural associations of a colour such as those given on yellow in Paul Coates' fascinating *Cinema and Colour* (2011: 87-89) can be nuanced further to advance a close reading of a particular filmmaker, working at a specific cultural moment, to explore his or her

persistent thematic concerns on film.

One is led back to the lingering sense of Minnelli's contemporaries that his visual style is aesthetically elitist or speaks covertly to an "effeminate" minority (Tinkcom 2002: 121). Minnelli's yellows do reach beyond the mass audience to set up a dialogue with the invisible minority in the auditorium; the aesthetes, the literati and the "camp" outsiders, who may well have known, in the 1940s and '50s, the Impressionist and Decadent associations of yellow. In so doing, Minnelli's yellows operate to problematize the very illusions they create and remind us that "[i]n Minnelli's films there is a constant tension between his awareness that the Hollywood musical is artificial and false, and his contradictory delight in being able to create and manipulate that artificiality so well... Like Flaubert, Minnelli is acutely aware of the inadequacy of romantic idealism and the potential destructiveness of illusion accepted as fact" (1982: 62-63).

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> There are two articles on this subject but both focus on Minnelli's biography rather than aesthetics: David A. Gerstner's "Queer Modernism: The Cinematic Aesthetic of Vincente Minnelli" and James Naremore's *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (7ff).

<sup>ii</sup> Although *Till the Clouds Roll By* was directed by Richard Whorf, Judy Garland's numbers were directed by Minnelli.

<sup>iii</sup> Minnelli might have been referring to either *The Life of James McNeill Whistler* (1911) by Elizabeth and Joseph Pennell or *The Art of Whistler* (1928) by Elizabeth Pennell alone.

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<sup>iv</sup> For example, *Harmony in Yellow and Gold: The Gold Girl Connie Gilchrist*.

<sup>v</sup> The dancer played here by Leslie Caron is visually inflected with the can-can dancer Jane Avril, who is not in this poster, but appears in Lautrec's *Jane Avril* (1893).

<sup>vi</sup> Minnelli often uses the visual effect of a single bright colour against black and white. I have noted this in the "Concerto in F" and in the transition to the "American in Paris" Ballet above. Garland's "Who Stole My Heart Away" in *Till the Clouds Roll By* and "The Coffee Song" in *Yolanda and the Thief* are other examples of the black-white-yellow colour scheme. "This Heart of Mine," with Lucille Bremer and Fred Astaire, from *Ziegfeld Follies* gives an example of a black-white-red colour scheme

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