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Sue Harris, *An American in Paris*. BFI Film Classics. London: Palgrave, 2015. 128 pp. Notes, credits, and bibliography. \$29.99 (eb). ISBN 978-1-84457-882-5; \$19.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-84457-471-1.

Review by Jennifer Fleeger, Ursinus College.

The BFI Film Classics series is a formidable enterprise in that writers are asked to explain a film's aesthetic and historical value, interpret its meaning, and provide an account of its production and reception all within a tidy volume that appeals to both scholars and the public. Sue Harris's *An American in Paris* accomplishes each of these goals while sustaining an engaging through line about the meaning of Paris for MGM (the film's studio), Vincent Minnelli (its director), and Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron (its stars). Her book reveals how a musical with songs by an American known for popular and symphonic jazz managed to condense and distribute the image of Paris on film for generations to come.

Harris begins by acknowledging the unique origins of the film: rather than a story, *An American in Paris* began with a musical composition of the same name and a goal of filling out the rest of the score with George Gershwin's oeuvre. That this led to a rather unconventional narrative ought to be no surprise. Ostensibly about Gene Kelly's character, Jerry, the eponymous American, the story ultimately centers on the friendship of three men, and while there is a woman at the center, the film, as Harris points out, resists the typical Hollywood musical structure. It is filled with music sourced from other movies but also from Gershwin's orchestral work: his "Concerto in F" provides the structure for a fantasy sequence in which real-life prodigy Oscar Levant multiplies to play all the instruments. Harris investigates the inclusion of each piece, which was particularly useful in situating this rather odd number in relation to Buster Keaton's 1921 film *The Playhouse* (p. 27).

The most striking thing about *An American in Paris*, however, is its ending, a seventeen-minute dance staged outside the confines of the story. In a chapter devoted to the ballet, Harris digs into the reasons for this finale, which had been imagined as a stand-alone number from the start and served as the culmination of Minnelli's and Kelly's careers. This is probably the book's strongest section, weaving Harris's interpretation of the scene with critical commentary from the period and history of the production of the sets. For Harris, the ballet sequence "has allowed Paris to shift from being naïve and whimsical, to being a space that reflects the new-found maturity of the romantic leads" (p. 94). Of course, the sequence is something of a fantasy, arising from Jerry's desire for an alternate conclusion to a romance that didn't go his way. In a beautifully written and compelling argument for the value of the ballet sequence, Harris reads the final dance as a logical end to the story rather than a destabilizing element of the narrative: "the ballet is crucial to the structure of the film, creating a space in which the underlying anguish and hysteria of the separation--the failure of the film to assert its own conventions--can be played out" (p. 101).

In the same way that the ballet sequence could be separated from the rest of the film, Harris's chapter on it could stand alone as an essay on the subject and a distillation of her approach. However, the book's other five chapters also offer valuable research and insight, particularly about the role played by Paris in

the imagination of the filmmakers. Starting with a short chapter on the appeal of the city and the critical success of the film, Harris moves to a chapter on the movie's pre-production history, with sections on the script, music, and cast and detailed information about the shooting, which did not, in fact, take place in Paris. She demonstrates the way each element of the film was designed to evoke Paris as an artistic European city, one where Americans like Jerry might find themselves. This is of particular interest in her discussion of the selection of Gershwin tunes and the section on the casting of Leslie Caron.

The third chapter, "Paris, Culver City," is devoted to the cultural value of Paris in the postwar American imagination. Harris describes the presence of Americans in the city after the end of the war and discusses a popular 1949 *Life* magazine profile on an artist who bore striking similarities to Jerry. This backdrop helps readers understand why the film would have carried the weight it did upon its 1951 release. She also explains how a film director who had never visited Paris was assisted in the construction of a city that "is deliberately shaped to be the place we recognize from the postcards" (p. 62). This vision of Paris, Harris argues, is apolitical and nonthreatening, "only an affirmation of the compatibility and complicity of France and America" (p. 62).

It is this vision of Paris as a place of cooperation that provides the setting for Harris's film analysis in the following chapter, where she focuses on the presentation of community and the film's love story. She looks at how the film defines the city as a place of male camaraderie, which is then troubled by the women who circulate outside it. For Harris, the film's central romance flourishes outside of this communal sphere, which explains why it might only be resolved in the final dance number, staged within a version of Paris "as an abstract projection of Jerry's emotional state" and not at the Beaux Arts Ball with which the story would seem to end (p. 86).

In the final chapter, Harris helpfully provides several perspectives on the film's reception, contrasting lukewarm reviews by renowned critics such as Lindsay Anderson with the more widely shared perception that the film deserved its Academy Awards. She notes that the French papers in particular appreciated the film, using new words to describe it, including "*musifilm*" and "*balletofilm*" (p. 105). After reading Harris's meticulously researched book, for which she visited the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as well as the University of Southern California Cinematic Arts Library, it is easy to conclude, as she did, that *An American in Paris* provided the "template for Hollywood's narrative and visual engagement with the knowability and transformative potential of that most magical of European cities" (p. 114). Harris's book offers an insightful reading of the musical that is important for anyone wishing to learn more about MGM productions or the cultural construction of the city of Paris on film.

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