

# American Entertainments' Triumph over/ Incorporation of European Arts:

In Case of *An American in Paris* (1951, Vincente Minnelli)

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## 0. Introduction

Cinema had long been (or maybe is still now) not recognized as art except in cases of a very small number of "great directors" or "artistic movies." Generally speaking, it was at most after the auteur policy and New Wave (Nouvelle Vague) movies (or perhaps only partially and exceptionally after Neorealismo movies) that cinema got to be thought of as art, at least to some extent. In this respect, spectators of movies or people making them had had (or provably still have) a kind of strong inferiority complex toward arts, especially fine arts, represented by paintings, as well as a great longing for them.

In the United States, this inferiority complex and longing had been or provably is still now doubled by an inferiority complex toward and longing for Europe and its traditional culture, especially arts. This doubled inferiority complex and longing appears in MGM's trademark. It contains a Latin phrase, "ars gratia artis," which means "art for art's (own) sake."<sup>1)</sup>

I take up *An American in Paris* (1951) directed by Vincente Minnelli as a typical example of these doubled inferiority complex and longing, and clarify how the film reflects these and furthermore how it expresses implicitly that American popular entertainments can not only triumph over European arts but also incorporate them.<sup>2)</sup> I also take into consideration the film's historical con-

text, that is, political and cultural situations of early 1950's.

## 1. American people's Doubled Inferiority Complex toward/ Longing for Europe and its arts appearing in *An American in Paris*

When Henri Baurel, a French singer played by Georges Guétary appears in the film for the first time (DVD, ch.3, 0:06.13-), he speaks French in conversations with French people, though he speaks English in the voice-over. And when he sings a small part of "Nice Work If You Can Get It" composed by George Gershwin, he sings in English but between the words of the lyrics, he adds "Dites-moi" in French. These emphasize that Henri is a French singer, that is, a European singer, and though every song sung in the film was composed by George Gershwin, his singing style is "artistic" or "operatic" compared with the casual singing style of Gene Kelly, who played Jerry Mulligan, the protagonist of the film.

The French singer Henri begins to sing "By Strauss," the first musical number fully sung in the film, and Jerry and Adam Cook, an American pianist played by Oscar Levant, pianist very well-known as a Gershwin specialist, follow Henri (DVD, ch.6, 0:13.58-). Though the song was composed by Gershwin, the lyrics praise the greatness of the Austrian, that is, European waltzes composed by Johann Strauss (II). And before the number begins, Henri denies almost completely the value of Jazz music.

These reflects American people's doubled inferiority complex toward/longing for Europe and its arts, because European Waltzes are highly praised and the value of Jazz, one of the greatest entertainments the American people have along with Hollywood movies, is almost completely denied. In the beginning of the film European arts have their definite superiority over American entertainments, though American entertainments get the final victory as we will see later.

## 2. Jerry, the protagonist as a soldier of the occupation army

Jerry Mulligan, the protagonist of the film is an ex-GI who remains in Paris to study painting after WWII. He is symbolically and implicitly a soldier of the American "occupation army" in France, because as is very often pointed out, France was virtually not a victorious country but a defeated country of WWII and it was saved and liberated mainly by the United States and in early 1950's it was under the very strong influence of the US. Jerry often gives French kids chewing gums and in the musical number "I Got Rhythm" teaches them some English words. Giving kids sweets and sometimes teaching them English is, for example, exactly what American soldiers of the occupation army did in Japan during the Occupation Period (1945-1952) after WWII.<sup>3</sup> Though Jerry sings the latter part of the number in French, this shows not his respect toward France but his ability to incorporate French or European cultures.

This implicitly shows the political superiority of the US over France, or Europe. In early 1950's the US was politically the biggest and strongest country in the world and its influences were great, though it had the Cold War against the USSR and other socialist countries. And decisively the US played the main role in WWII in saving and liberating France, or Europe from Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. So, it was in a sense quite natural for American people to want to get also cultural superiority, especially in the field of arts.

## 3. Henri Seduced by the Entertainments of the US

In the musical number "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise," (DVD, ch.18. 1:00.23-) Henri sings on a stage in French in the beginning, but when he finds a friend from the US among the audience and introduces this friend to them, he starts to sing in English. This friend from the US is an impresario and after

the number (or the show), he proposes to Henri a tour around the US. The change of the lyrics from French to English seems to be for American spectators, but why then doesn't Henri sing in English from the beginning?

This change of languages from French to English implies that Henri was seduced by the American impresario before the actual proposition and that he said yes to it. It also implies that the French singer will be defeated by Jerry, an American, in their struggle for the love of Lise, the fiancée of Henri, played by Leslie Caron.

We should remember that this number comes right after the scene of Jerry's first date with Lise and their first kiss, and that the scene contains the musical number "(Our) Love Is Here to Stay." In a sense Henri was seduced by the entertainments of the US during the number "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise," and by saying yes to this seduction his defeat became conclusive before the actual defeat at the end of the film.

However, speaking of Jerry, it seems he did nothing to get Lise from Henri. Why and how could he win a victory over Henri?

#### 4. Jerry's Victory over Henri: American Entertainments' Triumph over/Incorporation of European Arts

Jerry couldn't succeed in paintings (of French styles), but it was not necessary for him to succeed in European-style paintings because he could defeat Henri and get Lise. Probably most of the American spectators in 1951 of *An American in Paris* felt it right and natural for an American man to take a French girl from a French man, not only because he is an American, but also because they believed (at least subconsciously) that the US or the soldiers of the US saved and liberated France in WWII and that France or French people should be obedient to the US or the Americans. (Of course, these judgments and beliefs are not politically correct at all.)

But why and how could Jerry win a victory over Henri? It is by the aid of the power of American entertainments, that is, in case of *An American in Paris*, Jazz and dancing to Jazz.

In the scene of the first date of Jerry and Lise by the Seine (la Seine), Jerry sings a little of the melody of the song, "Love Is Here to Stay." In fact, this is the tune they danced to and Jerry sang to Lise when they met for the first time. After a conversation for a while, Lise sings a very little of the melody. And after saying a few words, Jerry begins to sing the song, this time its lyrics. When Jerry finishes singing, they start to dance together to the melody of the song performed by an orchestra. And it is while they are dancing that they kiss their first kiss. (A three-time repetition is used here very effectively.) It is by singing a Jazz song to Lise and dancing together with her to the melody of the song that Jerry succeeded in getting her love.

And in the final musical number of the film, "An American in Paris," (DVD, ch.30, 1:34.49) which is very famous for its about seventeen-minute length, Jerry danced with Lise to the musical work of the same title composed by Gershwin. Here it is very important that the piece was composed by George Gershwin (though all the songs and the musical works used in the film were composed by him), because Gershwin is the first and perhaps the only "national" composer the US have ever had and because he was first quite a popular Jazz hit-song maker and began to compose several works of classical music for an Orchestra, though not all their orchestrations were by himself. His works belonging to classical music<sup>4)</sup> are based on Jazz, one of the main American entertainments. By dancing with Lise to *An American in Paris*, though it is only in his dream or imagination, Jerry could win a victory over Henri in the struggle for the love of Lise, and just after the number ends Henri and Lise come back and Henri lets Lise go to Jerry. Jerry and Lise hold each other very tight and kiss each other with the melody of *An American in Paris* resonating as background music.<sup>5)</sup>

Some may say the reason of Henri's recognition of his defeat is the fact that

just before the last musical number he overheard accidentally a conversation between Jerry and Lise and noticed she really loves Jerry, not him. However, this recognition and the final happy ending are justified on the level of the expression only by the musical number, "An American in Paris," because except dancing with Lise to the music by Gershwin, Jerry did nothing to get her from Henri.

As it is now evident from what I have pointed out until now, Jerry's victory over Henri also means American entertainments' triumph over European Arts. And the former does not only triumph over the latter, but they also incorporate the latter and take control of them, because while the musical number, "An American in Paris," is fundamentally based on Jazz and its unification is accomplished by Jazz, it also contains many elements of European arts, that is to say ballet dancing and the sets and the background paintings borrowing the styles of famous French painters like Renoir, Utrillo, Henri Rousseau etc.

## Conclusion

In a film, *An American in Paris*, American entertainments' triumph over/incorporation of European arts are implicitly expressed. A conflict between American entertainments and European arts, superiority of European arts over American entertainments in the beginning, and American entertainments' final triumph over/incorporation of European arts. This scheme was taken over by *Singin' in the Rain* (1952, directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen) and *Band Wagon* (1953, directed by Vincente Minnelli). In *Singin' in the Rain* the conflict is between theater influenced by European theater and Hollywood (silent) movies and in *Band Wagon* the conflict is between European theater along with ballet and American musical comedy. It is very interesting that all the three flagship musical movies of MGM in early 1950's are based on this same scheme.

We should argue in another opportunity to what extent this scheme can be applied. However, I'd like to point out here one possibility that American Pop Art during 1960's was influenced by this scheme, though Pop Art itself was born in Britain during 1950's, however, under the great influences of American pop culture.

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### Notes

- 1) For example, the trademark of *An American in Paris* I treat in this article.
- 2) Jane Feuer already discussed the struggle and conflict between entertainment and art in Hollywood musicals and the victory of the latter over the former and the incorporation of the former into the latter (cf. Feuer 1977 → 1995 and Feuer 1982 → 1993), but historical limitations are far from enough in her argument, and historical conditions behind such situations are not necessarily taken into considerations. And she doesn't refer to what I call doubled inferiority complex at all.
- 3) There was a slight difference that Japanese kids preferred chocolates to chewing gums, though.
- 4) Though the classical music works by Gershwin were first often thought to be "semi-classical," especially among musicians and critics of classical music, they were for American people classical music incorporating and based on elements of Jazz, and today they are thought to belong to classical music and often played in concerts by many orchestras.
- 5) Such powers of musical numbers using Jazz of solving problems, often appear in classical Hollywood musicals, though the case of *An American in Paris* is outstanding and exceptional. Jane Feuer 1982 → 1993: ch.4, esp. 73-76 pointed out that after dream sequences in Hollywood musicals in '30s and '40s problems are often solved, but she explains the reason on the basis of Freudian theory of dream and doesn't mention the importance of Jazz and dancing to Jazz.

### Video Materials

『巴里のアメリカ人 (Pari no Amerikajin)』 *An American in Paris*, DVD, ワーナー・

ホーム・ビデオ (Warner Home Video), 2015. (All the chapters and the time codes in this article are those of this DVD.)

『巴里のアメリカ人 (Pari no Amerikajin)』 *An American in Paris*, Blu-ray Disk, ワーナー・ホーム・ビデオ (Warner Home Video), 2010.

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