

## Vincente Minnelli's Melodrama *Some Came Running* and the Crossing of Borders

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This paper argues that in his first melodrama on screen, *Some Came Running* (1958),<sup>1</sup> the filmmaker Vincente Minnelli<sup>2</sup> tried to establish clear differences with his earlier musicals, such as *An American in Paris* (1951) or *Brigadoon* (1954), by exploring the possibilities of narrative in his films. Film critics generally agree that in his melodramas, the crossing of generic borders between the musical and the melodrama is a key to his aesthetic achievement.<sup>3</sup> A study of the plot and characters will show the influence of the literary model<sup>4</sup> in the film's narrative structure. Conversely, the cinematographic model allows much of the aesthetics of the stage musical to exert on the screen their fascination on the audience. Points of interest in the film will be discussed, such as social borders and characterization, as well as the erasure of the borders of the stage, which benefits from the CinemaScope format, the rhythm of the musical which is transposed into screen movement by fast editing, and the innovative use of colour in the film melodrama, which is a key element of the musical. Examining this film from the point of view of a crossing of generic borders will show that much of its great success is due to the cross-fertilization of both genres, the musical (stage or film) and the onscreen melodrama.

### The Crossing of Generic Borders: A Significant Feature of Minnelli's Film Melodrama

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A number of leading critics refer to Minnelli's films in terms of their generic awareness. Jean-Loup

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<sup>1</sup> See synopsis in end notes.

<sup>2</sup> Vincente Minnelli (1903–1986). After graduating in arts, including music, painting, and costume and set design, he worked on shows and directed musical revues in New York such as Ziegfeld Follies of 1936. He was offered a job at MGM in 1940 by producer Arthur Freed. As a film director, his first films were musicals such as *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), and he directed musicals such as *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Brigadoon* (1954). Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincente\\_Minnelli](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincente_Minnelli), accessed 15 December 2020. The musical is about performed songs and this is particularly true of Minnelli's film musicals such as *An American in Paris* (1951) or *The Band Wagon* (1953). There exists an extensive bibliography on the filmmaker's work, among which only the relevant ones will be quoted, given the general availability of this documentation.

<sup>3</sup> "The Aesthete in the Factory," James Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, Cambridge (U.K.): Cambridge University Press, 1993, 7–50.

<sup>4</sup> Melodrama is found in eighteenth and nineteenth century literature as opposed to classical tragedy and comedy genres. It is a popular drama characterised by pathetic figures, sentimental situations which can be complicated enough to appear unrealistic. For the OED, it is a sensational piece with violent appeals to emotions and a happy ending; in the theatre the plays included songs and orchestral music accompanying the action.

Bourget, for instance, writes of *Some Came Running* that it includes all the dominant motifs of melodrama in film.<sup>5</sup> By this he means the themes of family life, as exemplified by the quarrelling brothers, Frank Hirsh (Arthur Kennedy) and Dave Hirsh (Frank Sinatra); of social life, as expressed by the dichotomy of high culture competing with low culture, represented through the opposition between Gwen French (Martha Hyer) and Ginny Moorhead (Shirley MacLaine); as well as by the popular theme of the young girl, Ginny, harassed by a villain, Raymond Lanchak (Steven Peck).

David Grimsted also discusses the literary model of the melodrama transposed in Minnelli's film. The characters either ignore the codes of social order, which characterizes Dave's attitude, or pay due attention to them: in the eyes of Dave's elder brother and his wife, who condemn Dave's misconduct, social order means morality. In the original model, the young heroine embodies virtue, the young man (or the old father) is opposed to the villain attempting to seduce her.<sup>6</sup> But David Grimsted shows that the main characters of Minnelli's melodrama are more complex than their literary sources. Ginny is rather the "lively girl" model found in secondary characters of melodramas, but gradually evolves into the innocent heroine, and Dave's rejection of the established rules of the bourgeois world gathers a strong moral value when we understand that he is aware of their hypocrisy. As a result, the film gives a satirical picture of the bourgeois morality extolled in the literary model.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in Dave's neglect of conventions, and, in parallel, Ginny's ignorance of them, one sees the emergence of the modernist anti-hero type of post WWI literature. It can be argued that the moral dichotomies of romantic melodrama are rewritten by the film into a modern model relying on values of individualism and freedom of manners. By the end of the film, Dave and Ginny reverse the moral order of the establishment.

For his part, Thomas Elsaesser argues that, historically, melodrama was born with the rise of middle-class concerns. In his opinion, *Some Came Running* is a melodrama in that it exemplifies the entropy of the established middle-classes and their reticence in the face of impulse and energy. In that respect, it will be appropriate to examine the use of colour in *Some Came Running* as an onscreen vehicle to visualize the conflicting forces of society, conservative versus dynamic ones. Regarding our subject which is the transformation of the musical genre into the melodramatic one by Minnelli, we shall bear in mind Elsaesser's additional argument that melodrama is a genre which does not contradict the concerns of the musical in that it relies on a "dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones."<sup>8</sup>

Among film critics interested in melodrama in cinema, Rick Altman devoted a whole study to the notion of film genre. He argues that genre itself is a "border" in the sense that authors use established, pre-existing works as a model (for example imitation, pastiche or parody).<sup>9</sup> In so doing, they cater to the audiences' expectations defined by the implicit commonplace habits fostered by cultural backgrounds, customs, and ideologies. However, if the crossing of generic borders is to be meaningful for the more sophisticated audiences, it is because genre identification, which is inherently self-reflexive, is sufficiently underscored to be noticeable. In classical Hollywood cinema, this self-conscious mode of

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Loup Bourget, *Le mélodrame hollywoodien*, Paris: Stock, 1985, 111.

<sup>6</sup> David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled – American Theatre & Culture, 1800–1850*, Berkeley: University of California Press, (1968) 1987, 171–176.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 181–182.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," (1972) reprint in B. Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* vol. 2, Berkeley: University of California Press, 165–189, 173. For Peter Brooks, the crossing of genres in melodrama is part of a more general aesthetics of astonishment. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination-Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New York: Columbia University Press (1976) 1985, 24–56.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, London: Macmillan, 1999, 14.

address is, of course, carefully ruled out as an obstacle to the illusion of reality created by screening fiction. Even when backstage drama comes to the fore in films about stars such as *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954) or stage rehearsals and productions like *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli 1953), the camera simply frames the stage and the backstage indifferently. There is little reflexivity about the stage show as a genre distinct from cinema, unless for dramatic purposes: for instance, Cyd Charisse, as a ballet dancer in *The Band Wagon*, discovers the value of the musical as a performance, a scene which reflects upon the embedding film being itself a musical.

### **Crossing of Borders in the Plot**

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The script of *Some Came Running*<sup>10</sup> emphasizes the crossing of borders on the diegetic level, through scenes in which the trope of social and cultural barriers so characteristic of melodrama is screened at length. The film has two significant scenes in which both Ginny and Dave cross social borders by trespassing upon the doorstep of rooms where they do not belong.

Suspecting Dave's attachment to Gwen, Ginny decides to meet her and uses her classroom after the students have left to introduce herself (1:36:5 – 1:40:52). She asks Gwen whether she is going to marry Dave and is in love with him. But Gwen turns very stiff and cold at Ginny's shocking entrance in her tight pink dress, bright red flower stuck above the ear, heavy make-up and red hair, a style which is rather unsuitable for an academic student. As Ginny makes her rudely intrusive enquiry, she does not stand motionless as a student is expected to but keeps shifting her steps as if on hot irons and waving her hands to convey her meaning better than with her words. To emphasize her superior social rank, Gwen's indignation swells under the insulting questions and attempts to make her leave as soon as she can without transgressing the codes of politeness and self-control expected from a teacher.

Ironically, Gwen herself has intruded earlier into Dave's life with a phone call at Bama's place, unwittingly crossing social borders. Just as Dave is securing good earnings at a game table in the company of his associate gambler Bama (Dean Martin), he hears Gwen inviting him to pay her a call (1:27:33 – 1:28:45). This interruption initiates a typically burlesque scene of chaos: while the phone call upsets Dave, it also arouses another gambler's suspicion of cheating. The loser requests that Bama take his hat off, which he never does, and a fight ensues in which Bama is wounded. When Dave eventually visits Gwen, he is told by her father that she is not at home and is given a check for the publication of his novella in a newspaper. Collecting the check, he rushes upstairs and enters her bedroom unannounced (1:47:02 – 1:48:36). As—expected by the audience having witnessed Ginny's initiative, Gwen turns him down indignantly. She addresses him with rigid coldness, declaring she has come back to her senses, and realizes she does not like the way he lives, concluding with the injunction: "Keep away from me!"

Dave feels desperate and, typically, as a lover on the rebound, he falls for Ginny's love declaration: she has bought copies of his story and believes he is unattached. Again, the crossing of a social border is embedded in the diegesis. After asking Ginny to clean the place, using her as a maid and not acknowledging her words "I love you so much" as she embraces him (1:52:40), Dave complains that she does not understand the meaning of his story, and she confesses that she loves him but does not

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<sup>10</sup> See film synopsis below. The movie was adapted by John Patrick and Arthur Sheekman from James Jones's eponymous novel. The town of Parkman was loosely based on author Jones's hometown Robinson, Illinois. The novel was Jones's second work, after his successful *From Here to Eternity*, adapted by MGM in 1953, starring Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr, Montgomery Clift, as well as Frank Sinatra.

understand him (1:55:16). It is this border between understanding, supposedly Gwen's competence as a teacher, and Ginny's true love, which Dave suddenly crosses under an impulse by proposing to her. The crossing of social barriers is completed when he decides to marry Ginny (1:55:40). The script is then devoted to the *mise-en-scène* of the wedding ceremony, which is a deconstruction (or "crossing" as has been suggested) of the expectations of the audience as far as the marriage ritual is concerned. Its representation, in the climactic sequence of the Centennial Revival Fair which will be discussed further on in this paper, emphasizes the dispersed form of the marriage ritual itself, as if this essential form of the melodramatic genre supposedly leading to a climactic happy end<sup>11</sup> had been disrupted.

### **Generic Cross-Fertilization in *Some Came Running***

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Before launching into a career as a filmmaker, Minnelli had in fact been an innovator of the "integrated book musical,"<sup>12</sup> and his success in the theatre had almost entirely been related to a new form of revue which rejected the traditional staging of the various numbers as entirely distinct from each other. The sequence of numbers was usually determined based on contrasts in tempo, mood, or theatrical effects, so that lyrical moments alternated with comedy, star turns alternated with chorus numbers, and spectacular routines were placed at climactic moments. Although these traditional rules of composition were applied by Minnelli in his film musicals, his shows were characterised by a proto-narrative transitivity – what he himself described as an "idea of production."<sup>13</sup> And indeed, in this film, the "idea of production" is explicitly foregrounded in the diegetic trope of class barriers being crossed, as if it were essential to the crossing of generic borders.

### **The "Integrated Book Musical"**

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Minnelli's own comments on his film musicals highlight his interest in a narrative structure. His understanding of cinema as an art necessitating both narrative coherence and the attraction of stage numbers lead to the creation of a new genre: the "integrated book musical" using the strategies of "cross-fertilization."<sup>14</sup> In *An American in Paris* for example, he attempted to use both spectacular numbers and melodramatic situations.<sup>15</sup> The film gathered narrative coherence by telling a story about common people, while the verisimilitude of the fiction was emphasized by details and needed to be given unity by chromatic composition, relying on contrasts between different colours to "showcase" the star, Leslie Caron. The different costumes<sup>16</sup> were chosen for their eye-catching use of primary colours to

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<sup>11</sup> Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 171–203.

<sup>12</sup> Since the 20th century, the "book musical" has been defined as a musical play where songs and dances are fully integrated into a well-made story with serious dramatic goals able to provoke genuine emotions rather than laughter. The three main components of a book musical are its music, lyrics, and book. <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=integrated+book+musical>, accessed 15 December 2020.

<sup>13</sup> J.A.D. Casper, *Vincente Minnelli and the Film Musical*, New York: Barnes, 1977, 19–20.

<sup>14</sup> While "hybridization" refers to animals or plants breeding with an individual belonging to another species, "cross-fertilization" does not appear in use (O.E.D). But according to Webster's American Dictionary, the two are synonyms, but the second one is also used metaphorically to mean "interchange" or "interaction" (as between different ideas, cultures, or categories), especially of a broadening or productive nature.

<sup>15</sup> Vincente Minnelli, *I remember It Well*, New York: Doubleday, 1974, 236.

<sup>16</sup> "[M]ost of his films contain scenes that take place at parties or festive celebrations." Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, 36.

obtain chromatic intensity. Jean-Loup Bourget argues that the transition between musical and melodrama which appears to characterize Minnelli's career as a film director, entails a shift of colour from the stage musical—of which it had become an essential ingredient—to its introduction into the melodrama, a genre which had previously flourished in black and white.<sup>17</sup>

Generic cross-fertilization also characterizes Leslie Caron's own art, as she was able to both dance in spectacular routines and act a part as a character. Because its script does not include social conflicts, this musical is not considered as a melodrama, but interestingly, Minnelli's comment in his autobiography shows that he sees no incompatibility between onscreen story-telling and the musical since they share an aesthetics of the senses in which colour and sound predominate.<sup>18</sup> In *Some Came Running*, though the melodrama relies on dialogue to develop emotional scenes of confrontation between characters attempting to manipulate each other, speech actually gives way as Gwen French's literary views about writing are actually questioned by her students. But in terms of the expressivity of contrast, she certainly provides a foil to the nearly inarticulate but keenly spontaneous and younger Ginny Moorhead.

### **The Show Within**

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Interestingly, the film script of *Some Came Running* gives us a *mise-en-abyme* of the musical in a climactic scene which sums up the essence of the genre, as it gives the characters, Ginny and Dave, a part which allows the stars, MaClaine and Sinatra, to don their Hollywood *persona*. At the Terre-Haute night-club, Ginny, who is now wearing a red dress and has been drinking heavily, upon suddenly hearing a melody which she loves is roused by an impulse to sing and join the orchestra.<sup>19</sup> Although, ironically enough, it was to become a well-known Sinatra song, she performs poorly with a raucous voice as she attempts to sing the melody, while her performance is, nevertheless, arresting.<sup>20</sup> The moment belongs to vaudeville numbers performance which addressed the audience directly, but owing to Ginny's intoxication it verges on the burlesque, through its melodramatic excess of gesture and its aural intensity, though her sudden arousal also conveys a sense of authenticity. When Dave manages to lead Ginny away from the small stage where the musicians are playing, she asks Dave to buy her a small yellow cushion inscribed with the word "Sweetheart" and she suddenly relaxes, her whole body expressing innocent surrender as she slips it on his shoulder before resting her head. The excess of feeling which the scene expresses is more than appropriate to the melodramatic genre, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith observes:

[M]usic and *mise-en-scène* do not just heighten the emotionality of an element of the action: to some extent they substitute for it. [...] This is particularly the case with Minnelli [...]. Often the "hysterical" moment of the text can be identified as the point at which the

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Loup Bourget, *Le mélodrame hollywoodien*, 205-14.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama*, 173.

<sup>19</sup> The song is "To Love and Be Loved," recorded several times by Frank Sinatra. The music was composed by Jimmy Van Heusen (1913–1990) and the lyrics by Sammy Cahn (1913–1993). It won an Academy Award as Best Original Song. See end note.

<sup>20</sup> We could speak here of the "text of muteness" which Peter Brooks sees as characteristic of the genre. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 56–80. Gesture and its silent efficiency replace language.

realist representational convention breaks down.<sup>21</sup>

However, rather than a “hysterical moment,” I believe such emotional intensity ultimately avoids the burlesque excess. Instead, its authenticity is achieved because, contrary to stage shows, we are empathizing with a film character, while the scene screens the generic crossing from realism into the marvellous.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, it is the aesthetic empowerment of her small yellow cushion and its “Sweetheart” inscription which carries us into an imaginary world of dreams by the sheer force of its poetry. The stage prop is also used to conclude the melodrama, as an aura to her sweet peaceful face when Dave delicately tucks it underneath her head once she has died saving his life, true to her words: “I’m going to make you a good wife” (2:01:58).

Such a crossing from the realistic into the marvellous is but one instance of the ease with which melodrama crosses generic barriers.

### **The Deconstruction of the Marriage Ritual: Another Kind of “Crossing”?**

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Unlike the melodramatic tradition of the abandoned mother (as in Griffith’s *Way Down East*, 1920), in *Some Came Running*, the girl marries, although she is not pregnant. But the wedding ceremony only amounts to signatures on a certificate, and banknotes to witnesses; and although the bride is wearing white, she is not carrying flowers; instead, we see her bunny-rabbit handbag which connotes her extreme youth and innocence. Later, she collects her fetish yellow silk cushion and its “sweetheart” inscription for the sweet promises of love that are part of the marriage ritual.

The order in which the various stages of the bride’s marriage unravel is disrupted: she first receives the contract which ties her to her husband, and only later are the vows taken; the symbolic significance of her white dress is seen only later, as she moves into the crowd, rather than earlier, before the ceremony. We see her mothering a child without bearing it and the happy pair are framed in a composition which highlights Dave’s lack of response instead of the traditional photograph on the steps of a church or other official building.

Part of this deconstruction of the ritual is due to Dave’s attitude, since he is never heard to utter the husband’s promise in his share of the vows. When Ginny moves towards him, expecting a kiss, he does not respond. In fact the marriage vows are delayed until the couple are at the fair ground, and she pronounces them alone, failing to get her husband to join her. As for the throwing of the rice, usually occurring as the couple leaves the church, it is to be delayed until Smitty’s, the place where the couple are expected, but which they never reach. These moments of deconstruction of the social rites are suspended by the attempted murder of Dave and Ginny’s sacrifice. The modality of such crossing is sublimated, as the ultimate crossing from life into death takes place.

And yet, there is a specifically American dimension to this emphasis on marriage details, even though they appear in a disorderly and incomplete manner. Rick Altman reminds us that marriage represents a very special phenomenon in American life. More than the dynastic, economic, and social event that marriage constitutes in Europe, the American marriage is a mystic occasion. “It is that moment when [...] the couple is [...] transfigured, drawing to itself the force and radiance of the sun.

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<sup>21</sup> G. Nowell-Smith, “Minnelli and Melodrama” (1977) reprinted in M. Landy (ed.), *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television*, Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1991, 268–274, 272.

<sup>22</sup> “The fairy-tale quality of the melodrama tended to blur the image of the social world.” Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 196.

Love it is that accomplishes this miracle – self-sacrificing, transfiguring love.”<sup>23</sup> Minnelli’s film devotes the last part of the narrative to such a moment, concluding it by the literal self-sacrificing of Ginny for the man she loves. It might therefore be because marriage in America is not an institution but a celebration which serves to project a momentary triumph of romantic love into eternity, that the final scene is so successful in winning our empathy.

### **The Colours of Melodrama in *Some Came Running*: Characterization**

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In the film’s use of Metrocolor, as in classical Technicolor films,<sup>24</sup> colour is used to characterize the types which the protagonists embody, the impossible crossing of social barriers, and eventually, when such crossing is attempted, the ultimate tragedy it causes. In the following scenes, we understand how colour makes meaning come across as it addresses the audience’s perception directly and emotionally. During the family reunion of enemy brothers with which the film opens, we discover the two protagonists’ relationship not only by their gestures and postures, but also by chromatic signifiers: the two men, Frank Hirsh (Arthur Kennedy) and his younger brother Dave, are wearing beige, almost monochrome clothes. However, this similarity serves to highlight the individualism of the younger man: Dave is wearing a tight-fitting military uniform which shows his lean, muscular body to advantage, as opposed to the baggy though well ironed beige trousers which his elder brother – a jeweller and bank trustee – is seen wearing throughout the film, often with a navy-blue jacket. After a night scene during which Dave fights Raymond for harassing Ginny, he is put in jail and his brother has to pay the fine to bail him out. When they meet for the second time, Dave has moved to Bama’s flat, and is recovering from his drinking bout. If Frank’s beige trousers are well-ironed, Dave’s tightly fitting beige uniform is now badly crumpled, which is a clue to his final rejection of middle-class conventions. And yet the colour pattern of Dave’s clothes remains toned down throughout the film: he later appears in grey flannels, white shirt, and black jersey, and, in the final scene, is dressed in a grey suit, white shirt, and dark red, grey and white “club tie.” The character is depicted thus as ambiguous, hesitating between conventional values when he visits the already quoted Gwen French with a mind to become a successful writer, and freedom, a value symbolized by Ginny. Dave’s facial expressions are always uncertain, troubled, or perplexed, as opposed to Frank’s rigid demeanour. Contrary to appearances, if for Frank and Agnes who are always careful about their appearance, Dave’s often neglected clothes mean he is ignoring the rules of social order. It is with him that the audience is made to empathize. The chromatic composition in the film also depicts other characters’ psychology, as for example when colours serve to define the women’s differing attitudes to sensuality and sexuality. Frank’s wife Agnes is unable to show affection either to her husband or her daughter, and her preference for blue dresses constitutes an objective correlative of her emotional coldness; however, she wears a pink robe when she is seen waiting anxiously at night for her daughter to return from an “outing,” but this colour connoting well-to-do comfort clashes with her pallid face. Similarly, Gwen appears in a dress matching her golden hair to meet Dave the writer at dinner. The inner division of the character, between an intellectual superiority complex and a psycho-rigid psychology, is suggested by this first appearance. While a close-up of Dave’s face shows that he finds her very attractive, she pretends to be only a

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<sup>23</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 261-62.

<sup>24</sup> The founding text on Technicolor and color in films is Natalie Kalmus’s “Colour consciousness,” *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, August 1935, 139–147. See Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow – Color Design in the 1930s*, Austin (Texas): The University of Texas Press, 2007, 41–46.

teacher, and after escaping Dave's warm embrace as they dance, she leaves "to mark papers": the humorous innuendo of Dave's ceaseless attempts to seduce her (00:35:12) as she is seen sitting very prim at her car's steering-wheel, justifying her hairstyle by her job as a teacher, ends with his decision to step down at Smitty's bar and join Bama (00:35:57). Less ambiguous colours are used for her subsequent scenes: as a schoolteacher, she wears a white shirt and a blue skirt (1:35:30), and as a hostess greeting Dave who brings her his manuscript (00:52:49), she wears soft beige colours, which does not deter Dave since in this scene he manages to kiss her and undo her hair, and deeply, though briefly, arouse her passion (1:01:42).

Colour is used to convey the dichotomy between this conventional chromatic world and Ginny's, which is symbolized by its many colours. Colour shots of Shirley MacLaine in pre-production are commented upon by Minnelli:

It was very critical that she be overly made up, that she look vulgar [...] her make-up test arrived from Hollywood. It was dreadful. Her face was a child's, made up as a woman. I made her up myself on Sunday. Rouge was put where the shadows would be. I requested a photographer make colour shots of her; [...] it turned out to be a vulgar look, but one that didn't destroy her face [...]; she was now ready to deliver her pathetic performance. Her part represented the failure of sex rather than the triumph that would be implied if a sex bomb had been cast in the role.<sup>25</sup>

Within the palette of colours Minnelli uses, Ginny's dresses provide visual metaphors of her inner tensions. With the exception of the white dress in which she marries and is killed (1:59:49), her clothes are generally red or orange, matching her red hair and florid complexion. She is sometimes seen wearing the same low-cut, short-sleeved flowery pink blouse either with a skirt in the same fabric and a tight-fitting sash, a blue-grey skirt, or red pants. She usually wears a bright red artificial flower over her right ear which matches her bright lipstick and adds intensity to her expressive eyes. Thus, her clothes reveal her ambiguity and inner conflict: on the one hand, the primary colours echo the fact that she is very much aware of the social prejudice of upper-class characters for whom they advertise promiscuity and sex (she is a "hostess") but knows no other way of dressing given her low-class background, and, on the other hand, such primary colours are a vindication of the sincerity of her feelings for Dave. As she gives her body and life to protect the man she loves, her ultimate dress is made of two symbolic colours, white and red.<sup>26</sup>

## **Hollywood Stars**

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The casting of Shirley MacLaine<sup>27</sup> allows the star to perform a role in which spontaneity as well as grace and even elegance paradoxically fit the usual characteristics of her acting; though she plays the part of a character who is the butt of all the other characters' cruel scorn, including the not so respectable Bama

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<sup>25</sup> Minnelli, *I Remember It Well*, 328.

<sup>26</sup> Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard, *Silent Elizabethans. The Language of Colour in the Miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver*, *Astrea* n° 7, Montpellier: CERRA, 2000, 123–193. White and red became the colours of Queen Elizabeth's dresses instead of black, when brown replaced violet/blue. There is an English tradition for this symbolic pair disseminated in novels, in *Jane Eyre* for instance.

<sup>27</sup> American actress and singer Shirley MacLaine (1934-) is famous for her portrayals of headstrong, quirky, eccentric women.



despite his dignified posture and large gentlemanly hat, she never seems to deserve such contempt. As said above, she is given the highly significant line "I love you even if I don't understand you" (1:55:16) with which she proves that she is quite clever. At that moment the orchestra is heard playing a soft lyrical melody which matches Dave's sudden inspiration as he kneels near Ginny and says: "Will you marry me?" (1:55:40). The chromatic intensity chosen to characterize her by a highly emotional nature conveys her sincerity with great visual power, the Hollywood star being made literally to shine.

The casting of Dean Martin<sup>28</sup> for the comic role of Bama Dillert, a part which allows him to play his public *persona*, also uses his way of dressing to characterize him. He is always represented as very much aware of his appearance, in impeccably white underwear at home while carefully adding a few drops of whisky in his morning coffee, hesitating which tie to wear to match his jacket, while, as an emblem of his role as the clown,<sup>29</sup> he never takes off his hat, even in bed, but symbolically takes it off in a homage to Ginny's courage at her burial. He is never seen to wear other colours than light grey and sticks to his gentlemanly appearance even though he makes a profitable living by spoils from poker games.

As to the casting of Sinatra,<sup>30</sup> it contributes to the characterisation of Dave Hirsh as a modern anti-hero, owing to his reputation as a crooner, both violent and tender. Regardless of the stereotyped social grouping of melodrama, and despite his ability to sing and perform—which is not exploited in the film, but which might constitute one of its explicit references to the musical—he plays a character who does not belong to any definite social group. Indeed, Dave is capable of fitting into diverse social categories: he is welcomed by a former shopkeeper and smiles graciously; he has a relationship with a sophisticated educated woman, Gwen, and with a "hostess," Ginny. He can also behave as a decent, protective uncle to his disturbed and adolescent niece, Dawn, when he sees her entering the nightclub where he is with Bama. While his brother sees himself as a member of the wealthy, respectable middle class, Dave is torn between two extremes: he defines himself as both a failed writer, with ideals and aspirations (as shown by his love for the beautiful, but frigid, Gwen), and as an alcoholic. If, in Frank's case, monochrome images signify respectability, in Dave's case, they imply absence of social identity, and deep ambiguity and uncertainty. During the scene of his marriage to Ginny, the camera frames his mobile features in close-up, and, in an address to the audience, a sudden flare of his blue eyes reads as an eloquent metaphor of doubt, the typical philosophical stance of the modern anti-hero.

### **Modernist Colour Patterns: Crossing by Dissemination and Projection**

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As Ginny's first appearance on screen shows, her figure introduces a subversive force into Parkman's conventional world, dramatically expressed by the colour red. She is carrying a red jacket on her arm, and wearing red lipstick, which has stained Dave's cheek and that she carefully wipes off. Red is thus referenced through clothing and make-up but, ultimately, the proleptic symbolism of this plurality of meanings becomes clear as we reach the end of the film and the emblem of the red spot on her immaculate white dress. Dave sees the blood stain projected by the last beats of her wounded heart which is as it were literally printed on the palm of his hand: one might say that the dissemination of red

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<sup>28</sup> Famous American comedian Dean Martin (1917–1995) was nicknamed "the King of Cool" for his seemingly effortless charisma and self-assurance.

<sup>29</sup> On the figure of the clown see Philippe Goudard et Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (eds.), *Figures du clown, sur scène, en piste et à l'écran*, Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> American singer of traditional pop music and jazz Frank Sinatra (1915–1998) became a successful film actor after his career as a singer and starred in a great many Hollywood films.

here symbolizes the ultimate crossing into eternity.

### **The Centennial World Fair**

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The use of the fairground to underscore the main action, that is, the wedding, suggests that “in melodrama the rhythm of experience often establishes itself against its value (moral, intellectual.)”<sup>31</sup> In addition, the film is among the first to use CinemaScope, a format which enlarged the breadth of movement on the screen in a manner which suited the musical numbers and the exterior action scenes.<sup>32</sup> The broadening of space thanks to CinemaScope is exploited in the shooting of the Centennial Revival Fair with a boom-mounted camera.<sup>33</sup> Crowds and lights are seen in constant movement, a flow or “rhythm of experience” which the characters clearly share.

The chaotic freedom of the fairground was already a favourite location for cinema in black-and-white melodramas such as King Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1927), or Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (1951), and the transposition from black-and-white to colour films is referenced in the shadow cast by Raymond, the killer, reminiscent of Napoleon’s cast shadow in *Becky Sharp* (Reuben Mamoulian, 1935).<sup>34</sup> Shadows also appear earlier in Minnelli’s film, for example, combined with back-lighting and silhouettes in Raymond’s first attack on Dave, signalling the arrival of the “Chicago hoodlum.” The choice of green for this first street fight and red for the final one is also reminiscent of tinted horror scenes in silent films. The effect is to create a subterranean, demonic, parallel world, as in *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian, 1925).

The numerous, flickering lights take on a mysterious power, as if they were ominous signs, addressing us without the characters being aware of their significance. In Smitty’s bar, a green light is seen flickering above the exit at the back, as if beckoning to us: it is obliterated by a young man’s body as he rushes to the table where Bama is dining alone, to warn him about Raymond’s intention to shoot Dave. In a similar way, the lights on the gigantic Ferris wheel soar into the night like an ominous Wheel of Fortune. Here, the composer Elmer Bernstein uses harsh string chords which underscore the threat of Raymond’s manhunt, in contrast to the music of the merry-go-round that accompanies the couple. Moreover, Minnelli seems to have been fully aware that the rhythm of editing allows for the compression of events, leading to a psychological pressure that threatens Ginny and Dave.<sup>35</sup> He uses cinematographic devices such as parallel editing to create simultaneous plots, and in its climactic sequence of pursuit, the rapid juxtaposition of quick shots to screen the manhunt. In the final sequence of *Some Came Running*, what the flickering green light seems to have been conveying at that moment in the film is a warning about the imminent crime, as Ginny and Dave are being chased by Raymond. As if he had seen the signal along with hearing the young man’s warning, Bama immediately leaves the

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama*, 173.

<sup>32</sup> Colour in *Brigadoon* is enhanced by the use of the new format: CinemaScope, as in the views of the hills covered with purple heather. But Minnelli recalls that, “On *The Band Wagon*, some theatres used the Cinemascope mat and cut off Fred’s feet in his dancing scenes,” and complains that it changed the pictorial quotes by altering the proportions of screen space. However, the advent of CinemaScope cannot be separated from Bourget’s (aforementioned) shift of melodrama from black and white to Technicolor. Bourget argues that both changes contributed to a remarkable revival of melodrama in the 1950s (Bourget, *Le mélodrame hollywoodien*, 208) and the new format was important in the production and successful reception of *Some Came Running*.

<sup>33</sup> Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, 37. Here, Naremore quotes film historian Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, London: Starwood, 1993, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow*, 67.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama*, 174.

place and drives his car in the middle of the crowd, looking for Dave and Ginny to protect them. The parallel editing of his car trying to move fast but delayed by the thick crowd of people enjoying the fair (2:03:38) and quick shots of Raymond racing on foot in the crowd is typical of the suspense of action cinema. But the actor's performance is carefully choreographed: we see him jumping speedily upon tables with ape-like agility, scrutinizing the crowd with baleful eyes, and finally spotting the happy pair. This manhunt amid the crowd is punctuated by shots of the first floor of a hotel where he appears to get a better view of the crowd and spot Dave and Ginny. The hotel sign stands out in scarlet letters in the darkness, and when Raymond suddenly appears at the balcony, he stands out in back lighting as a mysterious black figure, while the whole screen is literally painted red by the neon sign's beam (2:03:08). The shot is repeated (2:04:30, 2:04:47), intercutting with subjective shots of the crowd below him (2:03:57, 2:05:29). Dave and Ginny's peaceful progress slows down when Ginny spontaneously bends over a small child and kisses him (2:04:30), a moment of suspense which shows the warm and tender person she truly is, while unaware of the villain's presence. The parallel choreography is a reference to the musical genre, as if we were now crossing the border from the marriage and the city to the world of the stage. But what is taking place in the crowd suddenly changes into an empty backstage (2:06:31).

### **The Colours and Rhythm of the Musical**

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This sequence uses rhythm – through editing – for its dramatic progression, and the cinematography expresses chaos in parallel to the diegetic disruption of the marriage ritual. In the same way, careful narrative motivation for colour, a characteristic of the musical as well as melodrama, is disrupted by the apparently arbitrary presence of the primary colours of the neon signs, seen as splashes of pure pigment. The chromatic intensity of such effects may account for a role of colour in the representation of the melodramatic theme of crossing in the film. The entertainment music broadcast from the different fair-ground stalls which created a variety of acoustic backgrounds can no longer be enjoyed. Now we recover the ominous atmosphere of Elmer Bernstein's Main Title score which is resumed: drums are heard loudly beating a march suggesting the irrevocable progress of destiny, while dissonant chords almost screech the main theme. The opening shot of the credits, printed in a vivid red, was a panning CinemaScope shot of a bus with sleeping passengers, and the action started as the driver was heard shouting, "Parkman!" The colour red had already been Ginny's hallmark, but now it spreads over a large screen curtain, in front of which the innocent victims pause to discuss their plans; it frames them, as if they were performers, and it is closed as if the show were over, but neither of them acknowledges its presence. Because of its similitude with the earlier red lighting on the hotel façade which covered the whole screen, the red curtain also becomes an ominous sign of disaster. Moreover, the red drapery here is combined with a bright green structure, in a daring clash of visual tension which makes colours free from their iconic limitations.

### **The Backstage**

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The connotations of the musical become more explicit when the murder takes place. By that time, Dave and Ginny have left the crowd and entered a backstage where several pieces from the different stands have been cast in disorder owing to their uselessness (2:06:31). Here, a red fabric is seen partly

dropping from an unused stand behind them, so that it could be argued that the theatricality of the performance is again enhanced by the red curtain motif. The camera pans upon details of the setting in a deserted place where the protecting crowd will never come, and upon closer perusal, a solitary discarded doll is seen lying among the rubbish. Among the discarded pieces of the fairground equipment, the camera also frames merry-go-round horses which have been cast off in a heap. They no longer belong to the world of entertainment, and instead, gather a new meaning from their desolate backstage setting. The pattern of red can be seen in many places of the setting, as when Ginny and Dave topple upon one another next to a large red object cast amid the rubbish on the pavement, emphasizing the spilling of Ginny's blood (2:07:16).

Therefore, here the film musical trope of the backstage is mainly expressed through colour, a process which enhances the dramatic effect by the loss of encoded meanings (already figured by the disruption of the order and unity of the marriage ritual), as the chaotic backstage stage props become a metaphor of the disastrous ruin and destruction of the characters' hopes of happiness. Because of their backstage setting, the discarded stage-props no longer refer to their encoded meaning. Instead, they depend for their significance on the patches of colours on a site which seems to be littered with waste, which creates a mutual chromatic resonance on the screen. In a modernist manner,<sup>36</sup> Hollywood's early view of colour as realistic becomes a useful means of highlighting different conceptions of colour in the film.

As seen above, Minnelli chose to make up Ginny's face to show her as socially inferior to the banker's wife, but also, as having a strong personal appeal. This oxymoronic conception of the character is typical of modernist art since the subject matter lies in the structure of objects rather than in their iconic image. The figure does not stand for an abstract idea but for the reality, and its unbearable horror, the inner tensions and suffering of the character as bodily experience: the deformations of the proportions of the bodies are not aesthetic but the mark of their materiality. The fact that she is shot through the spine, and the splash of red which accompanies the image is a metaphor for the suffering body, rather than the spiritual essence of the melodramatic self-sacrificing heroine.

However, when one analyses the central icon which stands as a metonymy for all Ginny's dreams, the colourful silk cushion, its colours actually transmute vulgarity into pathos. On the bright yellow background, the primary colour red and a saturated green, graduating through lighter shades of the same colours, certainly transgress the law of restraint advocated by Technicolor consultant Natalie Kalmus.<sup>37</sup> Yet, when Dave places it under her head, once she has given her life for him, it gives her face a special aura; her curved neck and raised arm recall her earlier posture, when she was performing in the night-club, but now it is graceful rather than awkward. As to the letters composing "Sweetheart" on her beloved cushion, they stand for the words she yearns for, and echo the theme for the song "To Love and Be Loved" which roused her before selecting the cushion in the shop window. Vulgarity and sincerity are brought together by the bright golden cushion which, with its scarlet fringe, becomes a visual metaphor of Ginny's desire.

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<sup>36</sup> "Minnelli, like Joyce, had an aesthete's temperament. His work was shaped by the same historical forces that gave birth to modernist literature." Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> "We must constantly practice color restraint; in the early two-color pictures, producers sometimes thought that because a process could reproduce color, they should flaunt vivid color continually before the eyes of the audience. This often led to unnatural and disastrous results." Kalmus, "Colour Consciousness," 147. And indeed, such excess of colour is used in the early Technicolor film, *Becky Sharp* (1935), to signify vulgarity, in a number in which the heroine misreads her Bath audience and sings an inappropriate lyrical piece; in a similar way, people like Gwen and Agnes think Ginny vulgar. Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow*, 48–75.

## Conclusion

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The crossing of generic borders in this film seems to constitute a form of cross-fertilization: the two genres have in common sound, particularly rhythm and music, as well as the use of Metrocolor, alias Technicolor,<sup>38</sup> and CinemaScope. Furthermore, while musical comedy aims at entertainment, and melodrama is concerned with moral issues, both genres are concerned with the bringing together of cultural and social opposites. Marriage is the focus of melodrama, as Altman argues, and the family is the main issue, while in the show musical, dance and shows are central, even more so in backstage musicals, i.e., shows not meant to be watched by the public in the theatre, but which comment upon the final performance. What *Some Came Running*, which revolves around social and family issues, borrows from musical comedy is a single number, but the “backstage business” is also there, transposed into the powerfully expressive metaphor of tragedy. What the musical brings to melodrama is, essentially, an intensity of rhythm, music, and colour, and freedom from the boundaries of realism, for a more sensuous, even haptic (to borrow Deleuze’s term)<sup>39</sup> approach. The significant part of music in the film, both in Ginny’s response to “To Love and Be Loved” and in Elmer Bernstein’s remarkable score produces great emotional intensity. Ultimately, it seems that Minnelli’s film remains remarkably efficient because of its free transgression of generic borders, with the innovative result of a cross-fertilization between the backstage trope of the musical and the melodramatic climax, as well as the interaction between sensational contrasts in stage effects and those allowed onscreen by the cinematography, from CinemaScope and color to rhythm by editing.

## Film Synopsis

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In 1948, Dave Hirsh (Frank Sinatra) is a disillusioned army veteran who had a career as a writer before the war, publishing two books. He comes back to his hometown Parkman, Indiana, in the company of Ginny Moorhead (Shirley Maclaine) whom he invited during a drinking bout in Chicago. She is in love with him and trying to escape from the harassment of a former boy-friend, Raymond Lanchak (Steven Peck), who soon turns up in Parkman and has a fight with Dave, before trying to shoot him as the plot ends. Dave has a brother, Frank Hirsh (Arthur Kennedy), who is a successful jeweler and banker in Parkman and, together with his wife Agnes (Leora Dana), very concerned about their social status and reputation in the town. However, he is having an affair with his secretary, Edith Barclay (Nancy Gates), which is discovered later on by his daughter Dawn Hirsh (Betty Lou Keim) who decides to leave Parkman. On meeting two of their wealthy social acquaintances, Professor French (Larry Gates) and his daughter Gwen (Martha Hyer), a creative writing teacher, who had asked to meet Dave because they admire his books, Dave is infatuated with Gwen’s looks. From then on he is divided between his passionate but unrequited attachment to Gwen and Ginny’s own devotion to him which moves him by its sincerity. Dave has also befriended in Parkman a hard-partying but good-hearted gambler, Bama Dillert (Dean Martin). Together they go on a gambling trip out of town, taking Ginny with them. Back in

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<sup>38</sup> Jean-Marie Lecomte, “The Genesis and Poetics of the Early Technicolor Voice,” in Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard, (dir.), *Cinéma et couleur — Film and Colour*, Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2009, 171-183.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 111-12, 122-23, translated from *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, Paris: La Différence, 1981, by Daniel W. Smith.

town, where the Centennial Revival Fair has now settled, Ginny visits Gwen at her school to ask if Gwen and Dave are to be married and she confesses her own love for Dave. Gwen is horrified and subsequently cuts Dave off. Dave immediately decides to marry Ginny on the rebound. They marry that night, in a festive atmosphere created by the town fair; but as they walk on the fair ground in a huge crowd, Raymond comes after them with a gun, injures Dave, and then shoots Ginny dead by mistake as she tries to protect Dave. (In the source novel by James Jones Dave gets killed, but Shirley MacLaine with Sinatra's support had the last scene changed.) A scene in a graveyard follows, in an attempt to moralize the story.

### **To Love and Be Loved**

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Sammy Cahn's lyrics for the song which arouses Ginny's emotion in Terre Haute. Music by Jimmy Van Heusen

That's what life's all about  
Keeps the stars coming out  
What makes a sad heart sing  
The birds take wing

To love and be loved  
That's what living is for  
Makes me want you the more  
The more we cling

Let others race to the moon  
Through time and space to the moon  
My goal is greater than this

To reach your lips, to share your kiss  
To stay in your arms is the dream I pursue  
To be sheltered and safe from the storm  
To be cozy and ever so warm

And for always to love  
And be loved by you

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/to-love-and-be-loved> Accessed 21 December 2021