"Somehow this crazy world has taken on a wonderful design": Vincente Minnelli's Neo-Victorian Utopias in Hollywood

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Abstract:
The mid-twentieth century Hollywood film director and artist Vincente Minnelli had a life-long fascination with the *fin de siècle*, which both precipitates and problematises the category of neo-Victorianism. In nine films Minnelli recreated this period as a utopian space of aesthetic excess and sexual freedom. Yet his interest in the *fin de siècle* has gone all but unnoticed by his critics. This article sets out the roots of Minnelli's concern with the period, as an illustrator and set designer in 1920s and 1930s New York and Chicago, and suggests that the assertion of his neo-Aestheticism in early 1940s Hollywood participated in a significant aesthetic shift in the Hollywood musical. It illustrates this claim by exploring the evolution of Minnelli's conception of the *fin de siècle* in the musicals *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), and *An American in Paris* (1951). In so doing, this article considers how and to what extent Minnelli can be considered as neo-Victorian, and how his musicals ask us to reflect on exactly when neo-Victorianism can date from.

Keywords:
Aestheticism, Aubrey Beardsley, Decadence, Hollywood, Impressionism, Vincente Minnelli, musical film, neo-Aestheticism, utopia, Oscar Wilde.

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In 'This Heart of Mine', a musical number from Minnelli's film *Ziegfeld Follies*, Fred Astaire sings to Lucille Bremer, "Somehow this crazy world has taken on a wonderful design" (Minnelli 1946: 59:01). This line encapsulates Minnelli's vision of musical film as a utopian realm apart from "this crazy world" of unsatisfactory reality. In films such as *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944), *Ziegfeld Follies*, *An American in Paris* (1951), and *Gigi* (1958), the temporal location of the *fin de siècle* is Minnelli's excuse to depart from reality. In re-imagining the period as one of ostentatious artifice, Minnelli renders perfect, just for a moment, what he contrastingly shows us to be the sadly inadequate 'reality' of mid-twentieth-century

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America. The nineteenth century becomes, in Minnelli's films, an aesthetic utopia created for its own intense, sensual sake. This "wonderful design" spontaneously delivers – or seems to deliver – the audience from the restrictive economic and political conditions of the mid-twentieth-century present.[1]

Though the way in which Minnelli's musical utopias create a dialogue between the nineteenth century and his contemporary age is broadly characteristic of neo-Victorianism, one is initially hesitant to categorise Minnelli as a neo-Victorian artist and filmmaker. After all, he long predates the heyday of neo-Victorianism, which Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn date from 1999 (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 3), or even the much earlier start date of the 1960s, suggested by criticism such as Louisa Hadley's 'Feminine Endings: Neo-Victorian Transformations of the Victorian' (Hadley 2013: 181 ff.). To add to his apparent peculiarity as a neo-Victorian subject, Minnelli's musical films are not situated in neo-Victorian studies' main established foci of novels and film/television drama; neither can they be understood in the category of heritage films or literary adaptations, which have been the foci of neo-Victorian film studies such as Dianne F. Sadoff's *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen* (2010). Still, having said this, Minnelli is a "self-conscious" and, "belated"[2] Aesthete-Decadent-Impressionist in the European tradition whose belatedness, in line with Heilmann and Llewellyn's definition of the neo-Victorian, "makes for a revitalized, even pyrotechnic response to the 'tradition' still so much represented by the Victorians and the possibilities nineteenth-century fiction [and film] always contained within itself for subversion" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4). In subverting the nineteenth century, Minnelli simultaneously subverts The Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code), which governed the morality of Hollywood films from 1934 to 1967 and to which he had to adhere, at least ostensibly.[3] Minnelli's audacious re-presentations of the nineteenth century on film have scarcely been mentioned by his critics and not at all by neo-Victorian scholars. However, exploring the nature of his engagement with the nineteenth century reshapes the vexed question of his aesthetic in film studies, whilst at the same time his work challenges the periodisation of neo-Victorianism, and expands the modes of engagement which might be considered by neo-Victorian studies.

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The only references to Minnelli in relation to the nineteenth century are made by film scholars, David Gerstner and James Naremore (see Gerstner 2009: 253ff; Naremore 1993: 7ff). Naremore's seminal essay on Minnelli as 'The Aesthete in the Factory' aligns his ethos with Théophile Gautier's vision of *"art pour l'art"* and suggests that "[h]is pictures frequently offered art as a refuge from bourgeois prejudice and industrial alienation" (Naremore 1993: 8). It is a provocative idea and the present article intends to one explore develop by addressing the thematic and aesthetic significance of the nineteenth century in Minnelli's career as a filmmaker, discussing Minnelli's long-term interest in the nineteenth century and how this manifests itself in the definitive style of the musical films he made as one of Hollywood's first auteurs.[4] It will argue that the *fin de siècle* becomes identified in Minnelli's musicals with an aesthetic utopia all but divorced from the demands of realism, social responsibility, and heteronormativity. In the context of neo-Victorian studies, these nineteenth-century 'palaces of art' create a dialogue with the conservative, realist presentations of the nineteenth century in Minnelli's contemporary Hollywood to effectively call into question the aesthetic and ethical norms of Hollywood film under The Motion Picture Production Code. To situate this argument I shall briefly discuss how Minnelli's interest in Aestheticism, Decadence and Impressionism, developed during his early career as a set designer and aspiring artist in New York, before going on to consider how his 'neo-Victorianism' contributed to an important aesthetic shift in the Hollywood musical from the early 1940s, which took its inspiration from his 'neo-Victorian' aesthetics.

1.   Aestheticism, Decadence and Impressionism

That Minnelli was self-avowedly attracted to the artistic personalities, fine art, designs, and literature of the late nineteenth century has long been established. His interest in Aestheticism, Decadence and Impressionism is mentioned in general terms both by Gerstner and Naremore who confirm that in the 1940s he read novels by Ronald Firbank and Oscar Wilde, gave his wife Judy Garland a drawing by Aubrey Beardsley, and painted his house in yellow as an homage to James Whistler (Gerstner 2009: 293ff; Naremore 1993:7ff). We can further add that he read Guy de Maupassant, the Brontës, George Bernard Shaw, and Henry James. And yet Minnelli's personal investment in the late nineteenth century is both broader and

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deeper than these bare biographical facts suggest. Firstly, his interest in Impressionist and Decadent visual aesthetics and – crucially – the deviant (im)morality it heralded was life-long: going back to his early twenties, when he was an aspiring painter and window dresser in 1920s Chicago, and continuing right up to the last films he directed, *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970) and *A Matter of Time* (1976). Secondly, as Minnelli rose from window dresser at Marshall Field's department store to become chief costume designer for the weekly theatrical revues at the Chicago movie theatre chain of Balaban and Katz, and then artistic director of Radio City Music Hall in the 1920s and 1930s, his self-education in *fin-de-siècle* art, literature and culture became an important part of his self-transformation from "a timid boy from Ohio who liked to draw and who hid in the background" to "an aesthete and man of the world" (Levy 2009: 21). As such, the nineteenth century became integral to his personal identity.

This self-education began when he became enthralled with Whistler and his circle after reading the Pennells' 1911 biography. Looking back on this period in his 1974 autobiography, Minnelli commented, of Whistler:

> 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. (Minnelli 1974: 50)

As noted above, years later, Whistler inspired the interior design of Minnelli's house in Beverly Hills, which he painted in yellow on the outside and furnished with Whistleresque blues and whites on the inside (see Gerstner 2009: 271 n. 20; Levy 2009: 20). In addition to this homage, Minnelli also affected a dandyism most unusual in 1950s Hollywood and best illustrated by the fact that he often sported a daffodil-yellow sports jacket with a bright buttonhole, reminding us that "a really well-made buttonhole is the only link between Art and Nature" (Wilde 1996: 521).

The most substantial evidence of exactly how the *fin de siècle* influenced Minnelli's pre-Hollywood work is his pastiche of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings. Whilst living in New York in 1930 Minnelli supplemented his income as a costume designer by illustrating an edition of *Casanova's Memoirs* "in the Aubrey Beardsley style for a publisher in

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[Greenwich] Village", as he later recalled (Minnelli 1974: 58). As Minnelli may have known, Beardsley already had a presence in inter-war Greenwich Village: Djuna Barnes had produced several illustrations in the style of Beardsley for the *New York Morning Telegraph* in the late 1910s when she was dubbed "the American Beardsley" (qtd. in Caselli 2009: 76),[5] and Wallace Smith illustrated Ben Hecht's outrageous Decadent-Nietzschean novel *Fantazius Mallare* (1922) with naked, long-limbed Beardsleyesque bodies.[6] Unlike Barnes' illustrations, which have focused critical attention on her relationship with Decadence, however, Minnelli's seven Beardsley-style illustrations for *Casanova's Memoirs* have gone entirely unremarked by his critics.

These illustrations, executed in pen and ink, illustrate particular familiarity with the compositions and motifs of Beardsley's drawings for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1894) and *The Yellow Book* (1894-95). Like these, Minnelli's illustrations for *Casanova's Memoirs* are semi-independent of the stories with which they are published and are, in fact, more subversive than these stories. Minnelli's illustrations are characterised by the suffocating artificiality of Beardsley's cluttered interior scenes: solid black walls are etched with ornate patterns and hung with drapes, against which androgynous semi-naked figures cavort and carouse in sadomasochistic games. He also incorporates a number of Beardsley's motifs such as Venetian masks, draperies, satyrs, candles, and flower heads, which punctuate the scenes to add to their perverse artificiality. For example, in his illustration for the story 'A Novel Love Cure' (Casanova 1953: 97), a naked woman in heeled shoes sits at a dressing table looking seductively over her shoulder towards us. The black patterned walls and large mirror intensify the erotic charge of the scene by closing the space in around her gaze. The composition recalls Beardsley's two 1894 illustrations entitled 'The Toilette of Salomé' I and II and, like those drawings, combines eroticism with horror: the naked woman is attended by an androgynous figure with long sinuous limbs and in the foreground a headless man sits with four decapitated heads and a Venetian mask beside his feet.

To take another example, Minnelli incorporates Beardsley's butterfly motif – which Beardsley in turn borrowed from Whistler's signature motif – into his drawing of 'Mademoiselle X. C. V.' (Casanova 1953; 193). The butterfly perches at the centre of the picture on the naked right buttock of an androgynous figure, who is one in a line of seven

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variously undressed women and androgynes. The butterfly both contributes to and mocks the artificiality of its claustrophobic surroundings: solid black walls and blackened windows adorned with heavy black drapes, which like the illustration for 'A Novel Love Cure' evoke the stuffy atmosphere of Beardsley's interiors. The illustration for 'Mademoiselle X. C. V.' goes further toward conjuring the sexual debauchery of Beardsley's drawings. The androgynous figures drape their arms around each other and their spidery fingers are poised to touch each other on breast and buttock. The suggestion that these figures are on the brink of fulfilling their desires is important: it eroticises the picture because it involves the viewer in feelings of sexual arousal, teasing and anticipation. The picture incorporates Beardsley's characteristic motif of a figure exiting the room through an elaborate doorway into the unknown, in a fairly obvious sexual metaphor, which is mirrored by the naked figure entering a large bejewelled pot in the foreground. The twist, as in Beardsley's illustrations, is that even as the picture engages the viewer-turned-voyeur in erotic desire, this desire is rendered grotesque.

Minnelli's self-conscious engagements with Beardsley make Beardsley and the 1890s Decadent Movement in Britain an essential part of a transhistorical discourse of sexual deviancy that stretches forward from Casanova's eighteenth-century Italy to 1930s New York. The nineteenth century thus assumes a crucial function in the artist's imagination – and arguably in the wider cultural imaginary also – as the sensational crucible of eroticism in which modern society's obsession with sexuality was forged. The illustrations' Beardsleyesque style also invest the book with the homoerotic undertones that, after 1895, surrounded Wilde's coterie, which had been widely rejected in Modernist discourses by the 1920s (see Higgins 2002), but have since been recovered and politicised both in queer theory and the many neo-Victorian works informed by it. Most obviously, these include numerous plays and biofictions of Wilde (the playwright having been claimed as an icon of the gay rights movement), as well as Sarah Waters' trio of neo-Victorian lesbian novels and their subsequent adaptation for television. Minnelli's work thus offers itself as a harbinger of much later neo-Victorian trends.

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2.   Minnelli's Nineteenth Century on Film

Having been brought to Hollywood by producer Arthur Freed in 1940 and put under contract as a director for Hollywood's leading film studio, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, perhaps Minnelli finally became "an aesthete and man of the world", as Levy later described him. Certainly Minnelli had unprecedented opportunity to indulge his taste for extravagant, multi-coloured, neo-Victorian sets and costumes, which he had anticipated in his designs for *Scheherazade* (1933) and *Ziegfeld Follies* (1935-36) on Broadway. His films, like these earlier productions, marked a departure from the contemporary world and its moral, aesthetic, and imaginative constraints. Of course, it would not be accurate to say that Minnelli was the only Hollywood filmmaker to be influenced by Decadence. David Weir has discussed the aforementioned neo-Decadent novelist Ben Hecht who went on to become one of Hollywood's leading screenwriters (see Weir 2008, 191 ff). However, Hecht's Decadent legacy in films such as *Scarface* (1932), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *Spellbound* (1945) is altogether more difficult to identify in his cinematic aesthetics. By contrast, Minnelli's early interest in the Victorian period – and in particular in Aestheticism and Decadence – is an overt influence on his visual aesthetics and the moral values of his films.

Reversing the Modernist aesthetic that governed the musicals of the 1930s and, equally, shunning the 1950s move towards realism and on-location shooting, Minnelli is singular in 1940s and 1950s Hollywood for bringing the aesthetics of the late nineteenth century to define his *mise en scène*. In his films the nineteenth-century past becomes a highly aestheticised parallel universe. The viewers become tourists in an idealised nineteenth century, as Minnelli reconstructs and re-imagines the period as a utopian space of colour, opulence, sexual freedom and amorality, and community. So Minnelli's films are not straightforward adaptations of nineteenth-century novels or histories of the period – notwithstanding *Madame Bovary* (1949) and *Lust for Life* (1957). Rather, Minnelli's 'neo-Victorianism' is impressionistic, and through this it operates to subvert both the *fin de siècle* and its present-day America.

Of Minnelli's films set in the nineteenth century, the most obvious examples are those just mentioned: *Madame Bovary*, set in the 1850s, and *Lust For Life*, his biopic of Vincent Van Gogh, which spans the period in the artist's life from 1860 to 1890. Writing of *Madame Bovary*'s period

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setting, Robert Stam comments that "[o]n every register, Minnelli cultivates an aesthetic of crescendo and excess" (Stam qtd. in Donaldson-Evans 2009: 70). This is no less true of *Lust For Life*, which overwhelms its viewers with Van Gogh's yellow palette to re-evoke the ambivalence of this colour at the *fin de siècle*.[7] However, it is in his musicals that Minnelli fully exploits the nineteenth century's potential for visual excess, with his large-scale dance numbers, filmed in 'glorious Technicolor'. *An American in Paris* (1951) is steeped in *fin-de-siècle* Parisian art, with the eponymous ballet situated in a "Disneyland" of nineteenth-century French Impressionist paintings (Dalle Vacche 1992: 76); *Gigi* (1958) is based on Colette's 1945 historical novella of the same name, which takes place in Paris circa 1900; the 1904 World's Fair setting of *Meet Me In St Louis* (1944) may be regarded as a sort of 'afterglow' of the 'Long Nineteenth Century'; and *The Pirate* (1948) is set in the Caribbean of the 1830s. *Ziegfeld Follies* meanwhile combines a Decadent interior, strongly influenced by Beardsley's cover illustration for *The Yellow Book*, with Whistleresque yellow Chinoiserie and, in one sequence, reuses – at Minnelli's behest – the sets for MGM's 1945 film adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Looking ahead to Minnelli's later career, the plot of *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970) turns on the main protagonist's regressions to her previous life in Regency England, while *A Matter of Time* (1976) features extensive flashbacks to 1880s Italy.

Before going on to discuss *Meet Me In St Louis*, *Ziegfeld Follies*, and *An American in Paris* in detail, some context is necessary to appreciate the aesthetic and thematic shift heralded by these nineteenth-century settings in the Hollywood musical. Prior to Minnelli's arrival in Hollywood, the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals of the 1930s typified the way that films (and particularly musical films) featured Art Deco sets to create a defiantly modern opulence and glamour, both to assert a positive vision of American modernity in the face of the Great Depression and "[in] revolt against Victorian embellishment and clutter" (Bergfelder 2007: 254). Complementing Astaire, whose sartorial choices and persona made him "more modish than dandy" (Evans 2010: 22), the Astaire-Rogers film sets, produced by Pandro S. Berman and Van Nest Polglase, were defined by their minimalist expansiveness and "geometric forms and symmetrical patterns" made in reflective "materials such as chrome, plastic, glass or bakelite" (Bergfelder 2007: 254), and located in the modern cityscapes of New York, London, Paris, and Rio, as well as a modernist holiday resort in Italy.[8]

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If, in the 1930s, Art Deco boasted confidence (albeit false confidence) in modernity, by the time of Minnelli's arrival in Hollywood in 1940 such sentiments were faltering, and there were indications that the time was ripe for a neo-Victorian aesthetic shift. The commercial and artistic successes of *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939) and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) indicated the American public's appetite for late nineteenth-century and pre-Great War nostalgia on film. Minnelli tapped into this mood. In contrast to Astaire, Minnelli was always more "dandy" than "modish". His films dissolve the strong, clean, sweeping lines of the black-and-white Art-Deco Astaire-Rogers musicals into the opulent, cluttered, multi-coloured interior decor of the late nineteenth century, and in so doing they redefine the look and feel of the Hollywood musical, as well as shifting its focus from the present to an idealised past. Many musical films "point back, to a golden age", as Richard Dyer has argued, so that the Hollywood musical is essentially utopian, and the removal of the whole film in time and space from contemporary America allows the audience to indulge in the pure pleasure of cultural nostalgia (Dyer 2002: 28). Yet Minnelli's musical oeuvre has a distinctiveness which one should not underestimate by homogenising his works, as Dyer does, with relatively realist films such as *Oliver!* (1968) and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969). Minnelli's nineteenth century could hardly be more different: it is re-imagined as a kind of Disneyland nineteenth century,[9] which is liberated almost entirely from reality by its vast period sets and Minnelli's singular preoccupation with bright, striking colours, the effects of which are heightened by the "spectacle and fantasy" inherent in the visual appearance of Technicolor on screen in the 1940s and 1950s (Neale 2006: 18). Moreover, unlike in Dyer's other examples of utopian musicals, Minnelli's Disneyfied nineteenth century – perhaps recalling John Gardiner's discussion of "Theme Park Victoriana" (Gardiner 2004: 267 ff) – is multifarious and immersive; it is a vision of the period presented not just in a single film but emergent in the series of 14 musical films Minnelli made at MGM in the 1940s and 1950s. This also bears on how we think about Minnelli in terms of neo-Victorianism on film: because it asks, perhaps, for a broader conception of the ways in which the self-conscious representation of the nineteenth century so essential to neo-Victorianism can operate by means other than adaptation or the heritage film. Minnelli's musical films suggest that self-reflexivity about the nineteenth century can operate on

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other, impressionistic terms. To further illustrate these themes, I now consider three of Minnelli's films in more specific detail.

3.   Utopian Family and Community in *Meet Me In St Louis* (1944)
Meet Me In St Louis was the first major film that Minnelli directed. It is defined by the utopian vision of family and community that was typical of a 1940s MGM film under The Motion Picture Production Code. Simultaneously, however, the picture subverts this code through its identification of the long nineteenth century with a Decadent utopia of excess that would become more prominent in Minnelli's later films. *Meet Me In St Louis* centres on a wholesome American family living in St Louis as the city prepares for the 1904 World's Fair. It takes its drama from the romances of the eldest daughters, Esther (Judy Garland) and Rose (Lucille Bremer), and the fearful possibility that the family may have to relocate to New York. But, of course, in common with most musicals of the period, the plot is almost irrelevant; for we know that nothing really bad could ever happen in this idealised realm. The plot tensions, which are neatly resolved by the final reel, merely throw the innocence and harmony of life in *fin de siècle* St Louis into relief.

Though it is set in 1904, *Meet Me In St Louis* is overtly and covertly immersed in the previous century: its overt immersion serves to further MGM studios' family values, whilst its covert adoption of nineteenth-century aesthetics begin to undermine these values in ways that would become hallmarks of Minnelli's aesthetic. The *mise en scène* is focused on the family's house, "a remarkably self-contained, self-generating nineteenth-century relic, built by and around a middle class family whose sense of community and purpose is intricately connected to their property" (Bathrick 1976: 134). Embodying traditional family values, this house, 5135 Kensington Avenue, features in most scenes, and its external view serves as the establishing shot for each of the film's four sections. Instead of building separate sets for each room as was customary at MGM in the 1940s, Minnelli insisted that the interior scenes were shot on a continuous set, "constructed like the floor of a real house with interconnecting rooms" (Levy 2009: 99). Such a decision was typical of Minnelli; he has a rather Victorian agoraphobia and the vast interior set of 5135 Kensington Avenue plunges the audience into the period, combining styles from throughout the century: from Regency to Arts and Crafts. The camera tracks through the

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house again and again, indulging the viewer in the pleasure of coveting the quaint and ornate objects that clutter the house: an 1898 Bechstein upright piano, Arts and Crafts stained-glass windows, Regency striped wallpaper and, in Grandpa's bedroom, souvenirs from his time in the colonies, including his fez.

Expanding its identification between the family values and the *fin de siècle*, *Meet Me In St Louis* incorporates period music into the score at key moments when the St Louis community gathers together,[10] in order to identify the close-knit community with the period. The 1904 title song by Kerry Mills and Andrew B. Sterling, for example, is sung at the end of the film as the community arrives at the St Louis World's Fair. Other examples include 'Under the Bamboo Tree' (1902) by Robert Cole and The Jonson Brothers, which is performed by Judy Garland and Margaret O'Brien for the entertainment of the guests at Lon's going away party, and 'Skip to My Lou' (Frontier period, anon.), which are played at the same party,[11] whilst the St Louis Christmas Ball features 'Little Brown Jug' (1869) by Joseph Winner) and 'Home! Sweet Home!' (1852) by Henry Bishop.

Despite adherence to the rules of The Motion Picture Production Code and MGM's ethos of family values, *Meet Me In St Louis* indicates Minnelli's dissatisfaction with these bodies' aesthetics and ethics, which were far removed from his interest in Aestheticism, Decadence and Impressionism. This dissatisfaction is suggested most immediately through Minnelli's use of Technicolor. In 1940s Hollywood, nineteenth-century period films were very rarely filmed in colour, which was associated with "spectacle and fantasy", as previously mentioned, and MGM films set in the nineteenth century such as *Gaslight* (1944), *Little Women* (1949) and Minnelli's own aforementioned *Madame Bovary* (1948) used black and white to add to their sense of realism. By contrast, in *Meet Me In St Louis* as in his subsequent musicals, Minnelli embraces and accentuates the association of colour with imagination and dramatic effect, departing from the strict colour guidelines issued by the Technicolor company to use a riot of bright, contrasting "colour accents" onscreen (Coates 2011: 14).[12] Nowhere is this more apparent than in the set of 5135 Kensington Avenue where the possibility of the fantastical is created above all by the bright reds and blues of its stained-glass windows, the lilac and cream striped dress worn by Judy Garland strikingly contrasted with her auburn hair and bright red lipstick as she sings 'The Boy Next Door', or the crimson drapes hung

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in the parlour as Lon and Anna sing 'You and I' surrounded by their family. The juxtaposition of these colours transforms the *fin-de-siècle* home into a space far removed from realist depictions of the nineteenth century in 1940s films. Moreover, Minnelli's use of Technicolor in *Meet Me In St Louis* begins to indicate that the period might function as a space to transgresses the moral codes rendered in the representations of the nineteenth century in black-and-white films.

All of which does not mean that Minnelli actually used Technicolor to subvert the morality of *Meet Me In St Louis.* Still, his later reflections on the film suggest that he fantasised about doing so. Acknowledging the influence of nineteenth-century painting on the aesthetic of *Meet Me In St Louis*, Minnelli recalled that he modelled St Louis on "the look of Thomas Eakins' paintings though not to the point of imitation" (Minnelli 1974: 131). This is a curious insight into Minnelli's relationship with the nineteenth century. It indicates that this one-time would-be painter conceived the nineteenth century through the painters who interpreted it − and he would continue to do so, most famously in *An American in Paris*, discussed below. The Eakins link is puzzling though because the vision of the nineteenth century presented by Eakins does not accord at all with the family values that, on the face of it, define *Meet Me In St Louis*. Eakins' homoeroticism (e.g. *Arcadia*, 1883; *Wrestlers*, 1899) suggests a nineteenth century very much at odds with the mannered milieu of *Meet Me In St Louis* and, more broadly, the puritanical version of the previous century presented by Hollywood in the 1940s. Like Eakins' early paintings, certainly, Minnelli's *Meet Me In St Louis* creates an innocent and carefree atmosphere around a group of young people at leisure and on the brink of adulthood. However, Minnelli's allusion to Eakins also highlights the discrepancy between how they each evoke this atmosphere: Eakins' naked naturalistic figures in pastoral locales (perhaps shown most famously by the young men in *The Swimming Hole*, 1884-85) are the very antithesis of Minnelli's own, literally and metaphorically, corseted cast in the urban centre of St Louis. Nonetheless, the unself-conscious nakedness and homoeroticism of Eakins' figures haunt St Louis in the wake of Minnelli's statement. After all, this suggests that Minnelli questioned the straight-laced, heteronormative, vision of nineteenth-century youth and innocence at the centre of *Meet Me In St Louis*, and overwrites it with an alternative vision of awakening sexuality in the nineteenth century − one that could not have come into existence overtly

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in the era of The Motion Picture Production Code, but which his later films would employ to subtly subvert their ostensible family values.

4.   Aubrey Beardsley in *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946)

As Minnelli's aesthetic evolved at MGM he further liberated his version of the nineteenth century from realism and heteronormative ethics. His musical films effectively expanded the aesthetics of "spectacle and fantasy" through an ostentatious use of colour and the incorporation of nineteenth-century art. The neo-Victorian musical sequence, 'This Heart of Mine', which Minnelli directed for *Ziegfeld Follies*, is a prime example, using an allusion to Aubrey Beardsley to open a space for moral and sexual deviancy.

     Ziegfeld Follies comprises a series of lavish musical numbers and comedy sketches performed by an all-star cast and connected by the slender storyline of the famous Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld putting on one last Follies show in Heaven. Minnelli directed the five most ostentatious and Decadent sequences in this film: 'This Heart of Mine', 'Limehouse Blues', 'A Great Lady Has an Interview', 'The Babbitt and the Bromide' and 'Beauty'. If, in musical films, "song and dance occur in the space of spectacle […] in excess of the realist codes […] of the more humdrum story" (Tinkcom 2001: 121), *Ziegfeld Follies* heightens such spectacle to a camp zenith in which the ostensible romance-marriage narrative no longer exists at all: both realism and the teleology of the heterosexual romance narrative are suspended by the grand-scale numbers in the film. It is within this structure that it becomes possible to imagine deviation from a heteronormative teleology; in this structure, in other words, it is possible for promiscuity and homosexuality to come into being.

     'This Heart of Mine' has sets designed by Tony Duquette and is performed by Fred Astaire and Lucille Bremer.[13] The sequence opens with an establishing shot of a statue of a masked satyr and, as the camera pans to the right, we see that this is one of ten masked satyr statues presiding over the circular ballroom. The figures are an ostensible reference to Aubrey Beardsley's masked satyrs and, in particular, they bear a remarkable resemblance to his cover illustration of Issue 1 of *The Yellow Book* in 1894. Positioned right at the beginning of 'This Heart of Mine', these figures suggest the ludic eroticism and parodic ambiguity surrounding personal identity as symbolised by Beardsley's figures. Operating in the same way as Beardsley's drawings in *The Yellow Book*, the figures surrounding the

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ballroom create a space within commercial art for the social and sexual deviant: the he or she who, sitting alone in the back row, might identify with the statue's ironic glance toward this heteronormative society event. It is therefore more subtle than Minnelli's Beardsleyesque drawings in *Casanova's Memoirs* and necessarily so given the mainstream audience. Yet in an analogous way to those earlier drawings, the allusion to Beardsley aligns Victorian Decadence with playful sexual transgression.

      Conceived thus, these Beardsleyesque figures give substance to the suggestion of Jacques Rancier that, for Minnelli, "Art has no truck with either politics or morality" (Rancier 2009: 394). In subtle defiance of The Motion Picture Production Code, Louis Mayer and The Catholic League, this sequence privileges aesthetic value over accepted contemporary moralities, just as Decadence did. The extravagant style of this musical number – the vast and visually striking set, opulent ball gowns and large-scale choreography, all of which emphasise visual style over narrative substance – provides the ground on which the musical number will subvert the habitual moralities of contemporary marriage-plot musicals. Astaire's character is a would-be jewel thief, a playboy and a deceiver, and his relationship with an heiress (Bremer) is spontaneous and sexually charged. This is the antithesis of the wholesome marriage plot that typifies MGM musicals such as *Meet Me In St Louis*, in which Bremer co-starred as Judy Garland's older sister, and it mirrors and undermines the narrative resolution of *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945), in which Bremer and Astaire also starred together. 'This Heart of Mine' operates on the alternative terms of art for art's sake; we ask what is sensually intense and beautiful, not what is morally *right*.

      The sequence ends as Astaire bids goodnight to Bremer: he tries and fails to steal her diamonds, apparently undetected. However, as they part, framed in a doorway with draperies designed in the style of Beardsley, Bremer gives Astaire her diamonds. After doing so, she begins to walk away, looking back to him coquettishly, before the camera pans right to the Beardsleyesque satyr, and then on to a confused looking Astaire who eventually turns and throws open his arms for Bremer to run to him; they kiss passionately as the sequence ends. Minnelli's return to the Beardsleyesque satyr in these final moments self-consciously emphasises the sexual deviancy of the encounter between Astaire and Bremer, because it clearly evokes the transaction of jewels for sexual services that is seen in

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Beardsley's *Yellow Book* illustrations. It uses Beardsley (and, thus, *fin-de-siècle* Decadence) as a signifier for its erotic revision of the benign romantic ending of *Yolanda and the Thief*, and conventional musical films, with the heiress' desire for the jewel thief evoking the deviancy of Beardsleyesque morality and desire twice over: the would-be criminal goes unpunished but, more than this, the film signals *her* deviant desires and willingness to pay for sex.

5.   Impressionism in *An American in Paris* (1951)
Minnelli's acute attention to the visual elements of his films has drawn Andrew Sarris to suggest that "[i]f he has a fatal flaw, it is his naive belief that style can invariably transcend substance and that our way of looking at the world is more important than the world itself" (Sarris 1996: 67). More recently, Joe McElhaney has revised this view, arguing that what we have in Minnelli's films is "not simply a style, reducible to a handful of visual elements (a talent for interior decoration, an eye for color, a flair for camera movement) […] rather we find in Minnelli a vision, if not a philosophy, of (and for) cinema" (McElhaney 2009b: 5). Minnelli's "vision" for cinema is integral to his utopian evocation of the nineteenth century as a space of "spectacle and fantasy" and the potential of unrestrained sexual freedom, and it is indebted to his formative readings in *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics. As his highly aestheticised style evolves in the 1950s, reaching a climax with *An American in Paris,* this "vision for cinema" manifests itself in a vision of the nineteenth century that is entirely focalised through Impressionism.

      An American in Paris focuses on Jerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly), a former American GI trying to find success as an Impressionist painter in post-World War Two Paris, as he falls in love with the elusive Lise Bouvier (Leslie Caron). Although set in contemporary 1950s Paris, the whole film is steeped in the cultural nostalgia for the Paris of the *fin de siècle*. This longing for a lost Paris is embodied by the Jamesian *ingénu* Jerry, whose main reason for being in Paris is anachronistic even by 1950: "I came to Paris to study and to paint because Utrillo did, and Lautrec did, and Roualt did" (Minnelli 1951: 1:28:47-1:28:57).[14] He speaks for the audience and for himself. This moment suggests an addition to Fiona Handyside's exploration of Paris as the "European Utopia" of the Hollywood musical (Handyside 2007: 142). For, in *An American in Paris*, as in *Gigi*, it is the temporal transportation to the nineteenth century as much as the spatial

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transportation to the French capital that creates a utopian sense of artistic and sexual freedom. The film's climax is the culmination of Jerry's, and the audience's, nostalgia for the artistic heyday of *fin-de-siècle* Paris: this 18-minute 'American in Paris' ballet, choreographed by and starring Gene Kelly, directed by Minnelli, designed by Cedric Gibbons, and set to George Gershwin's symphony of the same name, "[presents] the idea of a lost Paris, namely the Paris of nineteenth-century painters, for this city always looks better in an image, a remembered past" (Dalle Vacche 1992: 70).[15] Paris appears in the film as a world within a world, within a world; distanced from reality by a factor of three, where it exists not to further the plot but simply for its own over-elaborate sensual sake. In defiance of "the ideally integrated musical" in which each musical number is an organic part of the plot, the 'American in Paris' ballet exemplifies Steven Cohan's point that "the libidinal energy released in the [musical] numbers is not linear, that is, not consistent with the conservative, teleological economy of classical narrative" (Cohan 2001b: 88-89). The sheer length of this ballet sequence and its location at the end of the film interrupts the plot set in contemporary Paris with a collage of nineteenth-century Paris, and thereby problematises the viewer's acceptance of its romantic resolution. The ballet's celebration of nineteenth-century Impressionism endorses, rather than disrupts, Jerry Mulligan's desire to extricate himself from economic and practical realities in order to live for art. To borrow a phrase from Oscar Wilde, Minnelli uses the nineteenth century to erect an "impenetrable barrier" against reality for Jerry Mulligan and for the audience in the final part of *An American in Paris* (Wilde 1986: 68), or at least tries to do so. His nineteenth-century Paris, reflected in that of Jerry, is an aestheticised, artificial version of temporal otherness, which takes aesthetic and cultural nostalgia as its starting point but which uses it to subvert the heteronormative 'family' values of MGM.

The 'American in Paris' ballet represents Jerry's dream of Paris, envisaged through the nineteenth-century artists who painted it. As Mulligan/Kelly dances through their re-imagined Paris, he brings to life the images of Raoul Dufy, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Maurice Utrillo, Henri Rousseau, Vincent Van Gogh and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; for instance, he becomes Chocolat in Toulouse-Lautrec's *Chocolat Dancing in Bar Darchille* (1896)[16] and seduces Bouvier/Caron in an erotic dance around Dufy's *Fontaines de la Concorde* (1950).[17] In Wildean mode Minnelli

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invites us to see the nineteenth century through the eyes of those who painted it and, in so doing, he invites us to conceive it not as a *real* period but as a realm of deviant imagination. To an extent, Minnelli would use painting similarly in *Gigi* (1958), in which the title sequence is set against *fin-de-siècle* drawings by Georges Goursat Sem, to suggest that "the very meaning of three-dimensional Paris is governed by its glorification, indeed, its mythicization in the two-dimensional work of its painters" (Altman 1989: 78-79). In *Gigi*, this mythicisation takes shape, via Sem, as a parody of Parisian society; whereas in *An American in Paris* it is conceived through Impressionism and Post-Impressionism as an ephemeral space in which sensual pleasure is paramount. It may recall "a Theme Park Victoriana" version of the nineteenth century (Gardiner 2004: 267 ff.), but in truth its relationship with both the past and the present is more self-consciously complex. The ballet subverts both the 1940s Hays Code and Hollywood's contemporary sanitised, realist version of the nineteenth century: the desire to forge permanent heterosexual relationships and to build a home, are two of the practical constraints from which the 'American in Paris' ballet affords a spatial and temporal liberation.

　　　Minnelli's use of Technicolor draws on the techniques of *fin-de-siècle* Impressionism in order to intensify this sense of liberation in the aesthetic world of his creation. The "colour accents" (Higgins 1998: 14), which defined Minnelli's palette in *Meet Me in St Louis*, still feature in *An American in Paris*, but in the later film his use of colour is even more audacious, incorporating "colour washes" in which a single colour saturates the screen in self-conscious homage to artists such as Whistler and Toulouse-Lautrec (Hext 2011: 7-8). For example, Mulligan's/Kelly's performance of Toulouse-Lautrec's *Chocolat Dancing in Bar Darchille* comprises 27 different shades of yellow, thus bringing to the screen all the ambivalence of the colour at the *fin de siècle* (Hext 2011: 9). These colour washes represent Minnelli's utter rejection of realism, such as that signalled by the black and white film adaptations of classic Victorian novels in the 1930s and 1940s; it expresses his unequivocal belief that film is an art like painting and his aspiration to make the screen into an impressionistic canvas.

　　　Like an Impressionist painting, the 'American in Paris' ballet 'paints' *movement* and, by extension, transience. The ephemeral nature of Mulligan's aesthetic revelry (and, thus, that of the audience) is of course

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implicit in the impressionist paintings that form the basis of this ballet, their visible brushstrokes suggesting the rapid movement of a world in a state of constant flux. Recalling Toulouse-Lautrec's 1892 painting *The Englishman at the Moulin Rouge* in order to accentuate a sense of impermanence, Kelly wears black modern clothing in this multicoloured ballet. In consequence, he appears as a figure redolent of the monochrome modern world to which he must ultimately return. It is because of the inherent transience of aesthetic pleasures that the Impressionist dream-ballet of Jerry Mulligan turns back into a pencil sketch just as, in Minnelli's *Brigadoon* (1954), the eponymous village vanishes into the mists to appear for a single day every century and, in *The Pirate* (1948), The Great Macocao is revealed to be but a travelling actor. What Andrew Sarris has called Minnelli's "unusual, sombre outlook" (Sarris qtd. in Naremore 1993: 8) comes directly out of the ephemeral nature of the director's cinematic illusions of an aesthetic utopia, most vividly evoked through his aestheticised visions of the nineteenth century. Situating his work in a 'queer' tradition, which begin with the aesthete Walter Pater and continue in the present day with the works of John Bucchino and Rufus Wainwright, Minnelli presents intense, ephemeral moments of excessive sensual stimulation, in the words of Pater, "too fragile and adventurous to last for more than a moment" (Pater 1889: 217). Utopias are often conceived in hope, and sometimes in vain. Minnelli's musical nineteenth-century utopias are of the latter kind. Such palaces of art as he creates cannot banish the pessimism attached to his view of contemporary reality, not for long, at least.

6.   Conclusion: Expanding Notions of the Neo-Victorian

This essay has striven to add analytic weight and substance to sparse comments about Minnelli's interest in the nineteenth century. Further to this objective, it has begun to indicate how his musical films might be situated in and, indeed, contribute to, the expansion of neo-Victorian studies. I have suggested that the nexus of Minnelli's neo-Victorianism is his self-conscious, re-vitalising and subversive reinterpretation of the nineteenth century through the lens of its visual arts. Minnelli suggests an alternative to the conservative realistic nineteenth century presented by his contemporary cinema by representing the period as a utopian space of vivid colours, deviant eroticism, and leisure time. In so doing, his musical films suggest alternatives to the aesthetic and moral codes sanctioned by MGM and the

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Hays Office. If we accept Minnelli as a neo-Victorian, though, we may have to reconsider when exactly neo-Victorianism proper begins: his subversive conception of the period endorses the view of critics, including Simon Joyce in *Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, that 'the neo-Victorian' begins far earlier – even as earlier as 1901 (see Joyce 2007). Certainly Minnelli indicates the value of adopting this broad time frame to expand our understanding of the nineteenth century at the same time as such a wider neo-Victorian frame offers new perspectives on Minnelli's aesthetic. Minnelli's nineteenth century is not (bar two exceptions) presented through adaptations of period texts which have, perhaps understandably, been the major focus of scholarship on neo-Victorianism on film. His daring representation of the nineteenth century through visual aesthetics of the *fin-de-siècle* constitute a stylistically radical neo-Victorian engagement, which might suggest a rich seem of enquiry into neo-Victorianist styles in the fine arts and musicals on stage and screen.[18]

Going back to how these observations bear on our understanding of Minnelli as a filmmaker, it is clear to me that the nineteenth century is a prism through which several significant issues in his musicals can be better seen and explained. The sexual deviance inherent in Decadence suggests the foundations of Minnelli's 'queer' aesthetic, set out by Matthew Tinkcom, while Aestheticism's celebration of 'spaces of colour', which defy the categories of form and content, helps us to expand Angela Dalle Vacche's influential discussion of Minnelli's use of colour. At the same time, attention to Minnelli's singularly nuanced vision of the nineteenth century suggests that his musicals cannot be merely grouped with the wider tendency towards utopianism in musicals identified by Richard Dyer. Minnelli's musical oeuvre is distinct and unique. It illustrates the development of a particular mode of utopianism, centred on the Aestheticist-Decadent ideal that 'beautiful style' might triumph over realism, to create worlds of ostentatious artifice in which sexual freedoms become at least imaginable.

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<u>Notes</u>

1. See Jane Feuer on "the myth of spontaneity" in the musical (Feuer 2002: 32-35).
2. Heilmann and Llewellyn argue convincingly that neo-Victorianism between 1999 and 2009 is defined by this sense of "belatedness": "Since the Victorians ushered in (proto-) modernity, there is a sense in which our continued return to them masks nothing less than our own awareness of belatedness" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 3). Furthermore, they present the "self-consciousness" of neo-Victorianism as essential to its being defined as such (see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4).
3. *The Motion Picture Production Code* is an excellent online resource (http://productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes_productioncode.php), which documents the Code and offers a comprehensive survey of its alterations over the course of the 37 years in which it effectively governed the output of the Hollywood studios. From the early 1930s and throughout the 1940s Minnelli's employer, MGM, positioned itself as a force of Christian morality under the guidance of its boss Louis B. Mayer, stringently following this Code in line with the principles of the National Legion of Decency.
4. Following an auteurist reading of Minnelli by Jean Douchet in *Cahiers du Cinema*, there has been a considerable literature on Minnelli as auteur. *Vincente Minnelli: The Art of Entertainment*, edited by Joe McElhaney, reproduces a selection of indicative readings (see McElhaney 2009b: 41 ff), while also reaffirming this approach to Minnelli's films in the twenty-first century (see McElhaney 2009a: 5).
5. For examples see *Poe's Mother: Selected Drawings of Djuna Barnes* (Barnes 2005: 7-8 and 98).
6. The former novel was privately printed in Chicago but, mirroring Minnelli's own migration, Hecht and Smith both relocated to New York soon after. *The Florentine Dagger* (1923) was published there by radical publisher Boni and Liveright, which included works by Wilde, Nietzsche and Maupassant in its select 'Modern Library' catalogue.
7. I have written about Minnelli's use of yellow and its debt to the ambivalent late nineteenth-century significances of this colour at length in 'Minnelli's Yellows: Illusion, Delusion and Impressionism on Film' (see Hext 2011: 12-14).
8. For typical examples one could look at 'They All Laughed' in *Shall We Dance* (1937; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1Lq9Xa9GAU), 'Pick Yourself Up' in *Swing Time* (1936;

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFAPfzUZ0vI), or 'The Continental' in *The Gay Divorcee* (1934; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cjv6nmF7wdk).

9. I am adapting Angela Dalle Vacche's comment, quoted above, that Minnelli depicts Paris in the 'American in Paris' ballet as a "Disneyland" (Dalle Vacche 1992: 76).

10. Original songs written for the film include 'The Boy Next Door' and 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas', both by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane.

11. See the video of these songs at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbXhlHRHo5c&feature=fvwrel&NR=1.

12. In the early 1940s Technicolor – at that time the only technology for producing colour film – became cheaper and more effective (see Neale 2006: 17-19). Moreover, the Technicolor company's strict and conservative guidance for which colours could be put together onscreen began to ease, allowing the auteur Minnelli to experiment perhaps more than any of his predecessors (see Higgins 1998: 5). Scott Higgins' article, 'Color at the Center: Minnelli's Technicolor Style in *Meet Me in St Louis*' gives excellent detail on the nature of these restrictions as they related to Minnelli (see Higgins 1998: 1 ff.).

13. This musical sequence can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ckhi1016LYY.

14. The adventure of an American in the Old World of Europe featured in the Astaire-Rogers series too, but whilst Astaire's American in London offers a fresh and exciting alternative to the stuffiness seemingly created by the great weight of history, Kelly's American in Paris is absorbed by the city's history.

15. The camp intervention of the 'American in Paris' ballet is significantly intensified by its nineteenth-century setting. The contrast between an imagined nineteenth century and contemporary reality is an effect used in several other films directed by Minnelli, including *Brigadoon* (1954), *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* and *A Matter of Time*. The contrasts between present-day America and nineteenth-century Europe present the latter as a realm of camp extravagance and opulence.

16. This section of the ballet can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aj36fJIsW9s.

17. This section of the ballet can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgZn_BFhMQE&feature=endscreen&NR=1.

18. There is some very thought-provoking work being done by Sharon Aronofsky Weltman in the area of neo-Victorian musical theatre. Her lecture on *Drood:*

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The Musical brought the house down at the 2013 Dickens Universe, in Santa Cruz, California, USA. Her book in progress, *Victorians on Broadway: The Afterlife of Victorian Literature on the Musical Stage, 1951-2000*, promises to define this field.

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