

USA, 1951. 113 min. MGM.  
 Cast: Gene Kelly, Leslie Caron, Oscar Levant, Georges Guetary, Nina Foch; Music: George and Ira Gershwin; Choreography: Gene Kelly; Cinematography by: John Alton and Alfred Gilks; Produced by: Arthur Freed; Written by: Alan Jay Lerner; Directed by: Vincent Minnelli

Musicals were once both a critically and commercially successful genre. With *An American in Paris*, producer Arthur Freed and his creative team were bringing the Hollywood musical to its height of popularity. Audiences ate up the romance, Gershwin tunes, Parisian *joie de vivre*, and Gene Kelly's choreography, but there is more to the film than song and dance. While the lavish finale, a dream ballet inspired by Impressionist paintings, remains the most commonly cited aspect of the film, I find myself captivated by the subtly complex opening sequence, which introduces three central characters.

We begin with a voice-over by the American painter Jerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly), explaining how he came to live in Paris. As the narrator, Jerry seems to have God-like ability. Describing the city's beauty, he instructs us to "just look at it," implying that he either controls what we see or is aware of our view. This is confirmed as he leads us to his apartment: we crane up the side of a building, and when we peek through a window at a couple kissing, Jerry corrects us, "No, not there. One flight up." But when we finally arrive at the appropriate window, Jerry is asleep. Moreover, upon waking up, Jerry looks at us (the viewer), rolls over, and falls back asleep. Were we just shunned by the protagonist? Our optimistic narrator becomes a contrasting visual character, tired and annoyed at our presence. It is a hilarious effect, but at three minutes in, the film is already confusing our sense of identification.

This concept of multiple personality is visualized when Jerry looks at his self-portrait. Displeased with it, Jerry rubs the sketching away, leaving us with two contrasting images of him: one of crisp Technicolor, the other a charcoal smudge. (Here is a character that is charming at one instant, inconsiderate the next; someone who goes from entertaining kids to stalking a pretty girl.)

Again in voice-over, Jerry notes that he has many friends in Paris. Our identification with him is thrown into upheaval as a new narrator asserts that he is one of those friends. We meet pianist Adam Cook (Oscar Levant), who gives us the details of his Parisian life. Just as we "mistook" the kissing couple's apartment for Jerry's, we similarly watch a bird owner until Adam reveals, "Nah, that's not me. He's too happy." Approaching the correct window, we realize his piano playing has been providing the background music. Yet as he looks directly at us (as Jerry did), Adam hinders our ability to identify with him by warning us of his "enormous lack of character." The film seems to be promoting a sense of split-identification, first asking us to be part of Jerry's life, then forcing us to share this identification with Adam. And then it gets more complicated.

Adam mentions that he once worked for Henri Baurel (Georges Guetary), a famous French singer, and asks if we remember him. Instantly, a third (!) narrator says, "I do, because that's me." A new character turns to us with a smile, and we believe this to be our man; he recognizes us, the viewer, just as Henri's voice introduces himself. However, we soon realize we were duped: the man bows to greet us, and Henri replies, "Bonjour." Not only has our identification now been divided among three narrators, but we get Henri's point-of-view: we are now Henri! We continue to be recognized by random characters until finally we see our reflection in a mirror, a young man adjusting his hat. In keeping with both Jerry and Adam's introductions, Henri informs us, "That's not me, I'm not that young." We are fooled again as the real Henri crosses in front of the camera, making it impossible for the viewer to have shared his point-of-view.

All this occurs within seven minutes, and we have raised many curious eyebrows. Why would this opening go to such lengths to not only encourage drastically splintered identification, but also to obfuscate identification with each individual? Perhaps this split-identification is a necessity of the genre. While most musicals have characters in narrative situations, they also include popular tunes performed by known talents. So while we understand that Jerry is an American painter who falls in love with his friend's girlfriend, we are simultaneously aware that Kelly is sweetly croon-

ing "Our Love is Here to Stay." We want to engage with the story, but we also want to be serenaded. It is this split-identification that keeps us from differentiating between the two, but harmonizes them for our enjoyment.

The opening sequence not only inundates us with this necessary split-identification, it rather brilliantly sets up the film's thematic elements and major narrative threads. Each narrator's introduction leads us into a temporary misconception: we mistake Jerry for half of the kissing couple, Adam for the birdman, and Henri for the younger man. These misconceptions could stand for what each character is missing—love, happiness, and youth, respectively—and these must be found by the film's end.

Subsequently, when we meet Henri's girlfriend, Lise Bouvier (Leslie Caron), we understand that really she is Jerry's love interest, not Henri's—Jerry is the one who must find love. This is made clear when we first see her. A reflection in a mirror dissolves into an image of Lise delicately dancing in front of a deep blue background, a lyrical portrayal of her beauty as described by Henri. The mirror frame matches Lise with Jerry, the painter. Several more dances describe her various traits (exciting, sweet, modern, bookish), which Henri and Adam find contradictory. Finally, all these (different but same) Lises appear onscreen together, resulting in a kaleidoscopic image of her multiple personality.

What lies at the heart of *An American in Paris*, beneath the soft shoe and catchy melodies, are complex characters dealing with serious situations. In homage to Keaton's *The Playhouse*, we see Adam's daydream in which he plays every part of an orchestra and its audience. This segment becomes just as much about ambition, dashed dreams, and hope as about the music. Later, when Jerry and Henri discuss the object of their affection, they launch into "S' Wonderful," and everything is lighthearted whimsy until we remember that they are singing a duet about the same girl. The number achieves what the film has set out to do—to harmonize music and narrative. Now, whenever I hear Kelly and Guetary merrily sing "S'wonderful, s'marvelous that she should care for me," I think about drama, while whistling along.

**Written by Jeremy Quist**