

【 研究ノート 】

## **A Place to Long For: The Representation of Paris in Hollywood Films**

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### **【ABSTRACT】**

In terms of tourism, there are few cities that attract tourists more than Paris especially in the cultural context. As seen in the number of films produced in Hollywood over the years, such as the classic Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris*, (1951) and Woody Allen's recent film called *Midnight in Paris*, (2001) Paris has always carried a special symbolical meaning.

In this paper, I will analyze films made in different eras in the United States as well as consider the symbolical role Paris has played in American movies.

**Keywords** : Paris, tourism, films, *Revolutionary Road*

### **I. Introduction**

Paris has always been a unique destination for tourists. "Paris Syndrome" is a word created by a Japanese psychiatrist, Hiroaki Ota, to indicate the psychological condition experienced by Japanese tourists who are disappointed when Paris does not live up to their expectations. However, Paris Syndrome is not exclusive to Japanese tourists though. The city has been selected as one of the most disappointing tourists' destinations by a number of web articles by Americans as well.

Idealized images of Paris in Hollywood films are partly to be blamed for tourists' high expectations for the city to cause later disappointments. As Levenstein says:

In this volume I show how these ideas, along with disgust over French people's standards of personal hygiene and their apparent propensity to eat revolting foods, persisted through the Great depression of the 1930s and blossomed again after World War II. (Levenstein 5)

However, despite Paris's hygiene issues and the Parisians' sometimes featured hostility toward Americans, it seems that in the history of Hollywood, nothing has really changed the desirability of Paris.

In this paper, I will examine why and how Paris was idealized in American films. In the first section, I

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will see the relationship between France and the United States in the historical and cultural contexts. In the next chapter, I will briefly look back to the cinematic description of Paris in American films and compare them to the Paris images in French films. Then in the final chapter, I will analyze how the American film *Revolutionary Road* embodies the ultimate image of Paris as an antithesis to American dreams. After redefining the cultural relationship between France and the United States, I will argue how *Revolutionary Road* is a film that criticizes the American dream by showing how the city Paris is portrayed as the idealized place beyond the reach of the American people.

## **II. Defining the Relationship Between France and the United States in the Cultural Context**

Despite its overwhelming economic growth, the United States of America, being relatively a young country, has always exhibited a sense of cultural inferiority toward the European countries. Although the United States has its roots in Britain and other European countries, the rhetorical simplicity of American literature, for instance, contrasts with the Shakespearean style of British literature. I see this as American writers having always had the inferiority complex toward European writers—for American writers, keeping their writing style simple is the way to rebel against the rich historical background of the writers in Europe and find their own originality. Mark Twain is the first of those writers who established the Americanness in the field of literature. Nevertheless, the lack of the rich historical and cultural backgrounds has always been problematic for American artists.

As Watanabe argues, the difference between the Eiffel Tower and the skyscrapers in New York tells the difference between the cultural standards of these two countries. Watanabe, quoting Magda Révész-Alexander's words, claims that whereas the skyscrapers in the States function as a mere display of

material success, the Eiffel tower is more about the beauty and the spirituality in it. (342) It is interesting to note that whereas in Paris, the landmark building in the city symbolizes beauty and spirituality, in New York, the landmark buildings such as empire state building and the now-gone world trade center first symbolizes commercial success.

For the American writers who belong to the lost generation, such as Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and so on, the disgust toward American materialism is one of the driving forces to move to Paris. These writers doubted the American values, which were driven by material success and instead considered Paris to be a more civilized place. As Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011) tactfully describes, the image of Paris to Americans consisted of the romantic imagination of the legendary writers who were expatriates of the lost generation. Field mentions tourists and expatriates as follows:

When *The Sun Also Rises* was published in 1926, F. Scott Fitzgerald famously dubbed Ernest Hemingway's novel "a romance and a guidebook" (Aldridge 123). The novel was celebrated as a *roman a clef* that depicted an actual segment of Parisian expatriate society.... Hemingway was reputedly disdainful of tourists, yet the novel's repetition of place names is organized into itineraries similar to those of travel guides contemporaneous to the novel. (1)

As Field says, the novels of the writers of that time or those writers' biographies functioned as a guidebook to the American tourists and stimulated their imagination of Paris as a capital of high culture in contrast to the materialist culture that ails the cities of the United States. The protagonist of *Midnight in Paris* is a typical American who idealizes Paris based on his imagination of what the city was like when those famous writers were around. For him, having traveled back in time to enjoy the company of the American legendary writers, the Paris of yesteryear appears more real than the real Paris. It is noteworthy that for those romantic Americans, the idealized Paris does not necessarily revolve around the real Parisians but the expatriates from the United

States instead. Hence, the image of Paris does not reflect the reality of Paris; it is based on the relationship between Paris and the States.

In this section, I have argued that Americans have always felt Paris to be culturally superior to them. Paris symbolizes a higher culture based on spiritual values whereas New York or the other American cities are considered more of a symbol of a material success. One can observe the Americans' sense of cultural inferiority through the history of literature and description of Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*. Looking back to the history, there was a reason why Americans idealized Paris especially in the cultural context.

### III. General Film Representations of Paris

Hollywood films, which have attained commercial influence to a certain extent, have a deep relationship with the tourism industry. The films depicted cities in which they set their stages as more fascinating places than those cities actually are. For example, *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) describes beautiful and exotic sceneries of Hong Kong. *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) presents Japan as far more a beautiful place than it is. It goes without saying that Hollywood films have also promoted the cities in the United States. Their glorified descriptions of cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans and so on have given each of them distinctive characters. Famous sites such as the Empire State Building in *An Affair to Remember* (1957) and Brooklyn Bridge in *Sex and the City* (2008), have never ceased to attract tourists throughout the years.

Apart from the cities in the United States, Paris is perhaps the most popular foreign city that Hollywood films have ever set their stages in. No other city has carried as special a meaning as Paris in the history of American cinema. The fact that the word "Paris" appears in so many film titles such as *A Scandal in Paris* (1946), *The Last Time I Saw Paris* (1954), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Forget Paris* (1995), *Midnight in*

*Paris* (2011), is a proof of how popular Paris is. No other city has appeared in film titles as frequently as Paris. Paris is always depicted as a place for characters to escape the reality and to experience the higher culture. Among the classical Hollywood films, Vincent Minelli's *An American in Paris* is a representative film that portrays Paris as the capital of art and dreams. *An American in Paris* portrays the typical American representation of Paris as most of the main characters speak English even though they live in Paris. The protagonist, played by Gene Kelly, is a painter whose works does not sell well. His friend is a pianist who never holds a concert. For Americans, Paris is a place for these artists and dilettantes. In this film, Paris is not an actual place but somewhere in a beautiful painting. Everything is over-romanticized there. The protagonist falls in love with a typical French girl, who speaks fluent English with a bit of French accent. This film is all about how the image of Paris is formed among Americans: beautiful, artistic, romantic and sexually liberative.

After the French New Wave, films made in France changed the way French people describe Paris. As Watanabe confirms, before the New Wave, they used a studio settings to shoot Paris. However, the directors of the New Wave used locations to shoot Paris in a more realistic way. (Watanabe 342) Thus, the image of Paris drastically changed from a dreamy one into a rough, darker one. For example, Jean-Luc Godard's *À Bout de Souffle* is a realistic representation of Paris, which has distanced itself from the previous romantic and artistic images.

While French directors were struggling to get rid of the stereotypical images of Paris, Paris in American films persisted as romantic, distinguishing itself from any of the American cities. No matter how bad the political tension between the United States and France became, Americans were in favor of Paris. Gradually, the representation of Paris became so unrealistically idealized that it became a place of a concept or a symbol in American films. In the next section, I will show how a film called *Revolutionary Road* reduced Paris into a mere symbol for Americans.

## IV. Paris Representation in Sam Mendes' *Revolutionary Road*

### IV-1. Wheelers as the Symbol of the American Dream

Although *Revolutionary Road* (2008) is a film directed by a British director Sam Mendes, this film is distinctively an American film. Setting its stage in 1950's American suburb, the film describes a couple, played by Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, and their children. This family, called the Wheelers, looks like a perfectly happy family. The father, Frank, is a businessman who works in an office in New York. The mother, April, is a beautiful and able housewife admired by their neighbors. When the wife suggests, out of the blue, that they should move to Paris, the tragedy begins. At first, the idea of going to Paris seems too unrealistic but the husband is gradually convinced by the idea. Just before moving to Paris, April gets pregnant and they have to give up the idea of going to Paris, which would destroy the couple's relationship. In the end, April dies after performing self-induced abortion.

In the 1950s, to live in a house in the suburb with a family meant attainment of the American dream. According to OED, "American dream" is defined as follows:

{American dream}, the ideal of a democratic and prosperous society which is the traditional aim of the American people; a catch-phrase used to symbolize American social or material values in general. (OED)

As a young country, America prided itself on giving equal opportunities for those who works hard. The American dream basically means material and economical success. Only after World War II, the concept of a home of one's own in a suburb was connected to the idea of the American dream. Stoppa and Elena argue as follows:

To sum up in a few words, the war contributed significantly to the economic recovery of America, so much so that no country (with the exception of Russia) was able to compete with it in the

postwar years; America was declaring itself the most prosperous and powerful country in the world. It is here, in this general euphoria, in this renewed faith in its abilities and possibilities that the American dream can finally find its expression in the suburbs. (Stoppa, Elena 7-8)

April and Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* are exactly the ones who live up to the American dream in 1950s. Suburb seems to be a perfect place to settle for successful couples like them since it seemed to take in all the advantages of the city life and the country life. Their Americanness is emphasized through the fact that their house is built on a little hill and thus that they are always the target of their neighbors' eyes. This reminds audience of the John Winslop's sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity." In it, he quoted from Matthew 5:4 and told his listeners, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden." Later, this concept of "city upon a hill" became popular in the political scenes in the United States and formed the American attitude as a nation: American Exceptionalism. When Mendes set Wheelers' house on a hill, it is apparent that he is alluding to this American Exceptionalism and dubs April and Frank Wheeler America or the American dream itself.

Suburbs, however, were not an ideal place as had been expected. It especially made some housewives unhappy and they felt trapped in a house. As Stoppa says:

After the end of the War both the men who survived it and the government knew that it was just a matter of time before they would go back to their jobs and send their women back home. On the contrary women from their point of view were not sure they were willing to go back to their domestic role without making any complaint. The time had come for the government to build up another campaign, another alluring illusion that would make sure everything went back to its original balance. It was in this particular circumstance that the suburbs were chosen as the perfect means that would attract thousands of women into their 'golden trap' by enchanting them with the

promise of a fairytale-like life built around the idea that the best achievement a woman could desire was to become a good wife and a loving mother. (Stoppa 48)

The suburbs, which were separated from the city and the country, confined the housewives to the middle of nowhere. At the same time, husbands became exhausted as a result of time-consuming commute to the city. Then, April, the wife, tells his husband that they should move to Paris even though they have no job, relatives or any kind of connection in Paris. By analyzing what Paris is to the Wheelers, the symbol of America itself, one can have a clear idea about what Paris is in Hollywood films.

#### IV-2. Paris as a Place to Long for

The images of Paris shared by the Wheelers sums up, to a large extent, the images of Paris formed traditionally by Hollywood films. Though they were an ordinary businessman and a housewife respectively, April tells Frank that he should be a writer or a poet once they move to Paris. The patriarchy that seems so rooted in the States can easily be shaken away. April also claims that in France, she will no longer be a housewife, but she will be the breadwinner of the family while Frank searches for what he really wants to do by reading and spending free time on his own.

“Why do you have to move to Paris?” is the repeated question posed to Wheelers throughout the film. For those people around them, there is practically nothing that can be found in America but only in Paris. There is absolutely no practical reason for them to move into Paris. What motivates them is the concept of Paris purely in the cultural context: a capital of freedom, art, beauty and dreams.

The Wheelers, who already lives up to the American dream, tries desperately to surpass that. As aforementioned, the American dream is a symbol of material and economic success based on the patriarchal system of the society. Subsequently, Paris surfaces as an antithesis to the American dream. It is completely



divorced from governmental propaganda, patriarchy and material success, but purely something to do with art, beauty, spirituality and freedom.

What is interesting about this film is that in the end, the Wheelers never get to go to Paris. Paris never once appears in the film. It only exists as a concept for Wheelers; it only exists in the dreams of the Wheelers. This description of Paris is the ultimate form of the American representation of the city of Paris. This shows that Sam Mendes is cognizant of the fact that Paris as Americans conceptualize never exists. It is different from the actual city that functions as a capital of France. Paris in American films was always a utopian place. It somehow crystallized as the sum of all the cultural and artistic elements that Americans thought they have missed out along the path of economical development. Paris as the Wheelers “talk about” sums up the Hollywood tradition of the representation of Paris.

## **V. Conclusion**

No matter how different the real Paris is from the filmic description of it, one thing is clear. Americans have always respected Paris as the symbol of rich historical and cultural backgrounds that they could never dream of possessing, and this longing and respect are often represented in Hollywood Films. It is only natural that tourists feel disappointed after actually visiting Paris. So would the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road* had they moved to Paris, which never happened. No matter how disappointing the tangible Paris is, the intangible concept of Paris as the capital of art, dreams and freedom will stay, as Humphrey Bogart puts it, “We’ll Always have Paris”. Tourists would relentlessly look for the fragments of Paris they saw in the American films.

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#### 【 要 旨 】

フランスの首都パリは、観光都市として、長年絶大な人気を誇っているが、一方で、「パリ症候群」と呼ばれる旅行者、移住者たちの適応障害が問題視されている。この適応障害は、旅行者たちが抱くパリへの過剰な期待が原因となっている。本研究ノートでは、『巴里のアメリカ人』(1951)、『ミッドナイト・イン・パリ』(2001)等、著名なハリウッド映画の中で描かれるパリの都市描写を分析し、人々のパリ幻想がどのように作られてきたのかを文化学的に考察する。