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Music, Gender and the Politics of Performance in Singin’ in the Rain
by STEPHAN PROCK

“Everybody tells so many lies—I’m just going to tell the truth.”¹
—Gene Kelly

AT SOME POINT between December 1950 and the early spring of 1951 Gene Kelly saw Debbie Reynolds sing “The Aba Daba Honeymoon” in the film Two Weeks with Love (1950).² Kelly was so impressed by the performance that he insisted Reynolds be cast to play the lead opposite himself in the upcoming production of MGM’s new musical Singin’ in the Rain (1952), which he was to co-direct with Stanley Donen. When the film was released in 1952, the chance that Kelly took by casting an inexperienced and relatively unknown 19-year-old performer paid off: not only was Singin’ in the Rain a great success, it launched Reynolds into stardom. And for Debbie Reynolds, the rest, as they say, is history.

Or is it?
Freeze frame. Rewind. Play.

At some point in the early spring of 1951 L.B. Mayer called Debbie Reynolds into his office and announced to her that she was going to play the lead opposite Gene Kelly in the upcoming production of MGM’s new musical Singin’ in the Rain. Soon after, Kelly himself was ushered into Mayer’s office and given the news of Reynolds’ casting. To Kelly this was an altogether unpleasant surprise. For his most important artistic project to date he was being saddled with an inexperienced and relatively unknown 19-year-old performer for his female lead. After putting Reynolds through her paces and discovering that she knew almost nothing about dancing, he was even more unhappy than before. Still, according to Reynolds, “It didn’t matter to Mr. Mayer. Gene Kelly had been told he had me and he had me.”³

On the surface these two narratives—the first, a retelling from Kelly’s perspective in Clive Hirschhorn’s biography; the second, Reynolds’ firsthand
account—seem simply to contradict one another. But the fact of the contradiction may not be as important as what the issues at stake reveal about the stars themselves—their sense of their own relationships to the film’s genesis, their roles within the film itself, their places in its subsequent critical reception. Tellingly, the center of gravity around which these two narratives revolve turns out to be a familiar trope of Western culture: the mind/body duality. Hirschhorn’s narrative tends to posit Kelly as the prescient architect of Reynolds’ career, a man with an unerring eye for talent and the foresight to create the space in which it can be nurtured. Reynolds, on the other hand, makes the central issue in her narrative the problem of her body—specifically, her inability to live up to Kelly’s demands on her as a dancer. In her autobiography Reynolds describes her experience filming *Singin’ in the Rain* almost entirely in terms of her body: the grueling hours spent in rehearsal, her bleeding feet, her refusal to take the studio doctors’ “vitamin shots” after she physically collapsed from exertion, and her fear of Kelly’s unpredictable rages. In the end, she specifically relates this experience not just to the body but to a specifically female body when she compares the pain of working on the film to that of childbirth, only more extreme: “The pain from childbirth was in the lower body but in *Singin’ in the Rain* it was everywhere—especially my feet and brain.”

Critical Mass; or, Debbie Disappears

The mind/body split underlying the gap between Kelly’s and Reynolds’ narratives also mirrors a gap between what the narrative of the film seems to be about and what the story of the film’s critical reception has been. On the surface, the plot of *Singin’ in the Rain* centers around establishing Donald Lockwood and Kathy Selden as ideal partners for one another, two film stars equal in talent and the possibility for achievement. And yet for nearly half a century critical commentary on *Singin’ in the Rain* has focused almost exclusively on Gene Kelly: praised not only for his on-screen performance but for his work behind the scenes as choreographer and codirector, his “three-in-one” presence has tended to overshadow the other performers in the film—including the female lead, Debbie Reynolds. At first glance, it might seem

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4. Indeed, Kelly implies that no element of Reynolds’ account is factual since he emphatically denies that the meeting in Mayer’s office ever took place: “I insisted she be used, and never had any meeting with Mayer concerning *Singin’ in the Rain*” (Hirschhorn, 181).


6. Reynolds and Columbia, 98.

7. Ironically, it was Fred Astaire (at that time filming *The Belle of New York*, also at MGM) who took Reynolds under his wing and provided some much-needed encouragement and help during the filming of *Singin’ in the Rain* (Reynolds and Columbia, 94). (Reynolds and Columbia incorrectly identify the Astaire vehicle as *Royal Wedding* which was released during the shooting of *Singin’ in the Rain*.)

8. Even Peter Wollen’s recent monograph from BFI’s notable “Film Classics Series” hardly mentions her; rather, Wollen focuses almost exclusively on Kelly’s life and work and his contributions to the film. Peter Wollen, *Singin’ in the Rain* (London: BFI Film Classics Series, 1992).
obvious why Debbie Reynolds has been generally ignored in the film’s critical history; her lack of a notable singing voice coupled with her complete inexperience as a dancer seemed to preclude from the outset the kind of highly charged performances Kelly gives. And yet to accept the critical and historical neglect of Reynolds as due to her deficiencies as a performer is to overlook the fact that, as MGM intended, the role of Kathy Selden catapulted the young Reynolds to stardom. If Reynolds made a name for herself as a musical actress in this film, why has it become so easy to ignore her performance? One reason is that the film’s historical reception and critical interpretation reiterate a gender hierarchy posed by the film itself (as I will argue in more detail below), which clearly situates Donald Lockwood (Kelly) above Kathy Selden (Reynolds).

The film establishes this hierarchy, however, not primarily in the plot but at the level of the film’s musical and cinematic discourse: the film’s narrative posits Selden as the multitalented woman whose natural speaking ability and beautiful singing voice save The Dancing Cavalier (and the career of Don Lockwood) from ruin, while at the level of the film’s musical discourse she is simultaneously effaced as a coherent musical subject. Kathy’s—or Reynolds’—performance abilities are never really featured; she never has a song or dance number all to herself, and in a striking and singular number (“Would You,” the song which comes closest to being her solo number) even as Reynolds/Selden performs, her body disappears from the film’s visual surface and she becomes a disembodied yet still fully diegetic vocal object.9

This effacement of Selden as a musical subject from a film musical about the making of film musicals has a much greater impact on our perception of her as a cinematic subject than it would in a purely narrative film. In narrative cinema, music strives towards a general condition of invisibility, subordinated to the demands of narrative; in the film musical, on the other hand, music is conspicuously central, often heedless of the demands of plot.10 Indeed, many of Hollywood’s best musicals are built around notoriously silly or incoherent stories (a legacy perhaps of the operatic tradition). In the musical, song and dance numbers are used to project the illusion of a direct self-expression different in kind and content from that available in purely narrative cinema. This illusion of direct self-expression gives the audience a sense of access to the authentic, inner lives of the musical’s characters, powerfully yet simply constructing them as subjects through performance. And though musical performance alone does not ensure subjectivity in the musical, only those characters who perform have any chance of achieving it. To efface Kathy from the most important level of the film’s musical discourse is thus to deny her the ability to project a musical self.

9. For a discussion of voice and its various possible relationships to the diegesis see Chapter Two (“Body Talk”) of Kaja Silverman’s The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), 42-71. See especially her discussion of voice-over in that chapter (pp. 48-49 and 51-54).

My claim that the film effaces Selden from one level of the musical discourse, however, requires further explanation, for the situation is more complex than it might first appear. To say that Selden disappears as a musical subject in Singin’ in the Rain is not to say that she doesn’t perform numbers or that Reynolds herself doesn’t perform well: as I have pointed out already, Reynolds was a highly talented performer in her own right—indeed, in the “Good Morning” sequence she matches two of Hollywood’s most charismatic hoofers practically step for step. (See Figure 1.)  

Rather, my claim is that music conspires with other aspects of the cinematic apparatus to efface Selden/Reynolds from an aspect of the musical discourse even as the plot posits her as Kelly’s equal. This gap between the narrative and musical discourse in Kathy’s case stands in high relief to the way in which the men’s musical numbers highlight and exaggerate their position within the story. In what follows I want to explore in greater detail how Sing in the Rain articulates this gender hierarchy and to consider how the inequities of gender representation in this film are part of a larger performance aesthetic of male-centered subjectivity formulated across Kelly’s career as a whole.

Figure 1: “Good Morning”

11. Hirschhorn states “for all Debbie Reynolds’ misgivings about her abilities, she ... has never worked as well. Her dancing in ‘Good Morning’ is no way betrays her inexperience, and she is the perfect partner ... in the lyrical ‘You Were Meant For Me,’” 190.
IT IS SURPRISING that so little work has been devoted to the issue of gender in the film musical, for all the elements of a critical framework already exist: musicology’s developing methodologies for analyzing gender and music relationships; the growing critical interest in film music; the well-established body of literature on feminist film theory and criticism; and the growing scholarly work on the genre of the film musical itself. Moreover, *Singin’ in the Rain* seems a prime candidate for this kind of study, not only because of its paradigmatic stature but also for the way representations of gender are worked out through musical performance in the film.\(^{12}\)

As Rick Altman has pointed out, representations of gender lie at the basis of the generic structure of the American film musical, a structure articulated through contrasting parallel numbers that tend to revolve around a male/female dichotomy.\(^{13}\) Altman’s approach offers us a general framework from which to consider the various ways contrasting numbers might create gendered differences in *Singin’ in the Rain*’s musical discourse. By following Altman’s cue and examining how men and women have radically different relationships to the musical discourse, even when their numbers are structurally parallel, perhaps we can discover how the film creates a fantasy about gender that represents one type of gender relationship on the level of plot and another in the structure of its musical performances.

In *Singin’ in the Rain* the characters’ gender, more than any other single factor, determines their relationship to musical performance and ultimately their position within the musical discourse. The men, Don and Cosmo, are firmly linked together (throughout the film Cosmo is not just Don’s alter ego but a powerful ally), and this position in the plot is reflected in the musical discourse as well. The two women, Kathy and Lina, on the other hand, are distinctly opposed to each other: and yet Kathy and Lina, never allies, rather readily replace each other; and, as such, they stand interchangeably for one another in the position of “woman” and opposite Kelly as “man.” These oppositions unfold in a sequence of parallel numbers: first, the men (Don and Cosmo together) opposed to Lina; then Don vs. the women (Kathy and Lina); last, Don (alone) vs. Kathy (alone). In discussing this last opposition I will demonstrate in greater detail how Don achieves his musical subject position and how Kathy’s is denied.

**Talking One’s Self Up; or, What Does Moses Suppose?**

*Singin’ in the Rain* begins with a narrative. Kelly’s character, Donald Lockwood, relates the story of his rise to stardom from its musical beginnings in his childhood. But as he narrates, the film flashes back and projects images

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12. It is often cited as a classic example of the problem of woman’s voice in narrative cinema; the complexity of the film’s musical construction, however, calls for a more detailed study. See Silverman, 45-46.

that contradict his glamorous, highbrow tale and we understand Lockwood’s narrative as reauthoring for the audience-within-the-film the humble beginnings he wants to obscure.

In this opening scene, the flashback’s visual construction directly represents the truth of Don’s past even as it demonstrates his ability to turn narrative to his own purposes and to the creation of the image of his choosing within the film. As Singin’ in the Rain progresses, the question of how cinema’s visual construction becomes increasingly tied to an idea of “truth” becomes more obvious and important to the plot. But a curious reversal takes place when visual portrayal and “truth” become bound up with representations of the “ideal” cinematic woman: while direct, spontaneous images reveal a “truth” behind Don’s revisionist and misleading narrative, the film becomes increasingly caught up in revealing the falseness, the very constructedness, of the “feminine” and the inability of women in the film to present or control their own representation.

The film thus sets up a gap between two kinds of cinematic representation: the direct, unmediated and spontaneous representation of reality and “truth” and the laborious, mediated construction of images without corresponding realities. This gap is represented at the level of the plot as we consistently witness men as the authors of women’s cinematic images (their visual “bodies”). But since Singin’ in the Rain is above all a musical, this gap between male subjectivity and the construction of women as objects plays itself out most startlingly at the level of performance and the film’s musical discourse.

As a film about the transition from silent to sound cinema, the plot of Singin’ in the Rain centers around issues of speech, voice, and the problem of synchronizing sound and image, specifically voice and body. The problem of synchronization in Hollywood cinema in general tends to be overtly gendered, and in Singin’ in the Rain, in particular, Kaja Silverman has noted how the entire film focuses on female vocal inadequacy, especially in its relation to image. Not only is Lina’s voice irritating and uncultured, it does not “fit” with the image of feminine beauty she projects (the entire plot depends on the audience understanding that her image and her voice are incompatible); across the course of the film a great deal of technological tinkering is required to create a voice that seems to match her image—though the film consistently reveals the underpinnings of that illusion, always reminding us that the beautiful voice seeming to emanate from Lina’s lips does not arise out of her own body. Don, on the other hand, is always associated with natural speech and linguistic ability. Even at his most vulnerable, when he becomes implicated in the failure of The Dueling Cavalier, it is not

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15. Ironically, Singin’ in the Rain itself recapitulates the situation it deplores: the tendency in American cinema to create deceptive images of women, especially in terms of the construction and projection of ideals of feminine beauty. Debbie Reynolds’ voice in “Would You” (the song Kathy records for Lina to lip-synch in The Dancing Cavalier) is actually dubbed by one Betty Noyes (or Royce, depending on the source); and those scenes in which Kathy dubs Lina’s lines are, in fact, dubbed by Jean Hagen herself (who plays the character of Lina). For a detailed account, see Carol J. Clover, “Dancin’ in the Rain,” Critical Inquiry 21 (Summer 1995): 724-25.
because of any inherent defect in his ability to speak. When the audience at the premiere of *The Dueling Cavalier* laughs at him, it is because of the film’s ridiculous dialogue and, more importantly, because the technology of the early sound cinema misrepresents his voice by destroying the appearance of its synchronous relationship to his image. Indeed, the film carefully forestalls any possible misunderstanding of Don’s linguistic powers by preceding the failure of *The Dueling Cavalier* with two scenes that are designed to demonstrate Don’s ability; crucially, his linguistic competence is demonstrated in part by directly contrasting it with Lina’s incompetence. Moreover, Don’s mastery is hyperbolized at the level of the film’s musical discourse—specifically, through the musical number “Moses Supposes.”

Most of the songs in *Singin’ in the Rain* were culled from earlier film musicals from the thirties, helping to create the story’s nostalgic atmosphere.16 “Moses Supposes,” on the other hand, was written especially for *Singin’ in the Rain.*17 In the film the number is precipitated by an earlier event: Producer R.F. Simpson storms onto the set of *The Dueling Cavalier* during the filming of Lina’s and Don’s “love scene” to announce the end of work on that picture because of the phenomenal success of the Warner Brothers “talkie” *The Jazz Singer.* Simpson then says the studio is going to turn *The Dueling Cavalier* into a talking picture. Suddenly, Lina speaks and the flaw in this plan—Lina’s defective voice—becomes painfully obvious to those working on the film (though comically obvious to the film’s spectators). Soon after, we see first Lina and then Don (who is joined by Cosmo) working on diction with their respective vocal coaches.

By placing these two scenes side by side the film depicts the gulf between Don’s and Lina’s speaking ability. The comparison is meant to be noticed. Lina, despite several attempts, can’t say “caahn’t” as Phoebe Dinsmore, her vocal coach, would have her pronounce it (the script says she can’t even hear the difference), and her scene ends with her failure; Don’s scene, on the other hand, begins with him easily repeating the word “caahn’t” and being congratulated by his coach.18 He goes on to consolidate his success by mastering a number of tongue twisters. The tongue twister, of course, is designed to make less able speakers stutter, and the fact that the subject of the tongue twister is Moses—perhaps the Bible’s most famous stammerer—is a subtle but witty emphasis of Don’s linguistic prowess.

Don’s mastery of speech as performance escalates into a display of musical mastery, even of performance itself. This transformation into music is foreshadowed by the scene’s emphasis on tongue twisters (an emphasis on sound over meaning) and is brought about through a smooth metamorphosis of speech into other modes of performance: Don’s ease of speech becomes Cosmo’s rhythmic recitation becomes both men reciting becomes singing

17. Lyrics by Comden and Green; music by Roger Edens.
becomes, finally, a dance tour de force. This metamorphosis of mastery of speech into mastery of musical performance suggests, in turn, a mastery of the musical discourse itself. The move from speech to song necessitates music: the men’s recitation calls forth an invisible orchestra to accompany their song. The move to song and dance with music that has its source outside the story implies a move out of the realm of the purely diegetic. This sense of diegetic transcendence is strengthened by the illusion that Don and Cosmo are addressing their performance directly to the audience outside the film. By returning the gaze they erase, without a hint of irony, the barrier that separates cinematic subject from spectator. 19 Having mastered their teacher at several levels of discourse, in the last moments of the number the pupils bury the diction coach (who has himself become nothing but a prop) under a mountain of props. (See Figures 2–5.) The scene ends with the two men holding up and pointing back to a placard containing an open human mouth and the “Vowel A,” the first letter of the English alphabet, reminding us that the origin of their performance was in their mastery of language.

While entertaining us with Don and Cosmo’s boisterous number, the film aligns the two men on the side of discursive mastery, specifically contrasting this mastery to Lina’s lack—a linguistic lack that highlights and exaggerates the chasm separating the men from a female character who never expresses herself in (and can hardly be imagined as having) a musical number.

Kathy and Lina: A Woman’s Place Is in the Story

While the plot of *Singin’ in the Rain* represents Lina’s failure as performer, we might expect that Kathy—the talented woman, the “right” partner for Don—might recuperate Lina’s deficiencies. In the plot Kathy achieves her position, her talent is recognized, and the gaping lack left by Lina’s expulsion from the Lockwood/Lamont duo is filled by Kathy. At the level of the film’s music, on the other hand, no recuperation occurs. As the film nears its conclusion, Kathy’s numbers have become inextricably linked to Lina’s body and persona. In the final scene, at the triumphant premiere of *The Dancing Cavalier*, Lina insists on performing a song publicly for the elated audience in the film. Of course, it is Kathy, hidden from view behind a curtain, who provides the voice for Lina’s lip-synching. Though Kathy is finally freed from this exploitation, her freedom comes only at the price of her own humiliation and helplessness and the agency of men, when Don, Cosmo, and R.F. Simpson gleefully expose the women to reveal the “truth” of their unsynchronized voices and bodies (a deception which we should remember Kathy was coerced into by those same men).

The constant interpolation of Lina’s body into Kathy’s numbers means that Kathy can never enter the musical discourse on her own terms, by herself, as both Don and Cosmo have done; in the one number in which she sings and dances as a form of self-expression (“Good Morning”) she is “sandwiched” between the two men and expresses with them a group sentiment. This song, then, can hardly establish Kathy as a musical subject in her own right. On the other hand, in her single solo in the film, “Would You,” Kathy’s voice is connected to Lina’s body in such a way that the narrative
eventually requires Kathy’s bodily disappearance from her own biggest performance in the film. This separation of Kathy’s voice from her body, however, does not disembodify it in a manner similar to voice-over, which usually implies a position of power within—sometimes over—the cinematic apparatus. Rather, her voice and the song she sings remain firmly anchored within the diegesis: at each transition we see how the source of the song’s music is always emanating from a space clearly within the story and this in spite of a complex montage that traverses both spatial and temporal distances.

The scene begins with a close-up of a microphone: the instrument intended to capture Kathy’s voice (and the orchestra visible behind her in the studio) and transform her song into a recording—a sound object. In the next shot Kathy herself disappears while her song and voice continue to be reproduced in the story on the phonograph to which Lina is trying to sync her performance. In the final shot, we see the Kathy/Lina/sound/image composite as it is being captured by the camera, as well as a brief shot of the Vitaphone. Suddenly, as the color begins to bleed from the shot, we begin to have the sense that we are watching The Dancing Cavalier as a film in its own right, but a reverse tracking shot quickly dispels this illusion, revealing the screen onto which The Dancing Cavalier is being projected, and continues by tracking far enough out to reveal the audience of male spectators screening the film (Don, Cosmo, and R.F.). Singin’ in the Rain reminds us that The Dancing Cavalier is a film-within-a-film; the music of the now invisible orchestra, which has been gradually slipping towards the condition of nondiegetic music, is deftly repositioned as diegetic (that is, as a song with nondiegetic music in a film that is itself contained inside the story of Singin’ in the Rain). Thus, as Kathy’s musical performance turns into the construction of an audiovisual “object,” the sequence not only depicts Kathy’s and Lina’s containment within the diegesis but emphasizes the continual entrapment of the film’s women within cinema’s technological apparatus. (See Figures 6–9.)

Figures 6, 7: “Would You”

20. Indeed, since the song was dubbed and not actually sung by Reynolds, she herself completely disappears from the performance.
Don’s “Broadway Melody Ballet” follows Kathy’s solo immediately as his parallel solo number. Although, like Kathy’s song, the narrative establishes the “Broadway Melody Ballet” as a scene from the film-within-the-film, the techniques for confining Kathy’s song to the inner narrative are repudiated in Kelly’s number. In fact, the contrast between Kathy’s and Don’s numbers could hardly be more striking: whereas the color bleeds out of the “Would You” sequence, Don’s is shown in blazing Technicolor throughout; a reverse tracking shot at the end of “Would You” visually positions it as part of the film-within-the-film, while reverse tracking shots at both the beginning and end of Don’s number suggest the inability of the cinematic apparatus to contain him; whereas the objectified, composite woman at the end of “Would You” seems to invite the gaze by not confronting it, Kelly’s larger-than-life, boldly grinning image at the end of his scene seems to defy objectification as we watch him watching us; whereas Kathy’s number exists as a filmed object, completed and “in the can,” Don’s number as it appears on the screen is a free projection of his imagination (when R.F. says he can’t quite visualize it, Cosmo responds, “On film, it’ll be better yet”). (See Figure 10.)

Musically, Don’s number differs from Kathy’s in two important ways. First, as already explained, the music in Kathy’s number is rigorously positioned within the diegesis, while the music for Don’s number floats free and is never shown as emanating from a source within the story. Second, unlike Kathy’s lyrical song with its rhythmic regularity, unchanging key, tempo, style and mood, the music for the “Broadway Melody Ballet” is vigorous and dynamic and even assumes a narrative dimension that mirrors and comments on the story depicted on screen—an element missing from any of Kathy’s numbers. For Don this number is the culmination of the linguistic and performative competence he has demonstrated throughout the film. Earlier in the film this linguistic competence became musical performance in “Moses Supposes”; now, at the end of the film, Don’s power over speech has become the power to narrate his own musical performance—to call forth music, dance and spectacle from the realm of his own mind. Kathy’s number, on the other hand, carefully dismantles the illusion of a coherent, transcendent and spontaneously musical female subject.
Express Yourself

In the musical (as in opera) it is through the solo song that characters achieve moments of self-expression and thus, perhaps, have the chance to be positioned as cinematic subjects rather than specular objects. Don and Kathy, however, are not given the same opportunity to achieve the status of musical subjects. Don achieves self-expression and the illusion of giving the spectator access to his inner life through performance throughout the film; his famous “Singin’ in the Rain” number is only the most obvious moment. His control over the means of creating that illusion of interiority, and the role of musical performance in achieving it, is particularly visible in one case: the song “You Were Meant for Me” in which he declares his love for Kathy.

In this scene Don works explicitly to set the terms of his own self-expression; in order to express his private feelings to Kathy, he first has to create the “proper setting”—a movie sound stage. This setting poses a double problem for Kelly. On the one hand, it emphasizes the realm of filmic performance as the proper realm of self-expression for Kelly’s character. And yet at the same time it places the expression of private emotion in a realm in which we know Don can’t be trusted: for we have seen him lie about his past in his opening narrative; and in the “love scene” from *The Dueling Cavalier*

21. Rather as characters in spoken plays do in the soliloquy.
22. A device Kelly first used in a similar situation in the film *Anchors Aweigh* with Kathryn Grayson.
he and Lina create an image of passionate love while exchanging bitter words. Moreover, as his scene with Kathy unfolds, the illusory, even deceptive, nature of cinema's visual constructions is again explicitly demonstrated by the revelation of its technical apparatus. But this time, with the aid of the musical and narrative power he commands throughout the film, Don ends up dismantling the visual illusion, first in order to show himself as its author, not its object, and then in order to set another kind of illusion in its place: at the moment Don shows us that cinematic sunsets are nothing but electric lights, the music that has been underscoring the scene from the start begins to respond to his words more directly. He turns on a smoke machine and at the words, “Mist from the distant mountains,” we hear a far-off bugle call. “Colored lights in a garden,” he says, and we hear woodwinds imitating the songs of birds. In other words, even as he demystifies cinema's visual illusions, the sound track reinvests them with mystery and meaning. (See Figure 11.)

Significantly, the music imbues Don's words with an illusion of reality that is not visual: most simply, the illusion that Kelly's character on screen is a subject and that he expresses his innermost feelings. Diegetic voice and nondiegetic music conspire in this scene and whisper to us to see what is not visual and what cannot be shown: a character's inner life. Seeing is not believing; the image is in the ear. As the scene progresses, Don himself picks up the thread from the invisible orchestra and begins to sing his love. It is not just Kathy, but we ourselves, who are drawn in: it would be difficult at this moment of musical performance to resist the power of Don's musical persona or question the sincerity of his expression.
The Case of the Missing Number; or, Debbie Disappears Again

But if key moments in this film are built explicitly around parallel musical numbers, where is Kathy’s corresponding solo? One of the most obvious facts about *Singin’ in the Rain* is that, unlike Don, Kathy never expresses her feelings about him in a spontaneous solo with nondiegetic orchestral accompaniment. Indeed, though she seems to have feelings for him, the film is intent on silencing her narrative and musical attempts at romantic self-expression. A brief example will illustrate how the narrative itself silences her. After one of her dubbing sessions for Lina the lights go up and Don tells her he loves her. When Kathy tries to respond to Don’s declaration, she is only able to utter his name before he cuts her off and goes on to tell her that he is going to put an end to the charade that allows Lina to steal Kathy’s voice. If she is never allowed even to speak her love, how can she ever sing it?23

The most obvious denial of Kathy’s ability to express herself in song, however, stems from the fact that she was supposed to have a solo (one in which Lina is not interpolated) in which she sang her love for Don, but which was deleted from the final print of the film. While it is true that one of Don’s numbers was also deleted, it should be clear at this point that the implications for Don’s character are minimal, whereas for Kathy they take on a global significance.24 Without this piece Kathy loses her one chance of becoming a musical subject.

It is ironic that this missing number, “You Are My Lucky Star,” was written by Brown and Freed for a film in which it becomes a virtual hymn to female musical performance: *Broadway Melody of 1936*. In this film the song “You Are My Lucky Star” permeates the film both as source music and underscoring. Sung at the very beginning of the movie by Frances Langford, it reappears later as Eleanor Powell’s fantasy of self-realization through dance. (See Figure 12.)

The contrast between the use of musical performance itself in *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Broadway Melody of 1936* could hardly be greater. *Broadway Melody*, Powell’s second film and the vehicle that made her a star, is filled mainly with musical performances by women: neither Jack Benny nor Robert Taylor sing or dance and the strangely limp peregrinations of Buddy Ebsen are a far cry indeed from the overtly “masculine” dance aesthetic of Gene Kelly. While the gendered split between musical performers in *Broadway Melody of 1936* may pose another set of questions regarding gender—for example, its implied emphasis on women as the primary objects of musical

23. One might argue that, on the level of the musical discourse, Selden does express her feelings towards Don obliquely in the “Would You” sequence simply because he happens to be on the set while she records the song and because she sings a line or two in his direction. But this number’s halfhearted effort at representing Kathy’s feelings for Don becomes irredeemably muddled by the disappearance of Kathy’s body from the number only to be replaced by Lina singing to Don in the film-within-the-film, *The Dueling Cavalier*—a pairing which at this point in the movie we understand to be fraught with irony and ill-feeling.

24. Despite the significance of the loss of Kathy’s number Hirschhorn tells us “of all the numbers Gene forfeited to the cutting room floor, [the loss of his reprise of “All I Do Is Dream of You”] pains him the most, for he regards it as one of the best he has ever done. But it slowed down the narrative, and ‘for the good of the show’ had to be abandoned” (Hirschhorn,189).
and visual pleasure—it is clear that that film’s use of the song “You Are My Lucky Star” (especially in Powell’s imaginary fantasy ballet) gives its women a kind of direct self-expression not only denied the women in Singin’ in the Rain but also explicitly appropriated by Kelly himself. Indeed, Kelly’s “Broadway Melody” ballet incorporates gestures strikingly similar to some that appear in Eleanor Powell’s tour-de-force performance of “Broadway Rhythm”; even the endings mime each other almost exactly.25 (See Figure 13.)

But the disappearance of the “You Are My Lucky Star” number from Singin’ in the Rain not only deprives Kathy of her one moment of direct self-expression in the film, it also significantly alters the musico-dramatic structure of the film’s denouement. When Don begins singing “You Are My Lucky Star” at the end of the film, it is no longer a reprise of Kathy’s romantic solo from earlier in the film. If it had been part of the final print, we would read the dramatic force of Don’s reprise, the thing that makes Kathy stop in her tracks and return to the stage, as stemming from Kathy’s realization that Don is returning the feelings she expressed earlier for him in the terms of her own song. Instead, its displacement means that now the force of Don’s singing emanates simply from his own musical persona. Kathy returns to him not because he is singing her song back to her but simply because he is singing to her.26

25. As I will discuss below, Kelly’s appropriation of a traditionally female performance role (that of the performing body as object of the erotic gaze) necessitates a consistent effort to distance himself from the feminine—creating an overtly “masculine” aesthetic.

26. The disappearance of Kathy’s number also changes our understanding of the music for the opening titles. By “marrying” orchestral versions here of Don’s and Kathy’s romantic solos (sung later by them within the film itself), “Singin’ in the Rain” and “You Are My Lucky Star” musically foreshadow the ultimate pairing of Don and Kathy. With the deletion of Kathy’s number all the music in the opening now becomes linked solely to Don and his musical persona.
Although the inclusion of Kathy’s solo in the final print might have gone a long way towards establishing her as a more coherent and expressive musical subject, this is not to say that it would have completely equalized the gender imbalance inscribed in the film’s musical discourse. Technically, Kathy’s song differs from Don’s in two important respects. First, she is unable to sustain the song as a musical number and lapses into speech in the middle (marking her as a subject unable to transcend speech through song). Second, and more importantly, unlike Don’s love song, which is carefully addressed to her and which she hears, Kathy’s song is private and contained, unheard by anyone in the story. The point that Kathy’s song goes unheard is made more ironic and poignant by the setting in which it takes place: she expresses her feelings in front of the billboard advertising the Lockwood and Lamont picture. What we mostly see is Kathy addressing her song to the giant, impassive, unhearing image of Don staring off into space. (See Figure 14.)

When Don reprises this song at the film’s climax, on the other hand, he seems to do so, not only spontaneously, but with a kind of knowledge of its significance for Kathy. Here, as I demonstrated earlier, the song has musical-dramatic significance: Don is singing Kathy’s song to her. But singing Kathy’s song without having heard it seems to confer on Don a mastery over the musical discourse—granting him seemingly omniscient access to realms of female interiority and allowing him to stand outside the film with its co-

27. For a discussion of how song becomes a privileged form of speech see Feuer, 51.
28. Kathy’s deleted performance of “You Are My Lucky Star” is included as bonus track 68 on the 1991 MGM/UA laserdisc release of the film.
creator, Gene Kelly. Unlike Kathy’s lack of a musical subject position, Don’s is exaggerated: he is not just a complete musical subject but one with a surplus presence bordering on authorship. (See Figure 15.)

Figure 14: “You Are My Lucky Star”

Figure 15: “You Were Meant for Me”

29. Lina’s failure to project a musical persona is exaggerated by the song she and Kathy perform: “Singin’ in the Rain”—the ultimate expression of male subjectivity earlier in the film.
Resisting the Dance

The sense of diegetic transcendence Don projects in his performances is reinforced by a kind of reflexivity the film creates between the character of Donald Lockwood and the man Gene Kelly. Both the narrative and Don’s performances reflect Gene Kelly’s real-life position. Don, like Kelly, is a major film star who, as Kelly implies he did for Reynolds, makes Kathy a star across the course of the film. This parallel between cinema fiction and real life is explicitly pointed to in the film’s own self-reflexive ending: a shot of Lockwood/Kelly and Selden/Reynolds gazing up at their own images on a billboard advertising their first picture together—Singin’ in the Rain. And the same reflexivity between actor and character proliferates throughout the film, for many of the film’s crucial segments illustrate actual biographical details of Kelly’s life and career. In the flashback at the beginning of the film, for instance, the film’s visual reenactment of Don Lockwood’s early career as a performer in speak-easies and vaudeville is a dramatization of Kelly’s early career. Don’s ability to play the violin reflects Kelly’s study of the violin as a boy. And the character of Cosmo mirrors Kelly’s brother, with whom he performed in his early years. Toward the end of the film the loosely structured narrative of the “Broadway Melody Ballet” again recapitulates Kelly’s struggle to make it as a dancer, rising from crude obscurity to suave stardom. Moreover, on the level of musical performance, the boundaries separating the fictional character of Don Lockwood from Kelly himself become practically indistinguishable, the two personas melding in spectacular numbers like the “Broadway Melody Ballet” or the famous “Singin’ in the Rain” sequence. Is it Don Lockwood or Gene Kelly himself who is the subject of these displays?

Since Singin’ in the Rain is in one sense, then, Kelly’s own story and one over which he had an unprecedented degree of control, it is not surprising that the film, arguably the pinnacle of his career, is a full realization of his own performance aesthetic. As many commentators have noted, this aesthetic is underpinned by a self-conscious anxiety about the feminizing aspects of music and musical performance. Peter Wollen points out, for example, that Kelly was “obsessed with the validity of male dance ... [and] a male body that is acceptably exhibitionist in its athleticism.”

30. Hirschhorn describes the “Fit As A Fiddle” routine as “the sort of thing Gene and his brother Fred might have done while playing the “doops” in Chicago” (Hirschhorn, 184). Kelly himself supports this interpretation in the interview he did for Gavin Millar. Produced by BBC TV with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc. (1974).

31. Alvin Yudkoff states that “in the eyes of the public one filmgoing (and video-renting) experience truly represented the Life Achievement of Gene Kelly: the 103 minutes of the finest musical ever made, Singin’ in the Rain” (Yudkoff, 220).


33. Wollen, 57.
tion in sports. And yet the litany of activities he describes seems only to stress the undercurrent of anxiety in his narrative:

When I became a teenager and after I had played a lot of football and ice hockey and baseball and the usual American rough sports and had grown big enough so that I wasn’t afraid of anyone calling me a sissy I found that I was very popular with the young ladies if I could dance. And I could. 34

Kelly’s obsession with evading the “stigma of effeminacy”35 led him on more than one occasion to insist on the connection between dancing and sports and culminated in a rather bizarre program in 1956, entitled “Dancing: A Man’s Game,” for Alistair Cooke’s Omnibus television series. In it Kelly asserted:

Any man who looks sissy while dancing is just a lousy dancer. A good dancer simply takes the physical movements of sport, exaggerates them, extends them and distorts them in order to show what he wants to say more clearly and more strongly. There’s very little difference between a footballer warming up for the game and a modern dancer going through his paces before the show. It’s only a matter of intention.36

Kelly’s emphasis on dance as an athletic pursuit had far-reaching consequences for how he appeared as a dancing partner, drastically altering the traditional way in which men and women relate to each other in the partnered dances in his films. He demanded a new athleticism from his female partners: Debbie Reynolds, for instance, was herself an athlete and had planned to teach gymnastics before being discovered at a beauty contest in Burbank. Yet, surprisingly, this demand for athletic ability did not lead Kelly to invite women to participate in this new aesthetic as equal partners. Rather, women are often transformed into mere objects whose primary function was to point back to Kelly’s own athletic displays.

A revealing aspect of Kelly’s dance aesthetic, in fact, revolved around his tendency to substitute objects for actual women in many of his “partnered” dances. As Kelly himself said in the Millar interview, “when you didn’t have the girl you used the symbol.”37 In Thousands Cheer (1943) he dances with and sings to a mop; in Invitation to the Dance (1956) he cavorts with a cartoon woman; in On the Town (1950) he falls in love with a poster of Miss Turnstiles while on the subway and later dances with a placard containing her picture; in Singin’ in the Rain he has Cosmo dance and clown around with a rag doll.

Even more fascinating is Kelly’s tendency to discard women altogether in favor of either asexual partners like children (or characters, real or imagined, with childlike traits) or, more surprisingly, other men.38 Anchors Aweigh (1945) is an early example of this aspect of Kelly’s evolving aesthetic. This

34. Millar interview.
35. Hirschhorn, 225.
36. Quoted in Hirschhorn, 225.
37. Millar interview.
38. Wollen notes in passing that “unlike Astaire, Kelly never danced with a regular female partner and generally seemed to prefer male partners” (Wollen, 14).
film was a crucial first step in the articulation of his personal style, for it is one of the first films in which Kelly played an important role in the film’s creative genesis: as in *Singin’ in the Rain* seven years later, Kelly was here teamed with Stanley Donen to choreograph the film’s dance sequences.\(^{39}\) Interestingly, even at this early stage of his development, we can observe many of the “partnered” dance strategies outlined above. In this film, for example, Kelly never has a show-stopping dance number with the film’s female lead, Kathryn Grayson.\(^{40}\) And—like Kathy Selden in *Singin’ in the Rain*—her performances tend to be rigorously contained within the film’s diegesis. In her solo number “Jalousie,” for example, Grayson is continually framed and often physically contained by the diegetic orchestra accompanying her performance. (See Figure 16.)


40. Though they do sway together in a crowded nightclub scene shot from the waist up, the focus here is clearly not dance but dialogue.
In this film, then, rather than performing partnered dances that tie into the film musical’s generic preoccupation “with producing the ideal heterosexual couple,” Kelly performs an acrobatic, swashbuckling dance to impress Grayson’s character with his masculine prowess; he performs the “Mexican Hat Dance” with a little girl; he performs a frolicking dance on and around the barracks cots with Frank Sinatra; he dances with Jerry the cartoon mouse of “Tom and Jerry” fame.

In short, one of Kelly’s major achievements in the film musical was to shift the emphasis of dance away from the intimate world of heterosexual coupling and the often traditional supportive role of the male partner, whose function to display the female object all too easily threatened to feminize him, and towards the homosocial world of work, “buddies” and male bonding, and masculine agency. Kelly is thus able to reverse the object of display from woman to man even while rigorously resisting his own objectification. During this process of reversal, however, women tend to become more objectified than ever: because they pose a threat to Kelly’s developing “masculine” aesthetic, they must be specifically displaced, reordered, or objectified.

In *Singin’ in the Rain*, for example, the one solo pairing of Reynolds and Kelly, the “You Were Meant for Me” number, is brief, embedded within his own solo song of love, and one of the most mundane and forgettable dances in the film. On the other hand, the most memorable and extended male/female dance pairing in the film, which occurs in the “Broadway Melody Ballet,” is an exercise in female objectification, even as Kelly remains the central dance figure. Here Kelly dances not with Debbie Reynolds but with Cyd Charisse, who exists solely as a tool to advance the fantasy number’s basic narrative of Kelly’s self-realization through dance. In the ballet Cyd Charisse represents a desirable woman, an overtly sexualized fantasy figure whose anonymity within the ballet (and, of course, the film) ensures her complete objectification. (See Figure 17.)

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41. Cohan, 46.

42. Other dances with children or characters with childlike qualities include: “Fido and Me” from *Living in a Big Way* (1947) in which Kelly dances with a little dog; in another number from the same film Kelly dances with children to the accompaniment of several children’s tunes; in *An American in Paris* (1951) Kelly performs Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” with a group of French children.

Other dances with men include “Be a Clown” from *The Pirate* (1948) where Kelly performs with the incomparable Nicholas Brothers; in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (1949) Kelly is once again paired with Sinatra (“Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” “Yes Indeed”) with Jules Munshin now thrown into the mix (“O’Brien to Ryan to Goldberg”); this trio of performers (Kelly, Sinatra, Munshin) appeared together the next year in *On the Town* (1950) and performed “New York, New York” together; in *An American in Paris* men in various combinations perform together: Kelly and Guetary (“S’Wordful”); Guetary and Levant (“Nice Work If You Can Get It”); Kelly, Guetary and Levant (“By Strass”); Kelly actually sings and dances with his brother Fred in MGM’s *Deep in My Heart* (“I Love to Go Swimmin’ with Wimmen”); in *It’s Always Fair Weather* Kelly, Michael Kidd and Dan Dailey play wartime buddies and together dance with garbage can lids on their feet.

43. The much-discussed scarf dance within the ballet is celebrated less for the pairing of Charisse and Kelly than for Kelly’s brilliant ingenuity in its choreography and technical realization to the extent that the prop seems to replace—even overwhelm—the woman.
GENE KELLY was, of course, never in complete control of any of his films: filmmaking has always been one of the most collaborative arts, and in the 1940s, when Kelly began his career, the studio system of production was still firmly in place. Kelly only began to emerge as a powerful creative force with a certain degree of control over his films in the late 1940s. In most of his important musical films before 1951 Kelly usually had little choice in the matter of his female costars and was, in fact, paired with women who were to a great extent his equals as performers: Rita Hayworth in Cover Girl (1944), Vera-Ellen in On the Town (1949), and especially Judy Garland in For Me and My Gal (1942), The Pirate (1948), and Summer Stock (1950). In these films it is more difficult to find the kind of objectification of women that marks the later Kelly vehicles, mainly because in these cases he is teamed with women who are stars and exceptional performers in their own right and who demand their own “star turn” in performance. To the extent that we appreciate these films today, however, it is often because of Kelly’s solo performances in which he begins to project his oft-noted, distinctly “masculine” aesthetic. Those images which linger in the mind tend to be of Kelly’s choreography and dancing: in The Pirate such numbers as “Nina” (characterized by Hirschhorn as a number in which Kelly’s character “courts every girl in San Sebastian in that overtly masculine manner which is his stylistic trademark”) and the “Pirate” ballet; in Summer Stock the “Squeaky Floorboard” dance; in Cover Girl the “Alter Ego” dance—perhaps the ultimate specimen of narcissism as male subjectivity.

Though individual scenes from these films may be important to his reputation and as a proving ground for his talent, Kelly’s fame finally rests on the brilliance of his contribution to the two films released back to back in 1951 and 1952: An American in Paris and Singin’ in the Rain. These two films mark the high point of Kelly’s career both in terms of the degree of creative control he was able to exercise, and because of the remarkably high quality of his contribution to each film as an artistic whole. Consistently, Kelly’s achievements are assessed and acclaimed in relation to these two films. And yet, as we have seen within the context of Singin’ in the Rain, at least, Kelly’s powerful performances are hyperbolized by a musical discourse that displaces women. It seems more than coincidental that the most remarkable achievements of Kelly’s career were attained in the two films in which Kelly was paired with 19-year-old female newcomers, who had neither the experience to compete with Gene Kelly’s performances nor the star power to demand their own moments in the spotlight. Indeed, it seems that it was the lack of established female performers in An American in Paris and Singin’ in the Rain that finally opened up the space in which Kelly was able (consciously or unconsciously, either because of circumstance or by choice) to enact his performance aesthetic of extreme male subjectivity. In both of these films the plot involves separating Kelly from women in positions of power over him in order to link him with younger, more subordinate female performers. In Singin’ in the Rain Donald Lockwood must escape his partnership with Lina Lamont in order to survive professionally. Once again, cinematic fiction and real life overlap, for (as dramatized within the narratives of both films) it is only when Kelly leaves behind actual, established female “stars” that he is able fully to realize his own performance aesthetic. It is difficult not to see this subordination of women performers as something of a precondition for the realization of Kelly’s greatest achievements.

Singin’ in the Rain stands at a crossroads for both Gene Kelly and the great MGM musicals. After 1952 Kelly would never again reach the creative heights he consistently attained in this film. Interestingly, 1952 also marks the beginning of the end of the great film musicals at MGM, partly attributed to the departure of L.B. Mayer as head of the studio and the accession of Dore Schary just a few months before the release of the film. My analysis 

45. According to Hirschhorn (Gene Kelly: A Biography), Leslie Caron was in some ways even more problematic than Debbie Reynolds as a performer. “Fortunately Debbie was as strong as an ox,” Gene said, “and unlike Leslie Caron could work for hours” (185). “Almost at once there were problems with Leslie Caron, who simply did not possess the physical stamina to rehearse the long hours Gene demanded” (170). “[Caron] was never a particularly strong girl” (171). The result of Caron’s inexperience was a much-reduced role in the film: as Altman points out, “A scene-for-scene analysis of An American in Paris reveals that Kelly receives more than double the screen time of Caron, a virtual unknown in 1951” (Altman, 31). But Leslie Caron was chosen over actress Odile Versois because Versois was “too sophisticated” and lacked Caren’s “naivete.” Hirschhorn, Gene Kelly: A Biography, 170.

46. According to Jane Feuer, “The classic period of the Freed Unit MGM musical may have extinguished its flame in the mid-1950s but musical entertainment endured and Hollywood musicals continued to be made. What seemed to die out in the mid-1950s was the energy at the heart of the great MGM musicals, an energy based on faith in the power of singing and dancing connected with an almost religious belief in Hollywood itself as the great inheritor of the spirit of musical entertainment” (Feuer, 87).
tempts me to equate this turning point with the attainment of Kelly’s male-centered performance ideal and to speculate that his negation of the feminizing potential of musical performance, in a sense, finished the cultural “work” of Kelly’s art (and perhaps the genre he helped redefine). This idea is reinforced by Kelly’s two big numbers in the film: the “Broadway Melody Ballet” and “Singin’ in the Rain” itself—the most famous number of the film, perhaps of Kelly’s career, and so far conspicuously absent from this paper. Both numbers require the absence of women. In the “Broadway Melody Ballet,” woman appears only to be discarded in favor of man’s love of performance: ultimately, woman is not necessary to male expression and is finally replaced by dance itself. But it is in Kelly’s performance of “Singin’ in the Rain” that we experience the full effect of this “liberation” from women. In this number Kelly brings together all the tools at his disposal—the spectacle of music and dance together with the discursive powers and technical possibilities of film—to mold an expression of male subjectivity into a musical experience that has rarely, if ever, been matched. It is all too easy to want to experience the “glorious feeling” in this moment simply as the expression of a universal, even transcendent, musical subject. For all its seeming autonomy, however, seen within the context of the film, “Singin’ in the Rain” only seems achievable as part of a hierarchy of gender that denies female subjectivity. Once again, the culture of patriarchy holds up that position reserved for men alone as expressing the universal. Kelly’s performance of this scene in particular has come to have an iconic status within American popular culture, yet its role within a film pretending to celebrate heterosexual gender equality even as it denies its performative musical expression invites us to question the very nature of the experience Singin’ in the Rain continues to offer audiences today.