Filmic (In)Fidelity: Vincente Minnelli's Cinematic Adaptation of Madame Bovary

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**Recommended Citation**

FILMIC (IN)FIDELITY: VINCENTE MINNELLI'S CINEMATIC ADAPTATION OF 
MADAME BOVARY
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"It is fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to 
pronounce Wright's Johnson Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikovsky's 
Swan Lake. In the last analysis, each is autonomous, and each is characterized by 
unique and specific properties." (George Bluestone, Novels into Film)

The American movie-making machine (aka. Hollywood) has often been criticized for its 
infidelity to those works of literature which it chooses to create in the film genre. 
Criticisms of this kind are often applied to filmic versions such as Vincente Minnelli's 
Madame Bovary. However, given the Hollywood Production Code of the 1940's, which 
restricted cinematography in numerous ways, is this reputation for infidelity really 
deserved by a director like Minnelli? After all, Gustave Flaubert himself received 
extreme criticism over the publishing of his novel because of its unspeakable topics: sex, 
adultery, lies, suicide. When Minnelli directed this film, these topics were still very 
much taboo.

This panel, in discussing Minnelli's uses of lighting, roles scenery, costumes and mise-
en-scene, will show the ways in which Minnelli attempted to maintain a faithful 
relationship between his finished product and Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary, all the 
while adhering to the strict guidelines imposed by the Hollywood Production Code of the 
time. In particular, we will examine Minnelli's treatment of Madame Bovary's main 
struggle with illusion and reality.