

Henry James's 1877 novel *The American* is a melancholy rhapsody of Paris; the city serves not only as the locale but also as the eyes and ears of the events that unfold.

Yet, curiously, a forthcoming TV adaptation of the novel does not include a single Parisian scene or landmark – not even the obligatory fake backdrop of the Arc de Triomphe. I can think of no other film about an American in Paris that makes such a pointed omission of the city. (PBS, Wednesday January 3, at 9pm ET.)

Whether the reasons for this breach of tradition are budgetary or otherwise (the film was shot in Dublin), the film brilliantly convinces us that the absence of Paris is necessary, as it gives the story a whole new profound dimension very much in the Jamesian tradition.

The invisibility of Paris mirrors the intentions of the protagonist, self-made US millionaire Christopher Newman (played by Matthew Modine). He is no Gene Kelly traipsing gaily along the Seine (as in *An American in Paris*), he is no Hemingway surviving on a diet of sidewalk pigeons, trying to soak in inspiration. Not that those two types aren't sometimes annoying as well.

Newman has come to Paris not to admire it, but to get it under his belt as painlessly as possible, buying up paintings and storing them in his cellar. He is the appalling expatriate who thinks that since he is wealthy, he can become French faster.

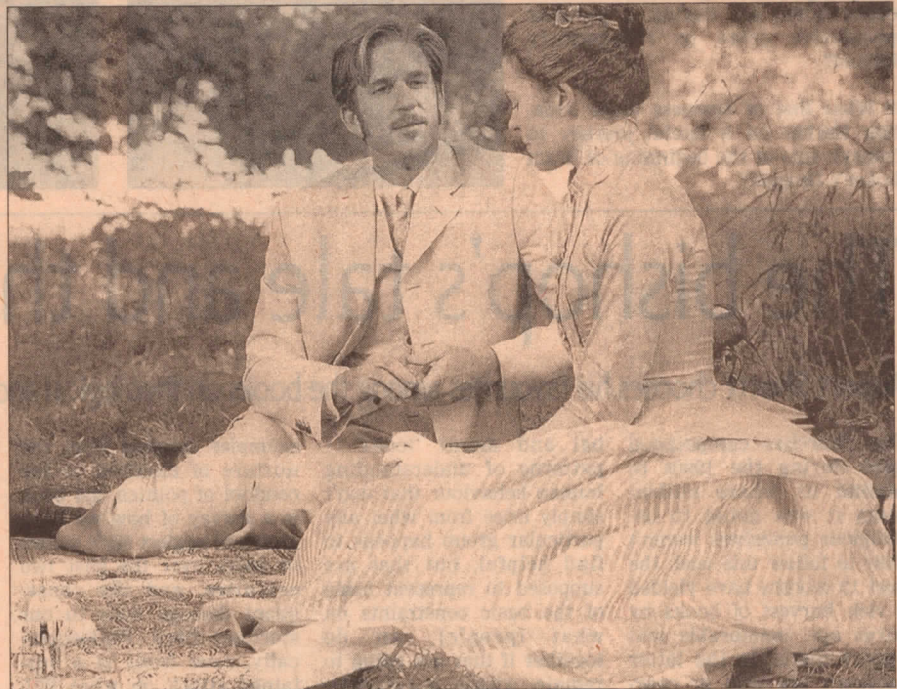
In a scene from the book not included in the film, we learn that upon first arriving in France, the only local word Newman knows is: "*Combien?*".

A conspicuous consumer, in the pure sense, cannot be satisfied merely by acquiring a thing. The thing must be literally consumed – gobbled up, leaving none for anyone else. That is why it is so appropriate that we don't see Paris in the film: Newman feels he has already bought it, wrapped it, and tucked it away.

His most important potential acquisition is Claire de Cintré (played by Aisling O'Sullivan), a young widow from an aristocratic family who represents all the Old World weariness, culture, and mystery he can hope to snag. The film obscures her face in a heavy

## TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

# Parisian tale of an American in Dublin



Matthew Modine as Christopher Newman and Aisling O'Sullivan as Claire de Cintré in 'The American'

mourning veil much of the time, signifying both her opacity and Newman's obtuseness. It is one of many examples of how the director, Paul Unwin, uses simple visual cues to represent psychological states.

This is no ordinary inter-class struggle. Claire's family, the de Bellegardes, is about as isolated as they come: they are Bourbon loyalists who "don't recognise the Bonapartes", or even most of French aristocracy, which limits their breeding pool to 100-odd families.

Dame Diana Rigg is outstanding as the hard-hearted matriarch, Madame de Bellegarde. Her facial expression literalises all the metaphors associated with the aristocracy: her upper lip is stretched stiff and taut, her eyebrows are raised, her eyelids are drooped so that she is literally looking down at everyone.

Henry James, himself famously ambivalent about his US identity, paints Newman as the most odious type of American abroad. Newman's transgressions

are not simply gauche and innocuously touristy, such as wearing shorts in a church or asking for ice in his drink.

Anachronism aside, such examples would be too obvious for James. Rather, Newman's behaviour gets uncomfortably close to the heart of the cultural clash. He has that sense of infinite opportunity that does not really apply outside a wild new frontier. In one scene, he consoles a Frenchman who has been disgraced from society: "You can surely earn a second fortune, as I did."

Newman condemns arranged marriages, making a stupid, naive asseveration: "I don't believe that in America girls are ever subjected to compulsion [in marriage]. I don't think there have been a dozen cases of it since the country began."

The film, on the other hand, has portrayed the American far more sympathetically than has James. This is a joint British and US production and, as is occasionally necessary, the two cultures have found themselves in

the odd position of allying culturally against the French.

This production's Newman is not so sharply American per se; rather, he seems to be in that broad category that the French somewhat disparagingly call "anglo-saxon" – in other words, anything that is decidedly un-French, the primary culprits being equally from Britain and the US.

In Newman's case, this includes such traits as his insistence on fair play, his belief that grievances should be addressed through the court system, and his emphasis on reason over tradition.

For better or worse, these differences are collapsing little by little. The latter-day French press complains that this so-called globalisation is really occurring mostly in one direction – the anglo-saxon way.

I wonder how James would feel if he were alive to discover that the Christopher Newmans of the world had, in a sense, won. I think he would probably retire in isolation, to a beach cottage in Brittany.