

# Pursuits of Happiness

---

THE HOLLYWOOD COMEDY OF REMARRIAGE

**Stanley Cavell**

---

Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

Copyright © 1981 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College  
All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

SIXTH PRINTING, 1984

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Cavell, Stanley, 1926-  
Pursuits of happiness.

Includes index.

1. Comedy films—History and criticism. 2. Marriage

in moving-pictures. I. Title.

PN1995.9C55C38 791.43'09'09354

81-6319

AACR2

ISBN 0-674-73906-X (paper)

*To Benjamin William Cavell*

---

## INTRODUCTION

### WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

**E**ACH of the seven chapters that follow contains an account of my experience of a film made in Hollywood between 1934 and 1949, an account guided by two claims. The first claim is that these seven films constitute a particular genre of Hollywood talkie, a genre I will call the comedy of remarriage. I am for myself satisfied that this group of films is the principal group of Hollywood comedies after the advent of sound and therewith one definitive achievement in the history of the art of film. But I will not attempt to argue directly for that here, any more than I will attempt explicitly to convince anyone that film is an art. The second guiding claim of these accounts is that the genre of remarriage is an inheritor of the preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy, especially as that work has been studied by, first among others, Northrop Frye. In his early "The Argument of Comedy," Frye follows a long tradition of critics in distinguishing between Old and New Comedy: while both, being forms of romantic comedy, show a young pair overcoming individual and social obstacles to their happiness, figured as a concluding marriage that achieves individual and social reconciliations, New Comedy stresses the young man's efforts to overcome obstacles posed by an older man (a senex figure) to his winning the young woman of his choice, whereas Old Comedy puts particular stress on the heroine, who may hold the key to the successful conclusion of the plot, who may be disguised as a boy, and who may undergo something like death and restoration. What I am calling the comedy of remarriage is, because of its emphasis on the heroine, more intimately related to Old Comedy than to New, but it is significantly different from either, indeed it seems to transgress an important feature of both, in casting as its heroine a married woman, and the



## INTRODUCTION

drive of its plot is not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*. Hence the fact of marriage in it is sub-jected to the fact or the threat of divorce. A significant question for us is therefore bound to be: How is it that this transformation is called for when classical comedy moves to film?

I habitually call these accounts of films "readings" of them. What I mean by reading a film as well as what I conceive a genre of film to be (matters internal to what I think film is) will receive specification in the course of the discussions themselves. Films other than the ones I give readings of belong to the genre of remarriage comedy; six or seven of them are cited along the way. But I take the seven featured here to be definitive of the genre, the best of the genre, worthy successors of the great comedies of the Hollywood silent era. Worthier than the Marx brothers or W. C. Fields? I might answer this by distinguishing the comedy of clowns from the romantic comedy of manners. Or I might rather answer by saying that while the characters of the comedy of remarriage are not worthier or funnier or deeper than the characters projected by the Marx brothers and by Fields, and the individual actors not specifically as gifted for comedy, the films as films of the comedy of remarriage are worthier successors of the great films as films of Chaplin and Keaton. Such claims are at best staked out in the pages that follow; a test of them awaits their fate under the pressure of whatever counter-claims may be advanced against them.

All but one of the seven films centrally in question for me appear within the seven years from 1934 to 1941; hence they, and other films to be distinguished from them, are often referred to as Hollywood thirties comedies. Why they emerge and disappear over the years in question are matters our discussions ought to provide terms for understanding. The explanation I have heard for this historical phenomenon—and it seems to have become something of a piece of folk wisdom—is that thirties comedies were fairy tales for the Depression. This can hardly be denied if what it means is that in a time of economic depression no-mances were made in Hollywood that took settings of immense luxury and that depicted people whose actions often concerned the disposition of fantastic sums of money. If luxurious settings and fantastic sums of money were confined to the Hollywood films of this period, and if Hollywood films of luxury and expenditure were confined to works that fit the genre of remarriage, then I would be more drawn to an economic

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

interpretation of the films I have interested myself in, or to an explanation of the emergence of the genre by economic causation. Since the facts are otherwise it matters to me that that explanation does not specifically account for the form in question.

There are comedies of the period which might better fit the description "fairy tales for the Depression," ones like *If I Had a Million* (1933), which consists of a set of episodes about what happens to various people when at random they are handed the title sum of money. But this seems less a reflection of particular economic realities or fantasies than of the ancient theme of fairy tales concerning the unforeseeable consequences of having wishes granted, call this the fantasy of escaping the realm of economy altogether.

Or take the more famous *You Can't Take It with You* (Frank Capra, 1938). An honest but poor young girl (Jean Arthur) and the son (James Stewart) of a rich father (Edward Arnold) are in love and want to marry; unknown to them the girl's beloved grandfather (Lionel Barrymore) is all that stands in the way of the boy's father's scheme to buy up the houses of all the girl's friends and neighbors and throw them out to make way for a munitions factory that is the key to the biggest deal in contemporary business. The grandfather will not sell his house and without it the factory somehow will not fit into the remainder of the twelve square blocks the financier has bought up. Grandpa won't sell for various reasons. One is that he knows he and his house are all that can prevent his entire neighborhood from destruction. Another reason is that his granddaughter's father and two friends of his spend all their time in the basement of the house inventing and making things; importantly, making munitions, I mean fireworks, just for the fun of it, for which the local police take them to be Communists. A third reason is that he had been happily married in this house, and while his wife died before his granddaughter was born, nevertheless the wife's presence, even her sweet odor, remains in the house, concentrated as it happens in the room that his granddaughter occupies.

The reasons not to sell go dead when the girl disappears, unable to tolerate the differences between her and the boy's families. Grandpa almost instantly sells the house to the boy's mean father and plans to move to make a new home for the granddaughter, away from what makes her unhappy. The image of this house of romance, of whim and acceptance fulfilled every day, as Emerson promised us, near the end



## INTRODUCTION

stripped of its life and ready for removal, is meant I guess to strike us with the force of the end of *The Cherry Orchard*. But where is the inevitability? Grandpa can take it with him, I mean take the money from the sale and buy a new house; but why *must* he? What is supposed to make it credible that this putatively good old man, urging everybody to do what he or she likes, to have the courage of his or her happiness, an Emersonian sage, is willing on an instant's notice to leave his entire neighborhood to destruction because he has to follow his grown granddaughter who is having trouble with her boyfriend? Is this an expression of the courage for happiness? Or is it proof that blood is thicker than water? Some Emersonian sentiment. Or are we to realize that Grandpa, exactly because he is the only neighbor who privately owns his own place, is the one whose solidarity with his neighbors is mostly talk, and that in the end he is closer to the mean big people than he is to the good little people? Surely Capra, whatever his problems with endings, could have avoided so naked a revelation and conflict of values if he had wanted to. For example, he could have saved the house (for the neighbors) the way he saved the house and family some years later in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), by taking up a collection from the little people; or the young man could secretly have raised the money, and when the girl finds this out she returns and . . .

Evidently we need a more credible explanation of Grandpa's motivation. He follows the girl not because she cannot recover without him but because he cannot live without her. (He may not have been prepared to sell the house to the young man.) She is the sweetness of his life. When sweetness and social solidarity conflict there may be tragedy, and in this world they will conflict. Besides, Grandpa is not proven wrong in the event. News of his plans brings the girl back in order to stop him; and his actions help make the boy's father relent, which means help him find the courage to do as he likes, which is not to make munitions (that only upsets his stomach) but to play the harmonica. Without offering this as a general solution to the problem of arms limitation, I hope it may allow us to see the value of this film not as a study in neighborhood organizing but as a vision of community, Utopian no doubt. The meaning of the vision is not so much that organization requires hope, which requires vision, as it is that happiness is not to be won just by opposing those in power but only, beyond that, by educating them, or their successors. Put otherwise, the achievement of human

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs.

Even if one whole-heartedly agreed with such a thought (as voiced, say, in Plato and in Rousseau and in Thoreau and in Freud) no one would say that it is applicable in all human contexts. It applies only in contexts in which there is satisfaction enough, in which something like luxury and leisure, something beyond the bare necessities, is an issue. This is why our films must on the whole take settings of unmistakable wealth; the people in them have the leisure to talk about human happiness, hence the time to deprive themselves of it unnecessarily. Emerson, while we are at it, in his essay "History," has expressed the best way I know of initially understanding these settings: "It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings . . . We honor the rich because they have externally the freedom, power, and grace which we feel to be proper to man, proper to us. So all that is said of the wise man by Stoic or Oriental or modern essayist, describes his unattained but attainable self."

But when I spoke a moment ago of the depicting of the disposition of fantastic sums of money I did not mean that the sums had necessarily to be large but that large or small the amounts had to be significant. In *It Happened One Night* Clark Gable is not interested in a \$10,000 reward but he insists on being reimbursed in the amount of \$39.60, his figure fully itemized. The economic issues in these films, with all their ambivalence and irresolution, are invariably tropes for spiritual issues. (Which is not to deny that they can be interpreted the other way around too, the spiritual conflicts as tropes for the economic. These conflicts are bound up with the conflict over the direction of interpretation, the question, say, of what money, and how you get it, can make you do.) This is what we might expect of American romantic, or Utopian, works. The figure Gable claims is owed to him is of the same order as the figure, arrived at with similar itemization, Thoreau claimed to have spent in building his house, \$28.12½. The purpose of these men in both cases is to distinguish themselves, with poker faces, from those who do not know what things cost, what life costs, who do not know what counts. It is as essential for the settings of our films to be such that we can expect the characters in them to take the time, and take the pains, to converse intelligently and playfully about themselves and about one another as it is essential for the settings and characters of



## INTRODUCTION

classical tragedy to be such that we can expect high poetry from them. Our critical task is to discover why they use their time as they do, why they say the things they say. Without taking up the details of the films we should not expect to know what they are, to know what causes them.

I am assuming that the films may themselves be up to reflecting on what it is that causes them, hence that they may have some bearing, for instance, on our experience and understanding of the Depression. *If Happened One Night* is a film, I will come to say, about being hungry, or hungering, where hungering is a metaphor for imagining, in particular imagining a better, or satisfying, way to live. There are a number of foods in the film, forming a little system of symbolic significance. There is also a woman, in what I call a "Depression vignette," who faints from hunger. What is the relation of the symbolism to this vignette? Has Capra stuck in the vignette to buy off criticism of his treating of the problems of leisure in an age of desperation? Or as a confession that he has no solution to give us to the problem of hunger and so might be excused for providing some distraction from it, which he does have to give us? Or is he really to be understood as taking the occasion of the Depression to ask what it is we as a people are truly depressed by, what hunger it is from which we all are faint? And if he is to be understood so, isn't this worse, morally speaking, than making up fairy tales? Wouldn't it be aestheticizing human suffering, or transcendentalizing it—like saying "Man does not live by bread alone" to a man in a breadline?

But then this is a risk any serious art must run that opens itself to present suffering, a risk run by, say, the famously beautiful prose and photographs of James Agee and Walker Evans in their *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as well as a hundred years earlier by Emerson in speaking of those living in "silent melancholy" and by Thoreau in describing the mass of men as leading "lives of quiet desperation." Does one conceive that Emerson and Thoreau are writing for someone other than the ones they describe out of their perception of the nation's depression? Mostly there is no one else. Or does one conceive that the despair they perceive is essentially a spiritual one, the kind a transcendentalist can see, and therefore betokens not so serious a hunger? They knew the accusation of refusing to help those whom they saw in need, as if giving what they wrote were less practical than alms, and they answer the accusation

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

openly. Around the middle of *Walden* Thoreau shows himself offended by the impoverished, inefficient lives of a certain John Field and his family and berates them for not reckoning cost as he does. I do not know that this passage takes upon itself a greater hardness, though the hardness is given greater specificity, than Emerson's saying in "Self-Reliance," as he pictures himself going off to write, "Do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor?" That is, it is not I who make them and who keep them poor; and so far as I can better the situation of whoever is poor I can do it only by answering my genius when it calls. But to give that sort of answer one must have a healthy respect for the value of one's work, let us say for its powers of instruction and redemption.

Is it obvious that the makers of the films we will read through—Frank Capra, Leo McCarey, Howard Hawks, George Cukor, Preston Sturges—are in principle not entitled to such claims for their work? Would the principle be that film cannot provide such instruction, or that American films cannot, or that Hollywood comedies (at least those after the silent period) cannot? Why should one believe any of this? Of course these films *can* be appropriated by any or all of their fans as fairy tales rather than, let us say, as spiritual parables. But so can Scripture be similarly appropriated; so can Emerson and Thoreau; so can Marx and Nietzsche and Freud. But from what better writers can one learn, or have companionship in knowing, that to take an interest in an object is to take an interest in one's experience of the object, so that to examine and defend my interest in these films is to examine and defend my interest in my own experience, in the moments and passages of my life I have spent with them. This in turn means, for me, defending the process of criticism, so far as criticism is thought of, as I think of it, as a natural extension of conversation. (And I think of conversation as something within which that remark about conversation is naturally in place. This one too.) I will do some of this defending once it begins to emerge that these films are themselves investigations of (parts of a conversation about) ideas of conversation, and investigations of what it is to have an interest in your own experience.

There will be resistance to considering the films in the way I do beyond the appropriating of them as escapist material for a particular period. Before moving from the concept of the Depression I note that



Malcolm Cowley, sifting his attentive experience of the period and of its writing, picks out three features for emphasis that our films may be seen to share.\* The transcendentalist possibility I was noticing seems to be what Cowley calls the period's millennialism, as if under the depression an ecstasy were discernible; he also mentions the presence in a number of the period's good novels of the theme of death and rebirth, and he finds a chorus of witnesses to the dignity of man. As we progress these themes will be found to play curiously sensitive roles in our set of films. But to see this we will have to develop a certain skepticism about appearances. For example, it will be a virtue of our heroes to be willing to suffer a certain indignity, as if what stands in the way of change, psychologically speaking, is a false dignity; or, socially speaking, the dignity of one part of society is the cause of the opposite part's indignity, a sure sign of a disordered state of affairs.

I AM NOT INSENSIBLE, whatever defenses I may deploy, of an avenue of outrageousness in considering Hollywood films in the light, from time to time, of major works of thought. My sense of the offense this can give came to a climax in presenting a draft of my essay on *It Happened One Night* (Chapter 2) to a university symposium entitled "Intellect and Imagination: The Limits and Presuppositions of Intellectual Inquiry." This essay begins with the longest consecutive piece of philosophical exposition in the book, concerning the thought of Immanuel Kant, whose teaching has claim to be regarded as the most serious philosophical achievement of the modern age. And what follows this beginning is the discussion of a Frank Capra film, not even something cinematically high-minded, something sad and boring, something foreign or foreign-looking, or something silent. Evidently I meant my contribution to a discussion of limits and their transgressions to be an essay that itself embodies a little transgression in its indecorous juxtaposition of subjects. I introduced my discussion of that essay at the symposium by giving three reasons for my transgression, that is, for courting and expressing a certain outrage.

First, I wished to take the opportunity to acknowledge that philosophy, as I understand it, is indeed outrageous, inherently so. It seeks to

\* *And I Worked at the Writer's Trade* (New York: Viking Press, 1978).

disquiet the foundations of our lives and to offer us in recompense nothing better than itself—and this on the basis of no expert knowledge, of nothing closed to the ordinary human being, once, that is to say, that being lets himself or herself be informed by the process and the ambition of philosophy. Wittgenstein voices the accusation against his work that it "seems to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important." He replies, as translated, that what he is "destroying is nothing but houses of cards"—as if this destruction were less important, less devastating than some other, as if we had any other modes of dwelling.\*

Second, I wished to take the occasion of a symposium to raise a question of the limits of the convivial, anyway of the extent to which the experiences and the pleasures of the participants were sharable—a way of testing the limits or the density of what we may call our common cultural inheritance. This issue was focused for me by the request of several participants for a thumbnail sketch of Kant's views against which one unfamiliar with Kant might assess my claims about him in my opening pages. (And assess echoes in the closing?) Since my pages on Kant are already a thumbnail sketch, I assumed that what was being requested was a preceding sketch, maybe like a short encyclopedia entry. Whatever the value of such a genre, for my purposes it would have none. It would not, for example, put its recipient in a position to assess certain originalities in the way I sketched Kant's vision. A purpose of mine, in any case, was precisely to bring into question the issue of our common cultural inheritance. The request for a (another) thumbnail sketch is an expression of something my sketch, in its juxtaposition with a Hollywood film, itself registers, that Kant is not a part of the common cultural inheritance of American intellectuals. (Perhaps this just means that we are not Germans or Central Europeans.) But if one of the indisputably most important philosophical achievements of the modern era of Western civilization is not a piece of our inheritance, what is? The ensuing discussion of a Hollywood film might stand in the place of an answer, or as a certain emblem of an answer. It must be an ambiguous place. One ought not to say, for example, that we have films instead of books as our legacy. In the first place, we do have books; in

\* I respond a little differently to Wittgenstein's observation in my Foreword to *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).



## INTRODUCTION

the second, it is not clear that we do have films in common, or not clear what it is to "have" them; in the third, the idea of "instead of" is undefined. The fact is that you cannot acquire the Kant I know from me, certainly not here and now. Anyway, would this work be worthwhile just for the sake of having something intellectual in common? Whereas a companion fact is that you can acquire from me, or reacquire, a Hollywood film, here and now (if you've seen it recently), along with certain related matters. But would this be something worth having in common?

My juxtaposition of Kant and Capra is meant to suggest that you cannot know the answer to the question of worthwhileness in advance of your own experience, not the worthwhileness of Capra *and* not that of Kant. (Some might feel this means that nothing we stand to inherit is sacred, and further that this just means we are Americans.) I am not, in the case of the Capra, simply counting on our capacity for bringing our wild intelligence to bear on just about anything, say our capacities for exploring or improvisation. What we are to see is the intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making; and hence perhaps we will think about what improvisation is and about what importance is.

Perhaps we will not, too; which means that my transgressing conjunction of interests will be refused as a courting, and an expression, of the outrageous. This would tend to outrage me (because it would strike me as intellectually complacent and neglectful)—to acknowledge which is the third reason for my conjunction of film and philosophy.

To subject these enterprises and their conjunction to our experience of them—that is, to assess our relation to these enterprises—is a conceptual as much as an experiential undertaking; it is a commitment to being guided by our experience but not dictated to by it. I think of this as checking one's experience. I indicated a moment ago by my quotation from Wittgenstein that philosophy requires the sense of the title of all that is great and important to be given up to experience. If one may think of this as an overcoming of philosophical theory, I should like to stress that the way to overcome theory correctly, philosophically, is to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it. I would not object to calling this a piece of theoretical advice, as long as it is also called a piece of practical advice. Philosophers will naturally assume that it is one thing, and quite clear how, to let a philosophical

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

work teach you how to consider it, and another thing, and quite obscure how or why, to let a film teach you this. I believe these are not such different things.

A READING OF A FILM sets up a continuous appeal to the experience of the film, or rather to an active memory of the experience (or an active anticipation of acquiring the experience). It seems to me that even those who are willing to believe that the details of every motion and position of what the camera depicts, and of every motion and position of the camera that is doing the depicting, may be significant in determining what a film is about—to believe, that is, that the visual facts of a movie you care about may survive the same kind of attention you would give the verbal facts of a literary text you care about—even among these people it is hard to believe that the *words* spoken in the film should be taken with the same seriousness. It is true that the words of dialogue put on the page seem too poor to carry the significance I will attach to them. And in a sense this is right—they have to be taken from the page and put back, in memory, onto the screen. It is natural to neglect this obligation because words can be quoted on the page and moving images cannot be, so you can think that work has been done for you (by the words on the page) when the work for you to do has only been conveniently notated. Apart from a clear recall, or a vivid imagination, of these words as spoken by these actors in these environments, my attention to the words may well seem, indeed ought to seem, misplaced or overdone. (Something analogous is familiar in reading plays. Even Ibsen's words might seem too poor on the page to live up to their reputation. Let this indicate, without denying that film is a visual medium, that film is a medium of drama.) This is an epitome of the nature of conversation about film generally, that those who are experiencing again, and expressing, moments of a film are at any time apt to become incomprehensible (in some specific mode, perhaps enthusiastic to the point of folly) to those who are not experiencing them (again). I am regarding the necessity of this risk in conversing about film as revelatory of the conversation within film—at any rate, within the kind of film under attention here—that words that on one viewing pass, and are meant to pass, without notice, as unnoticeably trivial, on another resolute and declare their implication in a network of significance. These



## INTRODUCTION

film words thus declare their mimesis of ordinary words, words in daily conversation. A mastery of film writing and film making accordingly requires, for such films, a mastery of this mode of mimesis.\*

Checking one's experience is a rubric an American, or a spiritual American, might give to the empiricism practiced by Emerson and by Thoreau. I mean the rubric to capture the sense at the same time of consulting one's experience and of subjecting it to examination, and beyond these, of momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust. The philosophical catch would then be that the education cannot be achieved in advance of the trusting. Hence Emerson is logically forced to give his best to Whim. Yet the American inheritance of Kant (and wasn't this in advance of experience?) is essential to making up Transcendentalism, and hence it goes into what makes Emerson Emerson and what makes Thoreau Thoreau. Encouraged by them, one learns that without this trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, without thus taking an interest in it, one is without authority in one's own experience. (In a similar mood, in *The Claim of Reason*, I speak of being without a voice in one's own history.) I think of this authority as the right to take an interest in your own experience. I suppose the primary good of a teacher is to prompt his or her students to find their way to that authority; without it, rote is fate. The world, under minimum conditions of civilization, could not without our cooperation so thoroughly contrive to separate us from this authority. Think of it as learning neither to impose your experience on the world nor to have it imposed upon by the world. (These are sorts of distortions of reason Kant calls fanaticism and superstition.) It is learning freedom of consciousness, which you might see as becoming civilized. Unless spoken from such a position, why should assertions concerning the value of, for example, film be of any concern to us?

\* I claim in "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of *Endgame*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 128-30, that Beckett achieves a new way for theater of accomplishing this point of mimesis. A reliable transcript of the dialogue of *Il Happend One Night*, together with, instructively, a pervasively inaccurate set of descriptions and "stage directions," is in *Four-Star Scripts*, ed. Lorraine Noble (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1936). Another published script of a principal remarriage comedy is *Adam's Rib* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

It is fundamental to this view of experience not to accept any given experience as final but to subject the experience and its object to the test of one another. For this a concept such as that of, let me say, the good encounter must come into play. There are such things as inspired times of reading or listening as surely as there are such things as inspired times of writing or composition. Successive encounters of a work are not necessarily cumulative; a later one may overturn earlier ones or may be empty. A valuable critic tends to know of his or her experience which is which as surely as he knows about an object what is what. A work one cares about is not so much something one has read as something one is a reader of; connection with it goes on, as with any relation one cares about. (Thoreau's copy of Homer is open on his table at Walden. So far as philosophy is a matter of caring about texts, meditation is its work before argumentation, since the end of the caring cannot be expressed in a conclusion which you might take away from the text.) Yet everything in our film culture, and not only there, has until recently conspired to adopt as standard the experience taken on one viewing. My impression is that most people still see all films except certain private or cult obsessions just once, and reviewers review on one viewing, saying things that there will probably be no practical way to test. In each other art it is comparatively normal to expect to be able to go back to a work you care about, at least in reproduction. Revival houses, university programs of film studies, television's unending dependence on Hollywood past, and perhaps any minute now video discs and cassettes, are changing these expectations. If these changes in mere practicality reach the point of making the history of film as much a part of the present experience of film as the history of the other arts is part of their present, this will result in a greater alteration of our experience of film, I predict, than any development since the establishment of the motion picture.

I SHOULD CONFESS that my confession to having courted a certain outrageousness in juxtaposing philosophy and film is not yet full, for I harbor the conviction that facing them with one another is positively called for: it is internal to my interest in each of them. From the side of film I have indicated in previous writings ways in which, as I might put it, film exists in a state of philosophy: it is inherently self-reflexive, takes



## INTRODUCTION

itself as an inevitable part of its craving for speculation,\* one of its seminal genres—the one in question in the present book—demands the portrayal of philosophical conversation, hence undertakes to portray one of the causes of philosophical dispute. It may be felt that these properties apply, more or less, to all the major arts. In that case what I am showing is that philosophy is to be understood, however else, aesthetically.

From the side of philosophy I can suggest what I see as its affinity for film by citing another passage of Emerson's, this time from "The American Scholar":

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; . . .—and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle, there is no puzzle, but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.

Something Emerson means by the common, the familiar, and the low is something I have meant (claiming the inheritance of the common pre-occupation of J. L. Austin and of Wittgenstein), in my various defenses over the years of proceeding in philosophy from ordinary language, from words of everyday life. By "sitting at the feet" of the familiar and the low, this student of Eastern philosophy must mean that he takes the familiar and the low as his study, his guide, his guru; as much his point of arrival as of departure. In this he joins his thinking with the new poetry and art of his times, whose topics he characterizes as "the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life." I note that when he describes himself as

\* This is the theme of film's acknowledgment (or definition) of its medium, a preoccupation of *The World Viewed* and of "More of *The World Viewed*" as well as of the Foreword written for their joint reissue as *The World Viewed, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). The question of acknowledgment, of self-reflection, is not exhausted, as appears sometimes to be thought, by the tendency of films to be self-referential. The latter is at best a specialized (generally comic) mode of the former.

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

asking "not for the great, the remote, the romantic," he is apparently not considering that the emphasis on the low and the near is exactly the opposite face of the romantic, the continued search for a new intimacy in the self's relation to its world. His list of the matters whose "ultimate reason" he demands of students to know—"The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body"—is a list epitomizing what we may call the physiognomy of the ordinary, a form of what Kierkegaard calls the perception of the sublime in the everyday. It is a list, made three or four years before Daguerre would exhibit his copper plates in Paris, epitomizing the obsessions of photography. I once remarked that Baudelaire, in his praise of a painter of everyday life, had had a kind of premonition of film.\* Here I should like to add that without the mode of perception inspired in Emerson (and Thoreau) by the everyday, the near, the low, the familiar, one is bound to be blind to some of the best poetry of film, to a sublimity in it. Naturally I should like to say that this would at the same time ensure deafness to some of the best poetry of philosophy—not now its mythological flights nor its beauty or purity of argumentation, but now its power of exemplification, the world in a piece of wax.\*\* It is to the point that the genre of film in question in the present book will at the end become characterizable as a comedy of dullness.

In subjecting these films to the same burden of interpretation that I expect any text to carry that I value as highly, I am aware that there are those for whom such an enterprise must from the start appear misguided, those who are satisfied that they know what film is, that it is, for example, a commodity like any other, or a visual medium of popular entertainment (as compared with what?). But anti-intellectualism is no more or less attractive here than elsewhere. Neither, no doubt, is overintellectuality. If anti-intellectualism were the genuine corrective to overintellectuality then there would be no distinction between a sage and a punk. I am moved here to reiterate to the reader the sentiment I was expressing in speaking about the issue of a common cultural inher-

\* *The World Viewed*, p. 42.

\*\* Exemplification is a principal theme of *The Claim of Reason*. In "An Emerson Mood," included in an expanded edition of *The Senses of Walden* (forthcoming from North Point Press in Berkeley), I have spelled out a little further the idea of Emerson and Thoreau as underwriting the procedures and certain aspirations of Austin and Wittgenstein.



## INTRODUCTION

iance. This book is primarily devoted to the reading of seven films. If my citations of philosophical texts along the way hinder more than they help you, skip them. If they are as useful as I take them to be they will find a further chance with you.

THE THIRTIES were more than the Depression. They were phases of histories other than that of what is called the economies of nations. The opening years of the Depression were also the opening years of a new phase in the history of cinema, the years of the advent of sound. The year of the earliest member of our genre, 1934, is early enough for that film to have had a decisive say in determining the creation of Hollywood sound film. The genre it projected, on my interpretation, can be said to require the creation of a new woman, or the new creation of a woman, something I describe as a new creation of the human. If the genre is as definitive of sound comedy as I take it to be, and if the feature of the creation of the woman is as definitive of the genre as I take it to be, then this phase of the history of cinema is bound up with a phase in the history of the consciousness of women. You might even say that these phases of these histories are part of the creation of one another.

It may prove to be, at any rate, that this genre of film is in fact the main reason for positing the existence of such a phase in the consciousness, or unconsciousness, of women. This would be the case so long as the picture of the trajectory of the feminist movement looks the way it has been presented more than once in my hearing: that after the great figures and notable gains of the generations of women beginning with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and culminating, so it seemed, in the winning of the vote for women in 1920, feminist thought and feminist practice somehow scattered themselves or lost their specific identity. After a decade to assess the value of suffrage there came the Depression, then the War, then the postwar Eisenhower generation of silence, then the civil rights movement for blacks, and only then, toward the end of the sixties, did a new phase of feminist history begin. As if the feminist preoccupation could not, during the four decades from the thirties through most of the sixties, get itself on the agenda of an otherwise preoccupied nation. Take the very existence of the genre of the comedy of remarriage of course, on my interpretation of what its films are and what they are about—as proof that such a picture can-

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

not be right. Coming from me, this claim is meant to be less about feminist theory and practice, about which my knowledge has barely begun, than about film, about the fact that films of the magnitude I claim the films in question in this book to be are primary data for what I would like to call the inner agenda of a culture. (I find Alice S. Rossi's description, in one of her introductions to a section of selections in *The Feminist Papers*,\* closer to the view I am expressing: "The generation that followed the activist generation of suffragists may have been consolidating feminist ideas into the private stuff of their lives and seeking new outlets for the expression of the values that prompted their mothers' public behavior" [p. 616]. What I am saying differs in two ways from this sort of account. First, I am saying that there is no "may have been" about it, as if we needed better evidence. What I am looking for is the better interpretation of documents as blatant as, say, a constitutional amendment. Second, the idea of "the private stuff of their lives" is part of the intuition I wished to capture by speaking of an "inner agenda of a culture"; but beyond that I meant it to express the idea of something shared, call it a shared fantasy, apart from which the films under investigation here could not have reached their *public* position.)

The formulation "consciousness of women" is studiously ambiguous as between meaning the consciousness held with respect to women, whether by women or by men; and the consciousness held by women, with respect to themselves and everything else. By the consciousness of women as expressed in the genre of remarriage I mean something of both sides—I mean a development in the consciousness women hold of themselves as this is developed in its relation to the consciousness men hold of them. Whether in a given historical period and class and place this consciousness is fundamentally imposed upon women or whether the relation is one in which women are fundamentally equal partners in the development is something I assume it is the burden of history to show (the burden of its working and the burden of the students of its working). Our films may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgment (as I have put it) is a struggle for mu-

\* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974).



## INTRODUCTION

tual freedom, especially of the views each holds of the other. This gives the films of our genre a Utopian cast. They harbor a vision which they know cannot fully be domesticated, inhabited, in the world we know. They are romances. Showing us our fantasies, they express the inner agenda of a nation that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself.

What suits the women in them—Claudette Colbert, Irene Dunne, Katharine Hepburn, Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck—for their leading roles? All were born between 1904 and 1911, about the years you would expect, given two assumptions: that the leading women must be around thirty years old as the genre is forming itself, neither young nor old, experienced yet still hopeful; and that within four or five years of the establishment of the talkie's material basis, it found in the genre of remarriage one of its definitive forms, as though cinema could barely wait to enter into the kind of conversation required of the genre and made possible by sound. An immediate significance of the women's being born in the latter half of the first decade of the century is that their mothers would have been of the generation of 1880, the generation of, for example, Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, Margaret Sanger. A distinguished generation, one would think, and one is asked to think about it because in the fiction of our films the woman's mother is conspicuously and problematically absent. If these films are what I have called investigations of something like the creation of the woman in them, we are bound to ask what the absence of the maternal half of her creation betokens.

What is it about the conversation of just these films that makes it so perfectly satisfy the appetite of talking pictures? Granted the fact, the question can only be answered by consulting the films. Evidently their conversation is the verbal medium in which, for example, questions of human creation and the absence of mothers and the battle between men and women for recognition of one another, and whatever matters turn out to entail these, are given expression. So it is not sufficient that, say, the conversation be sexually charged. If it were sufficient then the genre would begin in 1931, with Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, a work patently depicting the divorce and remarrying of a rich and sophisticated pair who speak intelligently and who infuriate and appreciate one another more than anyone else. But their witty, sentimental, violent exchanges get nowhere; their makings up never add up to forgiving one

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

another (no place they arrive at is home to them); and they have come from nowhere (their constant reminiscences never add up to a past they can admit together). They are forever stuck in an orbit around the foci of desire and contempt. This is a fairly familiar perception of what marriage is. The conversation of what I call the genre of remarriage is, judging from the films I take to define it, of a sort that leads to acknowledgment; to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis of death and revival, the achievement of a new perspective on existence; a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce. One moral to draw from the structure of *Private Lives* is that no one feature of the genre is sufficient for membership in the genre, not even the title feature of remarriage itself. Another moral is that the fact that *Private Lives* seems closer than our comedies do to the spirit of Restoration comedy is a good reason not to look to Restoration comedy (as I have periodically, for obvious reasons, found myself tempted to do) as a central source of the comedy of remarriage.

I FIND A PRECEDENT for the structure of remarriage, as said, in Shakespearean romance, and centrally in *The Winter's Tale*. This was one of the earliest and, while encouraging, most puzzling discoveries I made as I became involved in thoughts about the set of films in question here. Two puzzles immediately presented themselves. First, since Shakespearean romantic comedy did not remain a viable form of comedy for the English stage, compared with a Jonsonian comedy of manners, what is it about film that makes its occurrence there viable? This goes into the question why it was only in 1934, and in America of all places, that the Shakespearean structure surfaced again, if not quite on the stage. I have in effect already outlined the answer I have to that question. Nineteen thirty-four—half a dozen years after the advent of sound—was about the earliest date by which the sound film could reasonably be expected to have found itself artistically. And it happens that at that same date there was a group of women of an age and a temperament to make possible the definitive realization of the genre that answered the Shakespearean description, a date at which a phase of human history, namely, a phase of feminism, and requirements of a genre inheriting a remarriage structure from Shakespeare, and the nature of film's trans-



## INTRODUCTION

formation of its human subjects, met together on the issue of the new creation of a woman. No doubt this meeting of interests is part of America's special involvement in film, from the talent drawn to Hollywood in making them to the participation of society as a whole in viewing them, and especially America's preeminence in film comedy.

The second puzzle about the Shakespearean precedent is why the film comedies of remarriage took as their Shakespearean equivalent, so to speak, the topic of divorce, which raises in a particular form the question of the legitimacy of marriage. Since I am saying that the comedy of remarriage does not look upon marriage as does either French farce or Restoration comedy, I had thought in vain about a comedic precedent for the remarriage form more specific than the Shakespearean. It finally dawned on me that the precedent need not be found in the history of comedy but in any genre to which the film comedies in question can be shown to have an exact conceptual relation. This thought permitted me to find an instance of what I was looking for in the most obvious place in the world I know of drama, in Ibsen, and particularly, it turns out, in *A Doll House*. (I learn to call it this, without the possessive, from a convincing explanation with which Rolf Fjelde prefaced his translation of the play.)\* This is the latest of the ideas I introduce in these pages, and to commemorate it, and for future reference, I inscribe this early moment of my book with excerpts from the last pages of that play.\*\*

NORA: Thank you for your forgiveness. (She goes out through the door, right.)

HELMER: No, don't go—What are you doing there?

NORA (offstage): Taking off my fancy dress.

HELMER: Yes, do that. Try to calm yourself and get your balance again, my frightened little songbird. Don't be afraid. I have broad wings to shield you. How lovely and peaceful this little home of ours is, Nora. . . . What's this? Not in bed? Have you changed?

NORA (in her everyday dress): Yes, Torvald. I've changed.

NORA (after a short silence): Doesn't anything strike you about the way we're sitting here?

\* Ibsen: *The Complete Major Prose Plays* (New York: New American Library, 1978).

\*\* Translated by Michael Meyer in *Ghosts and Three Other Plays* (New York: Anchor Books Original, 1966).

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

HELMER: What?

NORA: We've been married for eight years. Does it occur to you that this is the first time that we two, you and I, man and wife, have ever had a serious talk together?

HELMER: Serious? What do you mean, serious?

HELMER: Nora, how can you be so unreasonable and ungrateful? Haven't you been happy here?

NORA: No; never. I used to think I was; but I haven't ever been happy.

HELMER: Not—not happy?

NORA: No. I've just had fun. You've always been very kind to me. But our home has never been anything but a playroom. I've been your doll-wife, just as I used to be Papa's doll-child. And the children have been my dolls. . . .

HELMER: There may be a little truth in what you say, though you exaggerate and romanticize. But from now on it'll be different. Playtime is over. Now the time has come for education.

NORA: Whose education? Mine or the children's?

HELMER: Both yours and the children's, my dearest Nora.

NORA: Oh, Torvald, you're not the man to educate me into being the right wife for you.

HELMER: But to leave your home, your husband, your children! Have you thought what people will say? . . . But this is monstrous! Can you neglect your most sacred duties? . . . First and foremost you are a wife and mother.

NORA: I don't believe that any longer. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, like you—or anyway, that I must try to become one.

HELMER: Nora, I would gladly work for you night and day, and endure sorrow and hardship for your sake. But no man can be expected to sacrifice his honor, even for the person he loves.



## INTRODUCTION

NORA: Millions of women have done it.

HELMER: Oh, you think and talk like a stupid child.

NORA: That may be. But you neither think nor talk like the man I could share my life with.

...

NORA: I can't spend the night in a strange man's house.

HELMER: But can't we live here as brother and sister, then—?

NORA: You know quite well it wouldn't last.

...

HELMER: Nora—can I never be anything but a stranger to you?

NORA: Oh, Torvald! Then the miracle of miracles would have to happen.

HELMER: The miracle of miracles?

NORA: You and I would both have to change so much that—oh, Torvald, I don't believe in miracles any longer.

HELMER: But I want to believe in them. Tell me. We should have to change so much that—?

NORA: That life between us two could become a marriage. Goodbye.

The intimacy of the connection between these excerpts and the themes of the films of remarriage will not, I think, make itself felt unforgettably until one is well into the studies of the individual films; certainly, as I indicated, I did not see the intimacy until I was just about through composing them. *A Doll House* is a structure in which an apparently orderly life shatters into fragments which assemble with raging velocity an argument concerning the concepts of forgiveness, inhabitation, conversation, happiness, playtime, becoming human, fathers and husbands, brother and sister, education, scandal, fitness for teaching, honor, becoming strangers, the miracle of change, and the metaphysics of marriage. The argument of a comedy of remarriage requires, with others, each of these concepts. In *A Doll House* a woman climactically discovers that her eminently legal marriage is not comprehensible as a marriage, and therefore, before her own conscience, that she is dishonored. She demands an education and leaves to seek one that she says her husband is not the man to provide. They could find a life together (and so perhaps find or create marriage between them) only on

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

the condition that a miracle of change take place. I have described the genre of remarriage in effect as undertaking to show how the miracle of change may be brought about and hence life together between a pair seeking divorce become a marriage. *A Doll House* thus establishes a problematic to which the genre of remarriage constitutes a particular direction of response, for which it establishes the conditions or costs of a solution.

How is this possible? Are these films as good as Ibsen's plays? But if what I have said is true about the intimacy and the exactness of the films' responses to the problematic of *A Doll House* is it important to ask whether they are as good? What is the doubt about them?

In a speech Ibsen gave to the Norwegian League for Women's Rights in 1898, he began by disclaiming the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. This disclaimer seems to encode two further claims of his opening paragraph: that the movement for women's rights is a part of the task of human advancement, whether the leading part in a given historical moment it is perhaps less important to say; and the task of human advancement he does claim to have worked for—if I understand—by saying: "I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seen inclined to believe."<sup>37</sup> The chain of concepts I extracted from the closing pages of *A Doll House* is hardly one that an observer of society would hit upon either to describe Victorian marriage or to make a case against it. An advocate of such marriage would have had a defense against Nora's case against it or he would have refused, unlike Torvald Helmer, to grant that a case had been made against marriage, perhaps by repeating differences between men and women which nobody need deny, and surely by saying that Nora's language—about dolls and honor and ignorance—is exaggerated, romantic. Helmer in fact takes this line in his initial responses to Nora's onslaught but soon he gives way before it, trying to comprehend her. His weakness is then humanly to his credit, his only hope for a future with her. The power of the drama lies in feeling the forming of Nora's moral conscience, her acceptance of her unprotected identity (in such lines as, "I realized that for eight years I had been living here with a complete stranger, and had borne him three children! . . . I could tear myself to pieces!"), and recognizing the con-

<sup>37</sup> Evert Sprinchorn, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches* (London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1965), p.



## INTRODUCTION

cepts of her newly created and creating consciousness, accordingly, as unanswerable.

There is in these closing pages of the play an unfolding of actions amounting to what I should like to call continual poetic justice. The intellectual or spiritual succession of concepts, dismantling the doll house, have this quality as certainly as the more obviously Ibsenist gesture in which Nora refers to her changing her clothes as her being changed, or the final sound of the slamming door of the house, which counts not as the interruption of an argument but as its continuation by other means, and specifically its ending. Her action is not the preventing but the abandoning of words, and of the house of words. The actions and words of our films characteristically work with these poetic densities—the subverted embrace at the close of *Bringing Up Baby*; the darkening screen, empty of figures, at the close of *It Happened One Night*; the photographs that close *The Philadelphia Story*; sitting down together in *His Girl Friday*; a song and dance in *The Awful Truth* . . . The Ibsen, and these films, declare that our lives are poems, their actions and words the content of a dream, working on webs of significance we cannot or will not survey but merely spin further. In everyday life the poems often seem composed by demons who curse us, wish us ill; in art by an angel who wishes us well, and blesses us.

Claiming Ibsen as well as Shakespeare as part of the specific inheritance earned by these American films, I seem to be moving toward a claim that American film is an ampler inheritor of the history of drama than American theater has been. It would be no objection to this thought to point out that three of our films have their source in American plays (two most famously, *His Girl Friday* from Hecht and MacArthur's *The Front Page*, and *The Philadelphia Story* from Philip Barry's play of that name). This is certainly to be studied, as is the issue generally of the relation of theater to film. I have not tried to do so in these pages and I make that all right with myself with the following two thoughts. First, I am not writing the history of the genre in question but proposing its logic (a distinction I will come back to). Second, more important from my point of view than locating sources is to understand what a source is. My working hypothesis throughout the following discussions is that the sources of these films bear to them no more decisive or more uniform a relation than, say, the sources of Shakespeare's plays bear to his plays. Whatever an earlier play called something like *King Lear* contains, its translation into Shakespeare's medium is in-

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

herently unpredictable; and however interesting the comparison may be in certain cases, it cannot determine what is going on in the Shakespeare. A complementary relation is that between a work of Shakespeare and certain spectaculars or panoramas "based upon" that work. In that case you might call Shakespeare's text not a source but a sea, from which various items—treasures, corpses, shells, weeds, more or less at will—were lifted and heaped on the shore of big entertainment.

I assume that the relations of source and of sea are both to be found in film, perhaps in different proportions than in other stretches of the history of drama. My purpose at the moment is to emphasize that translation into the medium of film is inherently unpredictable. A film will make of a play what it will. (In the case of the translation of human beings and of material objects this is the theme of my essay "What Becomes of Things On Film?") It is the film *The Philadelphia Story* and its participation in the genre of remarriage that tells you what happens to Tracy Lord's brother on film, I mean why he is incorporated into the figure of her once and future husband; the stage play has nothing to say on the subject.

I am always saying that we must let the films themselves teach us how to look at them and how to think about them. The following is a quite didactic moment that concerns the nature of a "source." It occurs at the end of *His Girl Friday* as Cary Grant phones his paper to tell Duffy, the city editor, to tear out the front page because he and Hildy are coming in with the real story. As the plot of the film is, so to speak, taking its course alongside him, Grant goes into detail about what should be taken off the front page and what left in and put where. I understand this as a fairly strict allegory of Howard Hawks telling his "re-write" man what to do with *The Front Page* (the play and the earlier film made from the play). Among other things Grant tells Duffy to do is to stick Hitler in the funny pages and to "Leave the rooster story alone. That's human interest." In part the allegory is a daring self-justification of comedy, of why one must make room for it, that what is news is determined by what human beings are humanly interested in, and you cannot know this apart from consulting that experience. Maybe it is in a rooster; and maybe Hitler is not news but just a problem about which we know what must be done. Further, it will emerge early in the reading of *The Awful Truth* that *His Girl Friday* includes elaborate allusions



---

 INTRODUCTION
 

---

to it, as might be expected of a film that re-casts Cary Grant and Ralph Bellamy into so similar a position with respect to one another, and to a former wife; but only late in the reading of *The Awful Truth*, after the point about the allusions is past, do I mention that it has a good rooster story in it that in *His Girl Friday* Cary Grant, or rather Howard Hawks, is surely praising Leo McCarey for having put in. But the principal point of the allegory would be to declare that the relation between *His Girl Friday* and its "source" is one of mere practicality, that Hawks feels no more obligation or piety toward the earlier work than a managing editor would feel toward the set-up of a front page that must be re-set in the light of new and startling developments. You just have to start over again, though some of the news may well remain where it is. One may take this as an allegory confined in reference to Howard Hawks's practice in this film. To me it reads as a reasonable statement about sources generally; about one way in which a source is pressed into service. An eventual work may follow a source closely or not, in one place or another. Not every way of following amounts to an adaptation. The relation, and the purpose, will have to be made out, critically, in the individual case. I take Hawks's purpose in his allegory about sources to declare at once that his work is fresher than its reputed source and of greater human interest. (Why a given writer is drawn to particular sources is a further range of question.)

HAVING LOCATED certain causes for the genre's beginning when it does, I ought perhaps to have some speculation about why it ends when it does. It would be an answer to say that it ends when the small set of women who made it possible are no longer of an age to play its leads. Yet one feels that if the genre has not exhausted its possibilities and if the culture needs them sufficiently, people will be found. And indeed it is not clear that the genre has yielded itself up completely. Three of the most successful American films, and most interesting, of the past couple of years have begun with divorce and attempted and speculated about remarriage—*Starting Over*, *An Unmarried Woman*, and *Kramer vs. Kramer*. I believe *An Unmarried Woman* is generally thought to be a better film than *Starting Over*, the comparison invited by the presence in both of Jill Clayburgh as the female lead. I think the reason for that opinion is a reluctance on the part of people of a certain cultivation to

---

 WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION
 

---

see how charming and perceptive a man Burt Reynolds can be, when not cast as a good old boy. The writing of *An Unmarried Woman* may be more literate than that of *Starting Over* but in the latter film the pair's saying of words to one another is shown to mean more; their conversations are meant to bring about believable change.

And then at the climactic conclusion of *Kramer vs. Kramer*, one of the most celebrated films of 1979, exactly 100 years after the opening of *A Doll House*, one for a moment, caught in the force of Meryl Streep's performance, might have the sense that one was seeing Nora return home. The film opens with her saying to her husband who is carrying on some business over the telephone that she is leaving him and their child, going out in search of an education, in search of herself. You don't know at the close of the film whether she will stay after she goes up to see her child, but the conditions are favorable: she comes back because she is ready to be with the child, and she understands that in her absence the child and its father are at home. That on this basis a further development in the genre of remarriage can take place, one that includes the presence of children, cannot be ruled out by this film. But it cannot be ruled in either, because the film constitutes no study of these matters; we have no feeling for their lives before she left, we know nothing specific about what she has learned about herself, and we have not, except for a moment of greeting, seen her with the child. We have seen enough of the father and child's life together to want it to continue, but we have seen nothing else that we want to see resume ("only a little different this time," as Cary Grant had said to Irene Dunne some forty years before).

To assess my claim that the Hollywood sound comedy of remarriage begins with *It Happened One Night*, in 1934, one will have to know more definitely what I mean by a genre and what I mean by its having a beginning. I have already said that my date may be off—an earlier film may present itself for consideration (even one from the silent era, if a critic can show that even the fact of sound should not be regarded as essential to the genre), or it might be argued that *It Happened One Night* is for some reason not a true member of the genre, so that it only begins later, say with *The Awful Truth*. But I have also said that I am not writing history. More urgent than the date is to know what any such date should be taken to mean. My thought is that a genre emerges full-blown, in a particular instance first (or set of them if they are simultane-



## INTRODUCTION

ous), and then works out its internal consequences in further instances. So that, as I would like to put it, it has no history, only a birth and a logic (or a biology). It has a, let us say, prehistory, a setting up of the conditions it requires for viability (for example, the technology and the achievement of sound movies, the existence of certain women of a certain age, a problematic of marriage established in certain segments of the history of theater); and it has a posthistory, the story of its fortunes in the rest of the world, but all this means is that later history must be told with this new creation as a generating element. But if the genre emerges full-blown, how can later members of the genre add anything to it?

This question is prompted by a picture of a genre as a form characterized by features, as an object by its properties; accordingly to emerge full-blown must mean to emerge possessing all its features. The answer to the question is that later members can "add" something to the genre because there is no such thing as "all its features." It will be natural in what follows, even irresistible, to speak of individual characteristics of a genre as "features" of it; but the picture of an object with its properties is a bad one. It seems to underlie certain "structuralist" writings.

An alternative idea, which I take to underlie the discussions of this book and which I hope will be found worth working out explicitly, picks up a suggestion I broached in "A Matter of Meaning It" in *Must We Mean What We Say?* and again in *The World Viewed*, that a narrative or dramatic genre might be thought of as a medium in the visual arts might be thought of, or a "form" in music. The idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance. There is, on this picture, nothing one is tempted to call the features of a genre which all its members have in common. First, nothing would count as a feature until an act of criticism defines it as such. (Otherwise it would always have been obvious that, for instance, the subject of remarriage was a feature, indeed a leading feature, of a genre.) Second, if a member of a genre were just an object with features then if it shared all its features with its companion members they would presumably be indistinguishable from one another. Third, a genre must be left open to new members, a new bearing of responsibility for its inheritance; hence, in

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

the light of the preceding point, it follows that the new member must bring with it some new feature or features. Fourth, membership in the genre requires that if an instance (apparently) lacks a given feature, it must compensate for it, for example, by showing a further feature "instead of" the one it lacks. Fifth, the test of this compensation is that the new feature introduced by the new member will, in turn, contribute to a description of the genre as a whole. But I think one may by now feel that these requirements, thought about in terms of "features," are beginning to contradict one another.

(Before articulating that feeling I pause for an aside to readers of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* who will sense a connection here, in the denial that what constitutes the members of a genre is their having features in common, with Wittgenstein's caution not to say of things called by the same name that they must have something in common [hence share some essence or so-called universal] but instead to consider that they bear to one another a family resemblance. But if I said of games, using Wittgenstein's famous example in this connection, that they form a genre of human activity, I would mean not merely that they look like one another or that one gets similar impressions from them; I would mean they are what they are in view of one another. I find that the idea of "family resemblance" does not capture this significance, if indeed it is really there.)\*

Take an example. I have mentioned that one feature of the genre of remarriage will be the narrative's removal of the pair to a place of perspective in which the complications of the plot will achieve what resolution they can. But *It Happened One Night* has no such settled place; instead what happens takes place "on the road." I say that what compensates for this lack is in effect the replacement of a past together by a commitment to adventurousness, say to a future together no matter what. But then it will be found that adventurousness in turn plays a role in each of the other films of remarriage. And one may come to think that a state of perspective does not require representation by a place but may also be understood as a matter of directedness, of being on the road, on the way. In that case what is "compensating" for what? Nothing is lacking, every member incorporates any "feature" you can

\* I am prompted to these parenthetical remarks by an exchange of letters with Paul Alpers.



## INTRODUCTION

name, in its way. It may be helpful to say that a new member gets its distinction by investigating a particular set of features in a way that makes them, or their relation, more explicit than in its companions. Then as these exercises in explicitness reflect upon one another, looping back and forth among the members, we may say that the genre is striving toward a state of absolute explicitness, of expressive saturation. At that point the genre would have nothing further to generate. This is perhaps what is sometimes called the exhaustion of conventions. There is no way to know that the state of saturation, completeness of expression, has been reached.

A NATURAL QUESTION ARISES as to how comedies of remarriage are related to films in which the fact of remarriage can be said to be dominant but the film is not a comedy. A good case is *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942), with Ronald Coleman and Greer Garson. This is complete with divorce; with spiritual death and revival; with the question of whether the man or the woman is the active member of the pair, with discussions of life as beginning with the meeting of the pair, the past having nothing in it but their past; with the return to a particular house in the country which holds the key to a saving perception—all matters that turn out to be part of the grain of remarriage comedies. But obviously this romance, despite its locating a certain happiness, is all wrong for our genre, somehow its opposite. It does not explain this fact to say that *Random Harvest* is not a comedy; it reasserts the fact. The question is how the films of remarriage add up such similar events to so dissimilar an effect. The difference cannot be expressed as a difference in the explicitness of features for which the relation of compensation can make up, since there is at least one feature absent from *Random Harvest*—the man never claims the woman, never declares his right to her desire—for which there is no compensation. It seems to me rather that this absence *negates* something necessary to the genre of remarriage.

The truth of these assertions aside for the moment (they cannot be assessed apart from the readings of the films to come), the idea of negation in contrast to that of compensation here suggests a way to express the intuition I have of how to think about films related to one another

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

not as members of the same genre but as members of adjacent genres. Let us think of the common inheritance of the members of a genre as a story, call it a myth. The members of a genre will be interpretations of it, or to use Thoreau's word for it, revisions of it, which will also make them interpretations of one another. The myth must be constructed, or reconstructed, from the members of the genre that inherits it, and since the genre is, as far as we know, unsaturated, the construction of the myth must remain provisional. Before seeing how a construction might go, I note that a minor member of a genre may hit upon a startling interpretation or revision of a passage of the myth. The central idea of *Remember?* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1939), with Robert Taylor and Greer Garson, is to interpret the passage about renewal as a story of starting again without knowledge, a condition it depicts as produced by an amnesia-producing drug. This in effect interprets the idea of a love potion—of whatever the thing is that makes love possible, or recognizable—as providing the gift of pastlessness, allowing one to begin again, free of obligation and of the memory of compromise. But let us see how the general construction of the myth might go.

A running quarrel is forcing apart a pair who recognize themselves as having known one another forever, that is from the beginning, not just in the past but in a period before there was a past, before history. This naturally presents itself as their having shared childhood together, suggesting that they are brother and sister. They have discovered their sexuality together and find themselves required to enter this realm at roughly the same time that they are required to enter the social realm, as if the sexual and the social are to legitimize one another. This is the beginning of history, of an unending quarrel. The joining of the sexual and the social is called marriage. Something evidently internal to the task of marriage causes trouble in paradise—as if marriage, which was to be a ratification, is itself in need of ratification. So marriage has its disappointment—call this its impotence to domesticate sexuality without discouraging it, or its stupidity in the face of the riddle of intimacy, which repels where it attracts, or in the face of the puzzle of ecstasy, which is violent while it is tender, as if the leopard should lie down with the lamb. And the disappointment seeks revenge, a revenge, as it were, for having made one discover one's incompleteness, one's transience, one's homelessness. Upon separation the woman tries a regressive tack,



## INTRODUCTION

usually that of accepting as a husband a simpler, or mere, father-substitute, even one who brings along his own mother. This is psychologically an effort to put her desire, awakened by the original man, back to sleep . . .

We would have to continue the story by telling the role of the pair's fathers and mothers and of the possibility of their having children. Let us not anticipate what the films themselves will have to say about these matters. And let us assume that the quarrel is going to have to take up questions about who is active and who is passive, and about who is awake, and about what happiness is and whether one can change. The quarrel, the conversation of love, takes lavish expenditures of time, exclusive, jealous time; and since time is money, it requires a way to understand where the (man's) money comes from to support so luxurious a leisure. The pair is attractive, their wishes are human, their happiness would make us happy. So it seems that a criterion is being proposed for the success or happiness of a society, namely that it is happy to the extent that it provides conditions that permit conversations of this character, or a moral equivalent of them, between its citizens. Then the ending clarifies these themes by deepening the mystery of the pair's connection. It is the man's turn to make the move—the woman had presumably started things with something called an apple, anyway by presenting a temptation. The man must counter by showing that he has survived his yielding and by finding a way to enter a claim. To make a correct claim, to pass the test of his legitimacy, he must show that he is not attempting to command but that he is able to wish, and consequently to make a fool of himself. This enables the woman to awaken to her desire again, giving herself rather than the apple, and enables the man to recognize and accept this gift. This changing is the forging or forgetting of that past state and its impasse of vengefulness, a forging symbolized by the initial loss of virginity.

In the construction of the myth, the picture of the properties of an object is replaced by an idea of the clauses or provisions of a story. Then to say that, to recur to my former instances, adventurousness compensates for the provision concerning a location of perspective is to say that the concept of adventurousness is an interpretation of the same story, allows it to go on being told, being developed; the genre remains the same, it is further defined. Whereas to say that the man's inability

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

to claim the woman negates that provision is to say that it changes the story; the genre is different, an adjacent genre is defined. Which of these is true of a given film and its interpretations cannot be decided at a glance. The consequences have to be followed out. In *Random Harvest*, the absence of the claim goes with events that require not merely the absence but the denial of the possibility of children for the marriage, and it means (consequently?) the withholding of sexual gratification during a dozen or so years of what is called the prime of life—anyway until after the age of child-bearing. (Quite as if we have here a participant in a genre whose myth presents a punishment for living the myth of remarriage, or for failing it.) Both compensation and negation, as procedures of what Thoreau calls "revising Mythology," are terms in which he might have described his life of writing as such. Another way to characterize what I called earlier the exhaustion of convention or the saturation of expressiveness is to say that when a myth can no longer support revision—the being looked over again—then the myth has died, we have died to it. (If the notion of dialectic meant much to us we might note the dialectical leanings of words like compensation and negation. A clause is neither just satisfied nor just unsatisfied but is satisfied or unsatisfied in some way, in some aspect, say literally or abstractly or ironically or individually . . . This [partial] satisfaction then changes the issue, which then must press on for further satisfaction, if the issue is still living.)

The concept of adjacent genres is something for future work. The principal other explicit call upon it in the book occurs late in Chapter 6, on *Adam's Rib*, at the end of an excursus on some related films of George Cukor. An implied contrast is thus set up between the concept of a genre and the concept of an oeuvre; the ground of the contrast seems to be that the latter, unlike the former, is meant to account for an historical order among its members. This contrast between genre and oeuvre prompts me to mention an essay I have just completed on Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*\* which locates this film at the same time within the development of Hitchcock's oeuvre and adjacent to the structure of the genre of remarriage. Specifically, the fact that it is the man, and not the woman, who undergoes something like death and re-

\* Forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*.



## INTRODUCTION

vival seems to be what allows the pair (uniquely in Hitchcock's romantic adventures) to be shown to marry, and in negating a clause of the myth of the genre of remarriage, the film declares its own way of working out the legitimizing of marriage.

IT WILL BE EXPECTED, from what I have been saying, that the order in which I take up the reading of the major films of the genre of remarriage is meant neither as historical (in whatever sense a genre may be said to have a history) nor dialectical (since that would entail deriving the genre along with all the genres of film, a task which is hardly yet a dream). The order has rather been determined by the practical or strategic problems of exposition. Having found that *The Lady Eve* made for a reasonably clear sketch both of the generic and the Shakespearean dimensions of the task I set myself, I wanted to follow it, as a kind of second beginning, with a reading that would go as far in invoking consecutive philosophical exposition as the present book requires and permits itself to go. Hence the essay on *It Happened One Night*. The material on *Bringing Up Baby*, the first of the essays written, was called for next by a remark in the essay on *It Happened One Night*. The order of the remaining four essays was negotiated amicably. I felt the need to reaffirm immediately, in as it were a third beginning, the theme of remarriage, after such fierce displacements of it. In *Adam's Rib* it is also displaced, so the fourth place in the readings would have to go to one of the other three films. For reasons that I hope make themselves plain in the essay on *The Awful Truth*, I felt that film should come last. *His Girl Friday* I wanted to follow *The Philadelphia Story*, with which it makes a pair; hence *The Philadelphia Story* comes fourth, putting *Adam's Rib* sixth. These last four essays, in contrast to the first three, were written knowing that the others were, or would be, written, and knowing what they looked like: that is, knowing that I was writing a book.

These facts are consequential. Once the fourth essay was done it locked the preceding ones in place, more or less in their original shapes, and became the site from which the essay to follow could survey its visible tasks, itself in turn becoming a site . . . So while the genre may not care, so to speak, in what order its instances are generated, a book about the genre is affected at every turn by the order it imposes upon itself. The essays are quite different from one another and it is clear to

## WORDS FOR A CONVERSATION

me that each of the readings would bear a different countenance had its order in the composition of the essays been different. Does this impugn the objectivity of my readings?

Two worries, trenched on in the course of this introduction, are generally expressed concerning critical objectivity: that a critic is reading something into a text; and that there may be more than one interpretation of a text. I mention them because nowadays it is equally in fashion, in other circles, to say that objectivity is neither possible nor desirable (like being a mermaid), and that far from seeking one interpretation of a text we should produce as many as our talents will allow. The watchword should be fun. In making a couple of concluding remarks about these worries I emphasize that the most important fact about them, to my mind, is their unclarity; so that the best instruction the worries have for us lies in trying to describe that very unclarity.

The idea of reading something into a text seems to convey a picture of putting something into a text that is not there. Then you have to say what is there and it turns out to be nothing but a text. But in that sense you might just as well say that there is no dog in the text "Beware of the dog." Is that what someone feels the error of overreading to be, a relatively simple, psychotic notion that an animal, for example, is a word? Naturally I do not deny that some readings are irresponsible in fairly straightforward ways. But "reading in," as a term of criticism, suggests something quite particular, like going too far even if on a real track. Then the question would be, as the question often is about philosophy, how to bring reading to an end. And this should be seen as a problem internal to criticism, not a criticism of it from outside. In my experience people worried about reading in, or overinterpretation, or going too far, are, or were, typically afraid of getting started, of reading as such, as if afraid that texts—like people, like times and places—mean things and moreover mean more than you know. This is accordingly a fear of something real, and it may be a healthy fear, that is, a fear of something fearful. It strikes me as a more discerning reaction to texts than the cheerier opinion that the chase of meaning is just as much fun as man's favorite sport (also presumably a thing with no fear attached). Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread. And the moral I urge is that this assessment be made the subject of arguments about particular texts.

As for the claim that there are interpretations other than the ones I

11/1/2011