

## Hurray for Hollywood

PHILOSOPHY AND CINEMA ACCORDING TO  
STANLEY CAVELL

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In his essay "The Thought of Movies," seeking to explain how he, as a philosopher, came to start thinking about Hollywood films, Stanley Cavell turns the question around to ask instead: "How is it that someone whose education was as formed by going to the movies as by reading books, gets to thinking about philosophy professionally?"<sup>1</sup> Taking his own autobiography as point of departure, he explains that for his father, an uneducated immigrant from eastern Europe, and his mother, who was a prominent pianist in Atlanta, the movies they went to weekly with their son were the most reliable source for common pleasure for them as a family. Two aspects of this childhood experience subsequently drew Cavell back to Hollywood's classic period. In these films he not only found inspiration for philosophical questions he was concerned with as a professor of aesthetics and the general theory of value at Harvard. Throughout his career he also chose to explore the interface between moral philosophy and Hollywood so as to make a claim for a specifically American way of engaging philosophically with the world.

The first of his books on the specific possibilities open to film as an aesthetic medium, *The World Viewed*, is programmatically dedicated to his mother and father. As he notes in the introduction:

Memories of movies are strand over strand with memories of my life. During the quarter of a century (roughly from 1935 to 1960) in which going to the movies was a normal part of my week, it would no more have occurred to me to write a study of movies than to write my auto-

biography. Having completed the pages that follow, I feel that I have been composing a kind of metaphysical memoir—not the story of a period of my life but an account of the conditions it has satisfied.<sup>2</sup>

His discussion is, in part, inscribed by a certain nostalgia for the cinematic world that came to be lost with the collapse of the classic Hollywood studio system. At the same time, at issue is the way an experience of film changes the way we view the world. Taking his cue from Emerson's turn to the ordinary as an answer to a sense of the loss of world, Cavell understands film as a reflection of the fact that we, as modern subjects, live and understand the world primarily by taking views of it. The cinematic experience, he suggests, allows us to understand the conditions by which the world reveals itself to us. Specific about the film image, in turn, is that it is projected onto a screen where we see things that are not actually present. What is produced is an image of the world, not the sight, look, or appearance of the world itself. The projected film image sustains the presence of a world predicated on the absence of the viewer. The reality of the film image is present to me while I am not in its presence. Yet a world of projected images that I know and see but in which I am not myself present is a world held at a spatial and temporal distance. The screen represents a boundary, screening me from the world it depicts and making me invisible. As a viewer, sitting in the movie theater, I am neither visible nor audible to the actor on screen, even while his image takes on presence for me.

Given this play with visibility and invisibility, with presence and absence, the projected world we view on screen offers an explanation for our inability to know others, as well as our own unknowability. By aesthetically reproducing our sense of being distanced from the everyday world, film, however, turns this limit on knowledge into a productive fantasy. Film invites us to understand the reality it projects on screen as a theatricalization of our own reality. The ease with which we identify with the world on screen corresponds to the fact that we have long since come to experience the everyday reality we are distanced from as theatrical. If, with the onset of modernity, self-explanations have always needed an element of drama to be fully convincing, at the historic moment when society has become fully dramatic, cinema rehabilitates our sense of reality in that the film

image makes a claim for the theatrical power of reality. Cinema, Cavell insists, has not so much changed our ways of looking at the world as it has “entered a world whose ways of looking at itself—its *Weltanschauung*—had already changed, as if in preparation for the screening and viewing of film.”<sup>3</sup>

### The Comedy of Remarriage: A Meet and Happy Conversation

While *The World Viewed* invokes a broad spectrum of films, Cavell's subsequent books turn to the way classic Hollywood can be conceived along the lines of a conceptual space for American culture to think about itself. Two genres emerge as seminal to this project. *Pursuits of Happiness* isolates seven sophisticated comedies of the 1930s and 1940s under the rubric of what Cavell calls the comedy of remarriage, while *Contesting Tears* treats four melodramas of the same period as films about the unknown woman. If Cavell entitles the introduction to the first of these two books “Words for a Conversation,” he does so to signal that the ability (or inability) of the hero and heroine to speak with each other is not only what distinguishes these two genres from each other. Conversation is also his own methodological concern. On the one hand, this concept refers to the personal experience as a moviegoer that he brings to bear on his discussion of Hollywood films. As he explains, because his discussion is based on his own experience of these films, they are themselves investigations of “ideas of conversation, and investigations of what it is to have an interest in your own experience.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the Hollywood films of the golden years exist in a state of philosophy because they engage with the question of moral perfectionism. Cavell's discussion of those films that mean something to him, because they have affected his experience as a scholar and a moviegoer, thus renders visible a conversation between philosophy and film studies.

The theme common to both the comedy and the melodrama genre concerns the creation of a new woman who stands in for moral perfectibility, in the sense of a recovery of humanity in all its fragility. The difference, in turn, consists in whether this moral transformation occurs with or against the gaze of the men determining such self-knowledge. Both genres address the conditions as well as the limits of

mutual recognition, with the concept of marriage serving as the trope for the possibility of a shared recognition in the former and its impossibility in the latter. Reconciliation is predicated on the fact that a marriage promise can be broken, while a reassertion of this bond is achievable only through a metamorphosis that is also tantamount to a new view of the world. If in the course of the film narrative the legitimacy of marriage comes to be renegotiated, this results either in a reaffirmation of a shared life or in a radical repudiation of the possibility of a shared conversation.

*The Philadelphia Story* (1940), my example for Cavell's take on the remarriage comedy, is driven by a desire to bring a couple back together again. Though the romantic couple is intimately familiar, a discrepancy between the sexual and the social conception of marriage has come to threaten their alliance. The witty conversation they still share revolves around the question of what happiness means and the degree to which one is willing to change in order to achieve this. The decisive transformation of their attitude toward each other, in turn, involves a logic of repetition. To achieve happiness in marriage requires that two people, who once found each other, must do so a second time, because only then will they discover why they had been made for each other all along. In this act of recovery as rediscovery, Cavell locates a refiguration of the Emersonian worry that one may have missed the opportunity for moral perfectibility. The pursuit of happiness on which the comedy of remarriage is predicated thus emerges as a pursuit for the right degree of separateness, as this, in turn, determines the right degree of mutual acknowledgment. Cavell foregrounds the issue of the heroine's re-creation because it is primarily her transformation that signals the change Emerson calls for—namely, to become the person one always was, only doing so consciously. By coming together again, the couple, having first lost each other, gradually becomes aware that they are the same yet also changed in such a way that the promise of shared happiness can be reaffirmed.

*Philadelphia Story* famously ends in a second marriage ceremony after Tracy Lord (Katherine Hepburn) refuses both the journalist Mike (James Stewart) and the businessman George (John Howard) and instead returns to her estranged husband C. K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant). As Cavell notes, “Having grown up together, or anyway

having in some way created a childhood past together, remains a law for the happiness of the pair in the universe of remarriage comedies.”<sup>5</sup> Dexter succeeds in reclaiming his bride from his two rivals because Tracy has suddenly realized that she had merely deluded herself into thinking that George and she viewed the world in the same way. Yet she must also relinquish Mike, even though he was the one who, at the height of her inebriation the night before the wedding, had recognized the erotic allure her first husband was impervious to. Given that for Cavell the tentative quality of any recuperated self-knowledge is significant, he underscores that the remarriage between Tracy and Dexter leaves open the consequences of this choice. The film ends after Tracy and Dexter, together with his best man, Mike, have reached the altar, where the priest has begun to perform the wedding rites. Suddenly, however, the ceremony is disrupted by a spurt of light from the flashbulb of the publisher of *Spy* magazine, who has clandestinely slipped into this exclusive gathering. Astonished, all three characters look into his camera, which is to say they look directly at us.

Cavell reads this closure as an implicit reference to Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, based as this comedy is on “the idea that the public world of day cannot resolve its conflicts apart from resolutions in the private forces of the night.” This therapy, leading to a resumption of wedding vows, he adds, occurs “by way of remembering something, awakening to something, and by forgetting something, awakening from something.”<sup>6</sup> Yet if Tracy herself admits that in light of what happened the night before her wedding, her eyes have been opened, the happy end of *Philadelphia Story* is predicated on a nocturnal awakening that Cavell only gestures toward. That evening, both Dexter and the bride’s father had attacked her for her austere moral behavior, comparing her to an aloof goddess. To become a first-class human being, however, thus their claim, she would need to be able to not only forgive the fallibility of others but also recognize such frailty within herself. Astonished at these accusations, Tracy had gotten drunk on champagne, and once she is alone with Mike in the moonlit garden behind her villa, she suddenly discovers an erotic desire previously unknown to her. Mike unexpectedly declares his unconditional admiration for her while the lighting Cukor uses to illuminate his heroine corresponds to the erotic fire his words inspire

in her. By asking her whether she sees how magnificent she is, he draws her attention to something she had always known about herself but that she can only now begin to acknowledge. After a passionate kiss, the two run off to take a dip in the pool, from where they return with Mike carrying Tracy in his arms, barely clad in her bathrobe and singing happily. They are met by Dexter and George, the other two men vying for her love. While the former is sure that Tracy will refuse to remember this excess once she has woken from her drunken state, the latter is filled with disgust at the inappropriateness of his bride’s behavior.

The wedding that takes place the next day transforms precisely this transgressive sexuality into a socially sanctioned bond. With her eyes now opened to her own fallibility, Tracy does not repudiate the erotic intemperance of the previous night. She also does not, however, choose the man who had called forth this repressed self-knowledge but rather the man who is already sexually familiar to her. Yet the photograph that interrupts her wedding ceremony shows all three standing in front of the altar. Remarriage thus requires two aspects of self-knowledge. The heroine must accept symbolic codes that curtail the blithe narcissism she had enjoyed in her illicit encounter with Mike, even while it is this nocturnal experience that has transformed her into the first-class human being the remarriage comedy requires. Furthermore, when in the light of a new morning she once more takes the man with whom she has always shared an intimate conversation as her husband, Tracy preserves a piece of this nocturnal narcissism. As Cavell confesses, his notion of remarriage speaks to the fact that “you are enabled to remain with the one to whom you have been bound, by discharging your hostility on a past life with that one, or with a past version of that one.”<sup>7</sup>

As the statue-like Tracy transforms into a first-class human being, able to both acknowledge her own fallibility and forgive her husband for the alcoholism that had been the cause of their divorce, a second thematic concern comes into play. Cavell reads this rebirth of the heroine also as a comment on the film’s understanding of American democracy. If within Puritan doctrine the marriage covenant represents a miniature of the covenant of the commonwealth, then the wedding that takes place at the end of *Philadelphia Story*, in the city that gave birth to the U.S. Constitution, is also of national concern.

As an example of the manner in which Hollywood offers a cognitive space for cultural self-reflection, this film comedy raises the question of “whether America has achieved its new human being, its more perfect union and its domestic tranquility, its new birth of freedom, whether it has been successful in securing the pursuit of happiness, whether it is earning the conversation it demands.”<sup>8</sup> The recuperated conversation between Tracy and Dexter thus mirrors a philosophical conversation about the conditions of the social contract that *The Philadelphia Story* implicitly entertains with the founding fathers of the Constitution: in particular, their claim that this newly founded nation sought to bring forth a natural aristocracy,

not inherently superior to others, possessing qualities inaccessible to others, but one which is more advanced than others, further along a spiritual path anyone might take and everyone can appreciate.<sup>9</sup>

Cavell’s reading of this film comedy is paradigmatic of his argument about the philosophical nature of cinema in yet a further sense. With it he unfolds a panoply of critical tropes that illustrate the way his hermeneutic process consists in using a discussion of cinema so as to bring literary and philosophical texts into conversation with each other as well. Cavell locates traces of Shakespeare’s dramatic imagination in Cukor’s comedy by first noting a correspondence to *Othello*. The three males of *The Philadelphia Story* may be construed as dividing up Othello’s qualities—Dexter taking up his capacity of authority, Mike his powers of poetry and passion, and George “his openness to suspicion and jealousy.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet it is above all *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that Cavell finds refigured, given that both the play and the film explore how nocturnal spaces help to work through conflicts posed in and by the ordinary everyday. Indeed, what for Cavell connects Cukor’s comedy of remarriage most pointedly to *A Midsummer Night’s Story* is that both unfold a passage leading from the “private forces of the night” into “the public world of consequences.”<sup>11</sup> Correspondences between the two texts include the juice of the magic flower that resurfaces as the champagne Tracy Lord imbues to excess, falling in love, like Shakespeare’s fairy queen, with a man socially beneath her class. The jealous yet dexterous Oberon, in turn, returns as her former husband, cleverly

erly turning a complex love plot based on confusion and blindness in his favor in order to win back his wife. For the conversation between cinema, literature, and philosophy that Cavell seeks to uncover, what is seminal, however, is not the discovery of solid evidence attesting to a relation between these two texts. Instead, he emphasizes:

I might rather describe my interest as one of discovering, given the thought of this relation, what the consequences of it might be. This is a matter not so much of assigning significance to certain events of the drama as it is of isolating and relating the events for which significance needs to be assigned.<sup>12</sup>

A further implicit intertext that Cavell uncovers for the witty sparring between Tracy and Dexter is Milton’s description of a successful marriage as a meet and happy conversation. Although he concedes that Milton had in view “an entire mode of association, a form of life, he does also mean a capacity, say a thirst, for talk.”<sup>13</sup> In his tract on divorce, Milton, after all, notes that “no effect of tyranny can sit more heavy on the commonwealth than this household unhappiness on the family.”<sup>14</sup> If, then, the covenant of marriage is to be taken as a cypher for the covenant the American subject enters into with democracy, Cavell understands Hollywood film comedies to be “participating in such a conversation with their culture.”<sup>15</sup> Part of this conversation is with the historical implications of certain key concepts of the Constitution, which the founding fathers wrestled over in Philadelphia some two hundred years before Cukor filmed *The Philadelphia Story*.

Cavell relates a discussion between Tracy and her detractors that ranges from what it means to be a first-class human being to the arguments philosophers have had since the signing of the Constitution about the implications and effects of this social contract. In his writings, De Tocqueville, for example, discovers a sympathy for eccentricity as well as a valorization of a freedom of thinking, both of which serve as an antidote to the tyranny of the masses that the French aristocrat had worried about during his travels through the newly founded democracy. Taken together with the notion of a natural aristocracy as it can be found in the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Cavell sees here a conversation emerging about human perfectibility that Cukor picks up again when, in



the course of his film comedy, he has his heroine transform into a first-class human being, conceived as the best self within any given person, independent of class and race. At the same time, Cavell also brings the notion of natural aristocracy as an expression of the humanity of the American subject to bear on the specific features of cinema as a medium. He discovers in the photogenic charisma of the star a visual correspondence to self-betterment, given that the camera (along with makeup and lighting) renders visible the best self in any given actress or actor and, as such, a potential for perfectibility that would remain invisible to the ordinary eye.

The conversation Cavell sees *Philadelphia Story* having with a set of philosophical concepts (natural aristocracy, best self, moral perfectibility) allows him to assign a very specific significance to the closure sequence. As already mentioned, Sidney Kidd, publisher of *Spy*, interrupts the marriage vows by capturing not only the bride and bridegroom but also his best man in photographs he is taking of this marriage ceremony because it is of national importance. In the closing moments of the film, we first see a frozen image of all three staring into his camera as if having been woken up by his flashlight, which is to say, as if woken from the dream that was the film's narrative. Seamlessly, this image transforms into an image in a photo album whose pages are being turned by an invisible hand, offering us a final image of Tracy in the arms of her recovered husband. Their lips are about to touch but are not yet touching. The film's closing sequence thus interprets the rebirth of its heroine as an act of creation shared by two married people, mutually dependent yet also with a margin of separation between them. The effect, however, hinges on precisely the self-reflexivity Cavell perceives as the point of connection between cinema and philosophy. The closing photographs can be taken as an official testimony

that a certain public event has taken place, and that the event is essentially bound up with the achievement of a certain form of public comprehension, of the culture's comprehension of itself, or meet conversation with itself, the achievement, in short, of a form of film comedy.<sup>16</sup>

One further touch of transformation, however, needs to be taken notice of. At the end of *Philadelphia Story*, the heroine, who loses

her statue-like aloofness by experiencing and then acknowledging her own fallibility as a woman, turns into the star Katherine Hepburn. The frozen photographs look like film stills from this film comedy, drawing our attention to the fact that we have been watching a Hollywood celebrity. Cavell's insistence that Hollywood entertains a conversation with American culture compels him to assign yet another significance to the shift from moving image to film still that marks the end of and our waking from this remarriage comedy. It is important to remember that, historically, *The Philadelphia Story* was also seminal for the rebirth of Katherine Hepburn as a new type of Hollywood star, which proved to be of national interest. After the success of this film, she came to embody American values such as sincerity, seriousness, and human sympathy for the rest of her career. Hepburn had bought the rights to the script, hoping to break with the image of the arrogant and headstrong actress who by the end of the 1930s was considered box-office poison. As though taking her cue from Emerson, she turned self-reliance to her favor, changed her public persona to fit the times even while remaining true to what the American audience adored in its female stars—a woman who self-consciously works to perfect herself even while remaining staunchly free in making her own choices.

Because the final moments of *Philadelphia Story* freeze the wedding scene into photographs, we too are able to awake from this projected world and our illusion of having partaken of it. And yet the status of the three people standing in front of the alter remains ambivalent, which is why the utopian gesture the comedy of remarriage makes a claim to is, for Cavell, compromised. Does the film end with the kiss that is about to occur and that would seal the promise of happiness? Or mustn't we say instead that the film ends with the photograph of an embrace predicated on uncertainty? The meet and happy conversation this film genre celebrates is shown to be limited to a play of light and shadow projected on a screen. The final image, reducing three players to a couple, inscribes yet a further disturbance. Even though Grant is now holding Hepburn in his arms as a sign that he has successfully won her from his rival Stewart, the lips of the two stars are either not yet or no longer touching. The kiss meant to seal this marriage covenant is one we do not partake of. The visual gap, so pointedly staged, instead calls up a memory of the only

kiss Cukor has presented to us—namely, the one between Tracy and Mike during their nocturnal intoxication in the garden behind her villa. The remarriage—between Tracy and Dexter, between Hepburn and her fans—stands for a covenant of nation importance, predicated on the transformation of an unencumbered erotic liberty into moral responsibility. The Constitution does not declare happiness to be the right of every citizen, only its pursuit, so that like moral perfectibility, which the American project also seeks, happiness—and, thus, Hollywood's reflection of the state of the nation—remains achievable but not yet achieved.

### Moving from Mourning to Morning: The Melodrama

In *Contesting Tears*, written some fifteen years later, Cavell reads a set of melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s (also called “women’s weepies”) as the dark inversion of the comedy of remarriage. If in comedy the heroine ultimately returns to a former husband after having gained insight into her desire, in melodrama she discovers the man she had initially chosen to wed is incapable of accepting her desire is separate from his. While both genres culminate in the rebirth of the heroine, melodrama negates precisely the couple’s ability to partake in a meet and happy conversation on which the resolution of comedy is predicated. If the remarriage comedy, furthermore, stages a contest for recognition, the heartbreaking pathos in melodrama is based on the husband’s refusal to acknowledge his wife, with her coming to accept why their conversation has failed. The metamorphosis she undergoes so as to forge for herself an independent life worth living lies beyond anything her husband could offer her. She thus comes to privilege solitude over a marriage based on discord and silent disregard. To accept the responsibility not only for her own romantic dreams of marriage but also for the disappointment of this aspiration means acting in such a manner that by renouncing her dream of marital bliss she will find a happiness adequate to the knowledge of herself she has gained.

While, according to Cavell, the remarriage comedy makes the heroine’s desire known to those who have misjudged her, melodrama revolves around those aspects of her desire that cannot be transmitted to others. At issue is the ability of the heroine to acknowledge her-

self in her distinct separateness from the man to whom, because he reduces her to a projection of himself, she remains unknown and unknowable. In contrast to the heroine in comedy, her longing for independence cannot be subsumed under the meet and happy conversation of marriage because what the heroine in melodrama is instead forced to acknowledge is that she no longer shares with her husband the set of values necessary for such a conversation to be sustainable. For Cavell the solitude she is compelled to choose is not, however, an expression of self-sacrifice but rather a form of self-empowerment. If melodrama stages to excess the heroine’s inability to make herself intelligible to her husband, this experience ultimately brings about her self-certainty. By speaking for herself, turning from her husband, and insisting on her own separateness, she overcomes self-doubt. She has found her singular voice and can now turn toward a freedom that, for the first time in her life, is tantamount to laying claim to her existence on her own terms. While marriage had stifled her voice because her husband could or would not esteem the value of her words, her discovery of a voice independent of him is tantamount to acknowledging her capacity to count. If she is re-created at the end of the film, then it is not in light of how those around her see her but rather by insisting on her right to remain unknowable to those who do not share the conceptual criteria by which she could be known.

For Cavell at issue is thus the question of a self-revelation to which only we, as the audience, can be privy. He once more makes use of the troubled interface between film character and star, claiming that what distinguishes the heroine of melodrama from her counterpart in the remarriage comedy is her ability to render herself (and her unknowability) visible in front of the camera. From Emerson’s writings, in turn, he takes the claim that most people don’t exist but rather haunt the world as ghosts of themselves. The philosophical aim of the melodrama of the unknown woman thus for him consists in the way it stages how such ghostliness can be overcome both individually and collectively. “The price of Emerson’s proof of human existence, our exposure to the consciousness of otherness,” he explains, “is that our relation to ourselves is theatricalized, publicized.” This self-display is also of national importance given that American film, at its best, participates in Emerson’s claim for self-thought and self-invention: “It has the space, and the cultural pressure, to satisfy the

craving for thought, the ambition of a talented culture to examine itself publicly."<sup>17</sup>

At the beginning of King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), the eponymous heroine (Barbara Stanwyck) stands in front of her garden fence with a book in hand, seeking to draw the attention of Stephen Dallas onto herself. She may only be the daughter of one of the workers in his factory, but she dreams of a marriage to this elegant man and the upward mobility this would bring with it. He, in turn, welcomes the fact that she is romantically interested in him because his childhood sweetheart, Helen, has recently left him to marry someone else. One evening, they go to the movies together, and we see the tears in Stella's eyes as she watches the kiss that seals a marriage proposal on screen. As she walks home with Stephen, she explains to him that she yearns to be as cultivated and witty as the movie stars she adores and assures him that she could learn to speak and behave the way he does. The kiss with which he interrupts her flow of words leads seamlessly to marriage, and yet, one year later, Stella is forced to recognize how she has failed to adapt to the propriety her husband's affluent lifestyle dictates because it is, in fact, not to her taste after all. She now forbids her husband to curtail her allegedly improper self-expression. Insisting instead on the discrepancy between her taste and his, she refuses the meet and happy conversation on which marital success is based.

Even the birth of her daughter Laurel cannot hold their marriage together, and after Stephen has moved to New York without his family, he once more seeks solace with Helen. She is now a widow and invites him into the home she has built for her two sons, so familiar to him because they come from the same class. Stella, in turn, accepts her estrangement from her husband because she has transferred her dream of upward mobility to her daughter, whom she educates to fit into the very society to which, owing to her own eccentric taste, she can never belong. At the turning point of the film narrative, Stella selflessly stages a quarrel with Laurel, forcefully bringing about a separation from the daughter who unconditionally adores her, and then proceeds to agree to a divorce so that Laurel can live with her father and Helen, whom he subsequently marries. To fulfill the dream she has for Laurel, she refuses all further contact, hoping thus to ensure her daughter's unencumbered entrance into a world she had initially imagined for herself. Put in terms of the logic of melodrama,

Stella reaches self-knowledge precisely because she is willing to relinquish the very maternal happiness toward which her entire existence seemed to be oriented. Purposely turning away from the world of affluent propriety into which she has propelled her daughter in her stead, she can move into a new day, albeit one far more tarnished than the one available to the heroine of the remarriage comedy.

Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas* hinges on the scene that sets up this break in a way such that the audience can experience it only as emotionally wrenching. The scene in the luxury hotel, in which Stella's flamboyant attire turns her into an object of public ridicule, draws its melodramatic power not from any catastrophic misunderstanding of how she should behave. Emotionally distressing about this scene, Cavell argues, is that Stella, who has sewn all of Laurel's tasteful wardrobe herself, knows precisely what shocking effect she will have on the elegant society she wants her daughter to be part of. Her vulgar self-presentation is a conscious strategy aimed at separating herself from Laurel precisely because she has come to know herself, which is to say, because she has come to acknowledge that she can never plausibly inhabit the world for which she has been grooming her daughter. If she does everything to appear distasteful to Laurel's cultivated friends, then it is not because she embraces vulgarity but rather because she now consciously seeks the repudiation of the society into which she knows she will never fit. Significant in Cavell's reading of Stella's choice is, thus, his insistence that we do not see her as a victim of her circumstances and instead empathize with the agency this choice entails. Not an emotional struggle is at issue, in the course of which a mother renounces her daughter, but rather the manner in which we are compelled to watch and, thus, affectively partake in the outrageous appearance with which Stella fulfills this sacrifice.

If, at the beginning of the film, she identified with the elegance of the silent movie star she saw projected on screen, seeking to emulate her, she now herself plays a movie scene, only the genre is no longer that of romantic comedy. Instead, we are confronted with a scene of assignation in which Stella shows herself ready to abdicate from her maternal role, forcing a daughter overidentified with her in filial love into acknowledging the need for separation. The dramatic formula Cavell offers for the melodrama of the unknown

woman is as follows: Stella's ability to become the self that she always was (albeit unknown to both herself and others) is predicated on an acknowledgment of separateness on the part of the daughter. This entails recognizing herself as a woman over and beyond those very cinematic images she had initially sought to emulate. Given that an abdication from cinema's illusory dreams is, thus, the linchpin of his reading, Cavell makes much of the parallel between the scene in the movie theater at the beginning of *Stella Dallas* and the closing sequence. Stella now stands in front of the window of Stephen Dallas's town house as though this, too, were a second film screen. She is as absorbed by viewing her daughter's wedding ceremony taking place inside this home in the final sequence of the Vidor's melodrama as she was by the kiss between the two screen lovers at the beginning.

Laurel's marriage stages (and is staged) as a repetition of the film world that had prompted Stella's own unhappy marriage. As Cavell notes, she looks at her daughter as though Laurel were the unapproachable star of the romantic film narrative that proved not to be available to her. Standing in the rain in front of the iron gate to this house and, thus, irrevocably excluded from the festivities within, she is, however, explicitly marked as the star of a different genre, the melodrama. Helen, who throughout the film narrative alone understood Stella's generosity, has insisted on keeping the curtains to her magnificent living room open, sensing (and hoping) that there would be a clandestine viewer. Even though a crowd has formed around Stella, she alone is illuminated by the three-pointed lighting typical of the way Hollywood gave visual glamour to its stars during its golden years. Stella is thus staged as the privileged audience of a scene of marriage that, in turn, is shown at a distance because it is shot through the windowpane. What she views seems not only to shed light on her but also to serve as a scene of moral illumination. Given the way the actual star, Barbara Stanwyck, is lit, we are, furthermore, meant to recognize that Laurel is not the star of the happy-ending marriage promises. Instead, Stella is confirmed as the sole star in a melodrama, whose narrative acme celebrates her as a woman unknown to all except us.

A policeman asks Stella to move on, yet she begs him to let her remain a moment longer because she wants to see the bride's face after she has been kissed by the bridegroom. As in *Philadelphia Story*, this

visual cypher for the completion of the wedding vow is disturbed, only in this case not because the light of a flashbulb causes the couple to look directly at us but because we get no close-up at all of the bride and groom. Instead, the final close-up the film offers us is of the mother, invisible to the person who, throughout the film, has meant the most to her. If the tears on Stella's face speak to the fact that she is enjoying the consummation of her daughter's romantic dream by proxy, they also signify that the transference of her fantasies onto Laurel is tantamount to her having overcoming these. Stella ecstatically turns away from the window qua film screen and proceeds to walk into the dark open space of a New York night while the camera captures her once more in a close-up, walking directly toward us as her tears turn into a radiant smile.

What has she seen in her daughter's face that the camera will not show us? Cavell surmises:

May we imagine that we have here some Emersonian/Thoreauvian image of what Nietzsche will call the pain of individuation, of the passion Thoreau builds *Walden* to find, expressed as his scandalous pun on Mo(u)rning, the transfiguration of mourning as grief into morning as dawning and ecstasy?<sup>18</sup>

By turning her back to the window behind which her daughter's marriage is being performed, Stella affirms her freedom to leave behind not only her family but also the consequences of a marriage she thought would transform her into a better person. At issue is less what her new life will look like than the fact that by turning away she proves she has an open future. The rebirth of Stella is tantamount to the birth of a woman who insists on her idiosyncratic taste, who self-reliantly takes on self-knowledge yet who is also present on the screen in such an illusive manner that we are left merely with an intimation of her inner vision.

At the same time, this final turn toward the camera is also the creation of a new star, Barbara Stanwyck. At the beginning of *Stella Dallas*, she still reminds us of the savvy female lover of silent cinema, using her youthful charms to inveigle a wealthy man. In the hotel scene, in turn, she parodies the erotic flamboyance for which pre-Code Hollywood had become so notorious. Walking past us in the



last moments of the film with little makeup and seemingly no elegance, she has, as Cavell notes, a future not only because we know she is about to return to the silver screen as the star of *Union Pacific* (Cecil B. DeMille), *Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder), and *Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks). We also recognize her stardom because the camera makes her present to us as a star by remaining focused to the end both on her walk and her facial expression. *Stella Dallas*, like *Philadelphia Story*, thus hinges on precisely the self-reflexivity that for Cavell is the trademark of the conversation between philosophy and Hollywood for which he is making a claim. The promise of Stanwyck's return, of her reincarnation in future films, is also the one promise with which the film releases us.

The fact that this birth of Barbara Stanwyck as a new type of Hollywood star should be predicated on abdicating from the elegant romantic comedy that had inspired her dream of perfectibility is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, it corresponds historically to the self-censorship introduced by the Hays Production Code in 1933, censoring such sexually exploitative roles as she had played in *Baby Face*, in which she successfully sleeps her way to the top of a company, ending up as the wife of the boss. On the other hand, her transformation corresponds to the moral perfectionism Cavell finds repeatedly relayed in classic Hollywood. "The Emersonianism of the films I have written about as genres depict human beings as on a kind of journey," he explains "from what he means by conformity to what he means by self-reliance . . . from haunting the world to existing in it." Cavell takes the unknown woman's final choice of turning away to be a version of asserting one's *cogito ergo sum*, as "the power to think for oneself, to judge the world, to acquire . . . one's own experience of the world."<sup>19</sup> Stella's demand for a voice, for an adequate mode of self-expression and her insistence on drawing attention to her own subjectivity, emerges as a modern reappraisal of Emerson's demand for thinking.

For Cavell the philosophical question emblematically posed by the final scene of Vidor's melodrama involves the status of the renunciation of maternal love it celebrates. By turning away from the window, Stella sacrifices not herself but a dream of perfectibility she has recognized as being wrong for her: "Stella's gift of and for her daughter, painful as the challenge is, is not precisely, or is precisely not,

self-sacrifice."<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of the film, hers was a ghostly existence, her visibility contingent on inscribing herself into the world of her husband. When in this closing scene Stella/Stanwyck not only turns her back on a world that has always had the quality of cinema (for her and for us) but in so doing passes by us, she stages for us that we can never know her, that she will remain separate from us. Having disclosed for the camera the intensity of her pain, Stanwyck performs the limit of such exposure. Rather than turning from us, she forces us to acknowledge that a kernel of unknowability remains of the woman—the heroine and the star—whose projection on screen had held our attention. She has finally gained her singular relation to the world, and this is one she will not (and cannot) share with us.

Cavell's love for the melodrama genre is, however, predicated on an additional autobiographical anecdote. If *The World Viewed* sets in with his description of his family's weekly visits to the movies, *Contesting Tears* ends with his recollection of the migraines his mother used to suffer from, suggesting this was her way of expressing a demand to be noticed. Her therapy for this mood was to play the piano in a darkened room, alone. Yet this is not the only maternal expression Cavell relates to his own preference for King Vidor's melodrama. Whenever this prominent Atlanta pianist wanted to get an opinion from her husband or her son regarding a new garment or ornament she was wearing, she would often ask, "Too Stella Dallas?" This scene most frequently occurred when they were about to leave their apartment for the Friday night movies. Cavell recalls that even then he knew his mother's reference to Stella Dallas was not aimed at dissociating herself from this film character. Rather, her question "was concerned to ward off a certain obviousness of display, not to deny the demand to be noticed."<sup>21</sup>

Based on the ambivalent response his mother entertained toward the American culture into which she, like so many Jewish immigrants from Europe in the first part of the twentieth century, placed her hope, Cavell discovers a final aporia in the melodramatic conflict played out between Laurel and her mother. This emotional conflict is concerned as much with the cultural experience of second-generation Americans as with the psychological separation between mother and daughter so necessary for individuation. As part of their constitutional right to a pursuit of happiness, the children of immigrants

were able to become part of proper American society, even if this possibility was predicated on a demand to correct their speech, their clothes, and their demeanor according to its codes. Cavell calls this right a risk because no one can say for certain what is considered proper in America, nor how important such proper behavior might be, given that it corresponds to precisely the conformity Emerson argues against. "Such a child—I speak from experience—recognizes subjection to the familiar double bind," Cavell explains. "If I am not different from them (my parents) and do not enter into a society to which they cannot belong, thus justifying their sacrifices, how can they love me? If I am different from them and do enter where they cannot belong, how can they love me?"<sup>22</sup>

The final theoretical point one might make regarding the philosophical stance of the Hollywood melodrama is that there is no solution for the aporia of immigration into America. With her walk into an open, as yet undetermined future, Barbara Stanwyck, born Ruby Catherine Stevens in Brooklyn in 1907, embodies not only the emotional ambivalence of a working-class mother who can never properly arrive in the proper society to which her husband belongs. She also embodies the immigrant daughter who comes to fulfill her American dream as a Hollywood celebrity. The fact that King Vidor presents her double impersonation as a melodramatic enmeshment between self-sacrifice and self-determination offers one final proof for the significance of the conversation that cinema, according to Cavell, entertains with the culture from which it emerges, which it reflects and which it effects. This conversation is as absolute and as versatile as America's democratic notion of what it means to take part in a cultural project that remains achievable but not yet achieved.

#### NOTES

1. Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," 88.
2. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, xix.
3. Ibid., 226.
4. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 7.
5. Ibid., 136.
6. Ibid., 142.
7. Ibid., 149.

8. Ibid., 152–53.
9. Ibid., 156.
10. Ibid., 142.
11. Ibid., 143.
12. Ibid., 144–45.
13. Ibid., 146.
14. Ibid., 150.
15. Ibid., 151.
16. Ibid., 160.
17. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 72.
18. Ibid., 212.
19. Ibid., 220.
20. Ibid., 184.
21. Ibid., 200.
22. Ibid., 213.

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# FILM AS PHILOSOPHY

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*Bernd Herzogenrath*

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EDITOR



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