

33. CAVELL AND THE COMEDY OF REMARRIAGE¹

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ABSTRACT. This paper deals critically with Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*, a study of seven film comedies from the 30's and 40's, among them *The Philadelphia Story*, *His Girl Friday*, *Adam's Rib*, and *It Happened One Night*. Negatively, I argue that Cavell's interpretations of the films he deals with are often extravagant, if held to any objective standard; that his conception of the genre of the comedy of remarriage is highly arbitrary, both in its inclusions and exclusions, and in its contention that the genre does not have a history; and that the philosophy of marriage implicit in Cavell's criticism is unsatisfactory in implying the illegitimacy of most existing marriages. Positively, I support his contentions that the genre has its roots in Shakespearean comedy and that the films often (sometimes quite consciously) raise the very difficult philosophical questions Cavell takes them to raise. Though I find much to disagree with, I contend that Cavell is writing criticism of the highest order.

Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* is a loving exploration of seven popular Hollywood comedies from the thirties and forties. One of Cavell's aims is to show that these films will bear the weight of the detailed analysis normally reserved for such acknowledged classics as the plays of Shakespeare and Ibsen. Much of the fascination of the book lies in seeing how rich these films can be in material for critical reflection. The sympathetic reader will find his perception of them permanently altered. He will also be treated to challenging reflections on the topic of marriage, a subject philosophers have not accorded the attention its central role in our lives would seem to merit.

But Cavell does not make it easy to be a sympathetic reader. He writes a complex and allusive prose, whose principles of organization are rarely transparent. His interpretations of the films frequently seem, and sometimes are, extravagant. Even where they seem justified, Cavell regularly disdains to support them with all the evidence he might properly have used, as if lying in wait for unwary critics. The conception of genre which governs his work seems indefensible. And the philosophy of marriage he develops seems to have very unfortunate consequences.

Before I try to substantiate the praise and criticism advanced in these opening remarks, let's begin with a brief survey of Cavell's main themes. His book is subtitled "The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage". After an introductory chapter setting up his conception of the genre, the seven remaining chapters offer readings of Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve*, Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*, George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story*, Hawks' *His Girl Friday*, Cukor's *Adam's Rib*, and Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth*. Cavell's contention is that these seven films "constitute"² or define (PH, 19, 59) a particular genre of Hollywood comedy, a genre

. . . which differs from classical comedy [in which] the narrative shows a young pair overcoming obstacles to their love and at the end achieving marriage, whereas comedies of remarriage . . . [feature] . . . a pair less young, getting or threatening their divorce, so that the drive of the narrative is to get them *back* together.³

Cavell sees these films as inheriting two traditions in drama: the Shakespearean tradition of romantic comedy, which puts particular stress on the role of the heroine and her relationship to her father, and which solves its problems by moving the action to a place of perspective, where the characters can achieve a transformation of perception (PH 1, 48-9); and the Ibsenite tradition of issue-oriented melodrama, which raises the problem of the legitimacy of marriage, and asks what conditions must be satisfied for a marriage to be an honorable arrangement for both parties.

Cavell's comedies take place in a world where no legal or religious ceremony is either necessary or sufficient for the moral validity of a marriage, where the presence of a powerful mutual sexual attraction may be necessary but is not sufficient, and where the presence of children in the marriage is irrelevant. Feminist criticism has called the institution of marriage into question. It must justify itself without appeal to its role as providing a setting for the raising of children. The narrative of these comedies gives their creators a vehicle for philosophical reflection on this problem and proposes a solution: the validity of marriage depends on the couple's discovering that, whatever disappointments marriage may contain, their own possibilities of happiness are so inextricably bound up with one another that they would be willing, continually, to reaffirm the marriage. "You know you are married when you come to see that you cannot divorce, that is, when you find that your lives simply will not disentangle." (PH, 84-6, 127, 142) Call this Cavell's most general description of the genre.

In his introductory chapter, Cavell adds specificity to that description by claiming that these comedies inherit a common myth, of which they provide interpretations: a running quarrel is forcing apart a pair who recognize themselves as having known one another forever, as if they had shared childhood together, as if they were brother and sister; they have discovered their sexuality together, and seek legitimation of it in marriage; but marriage, which was to be a ratification, turns out to need ratification itself; it proves unable to domesticate sexuality without discouraging it; the pair's natural intimacy, which seemed to justify their mutual attraction, is also an obstacle, as almost incestuous; each resents being made to discover his or her incompleteness without the other; they seek revenge by separation, and the woman

turns to another, less exciting, but more manipulable man; when her original man demonstrates that he has the legitimate claim to her sexuality, by showing that he is not attempting to command, but that he is able to wish, she awakens to her desire again, and he recognizes and accepts her gift. (PH, 31-2) Call this the mythic description of the genre.

As Cavell goes on to readings of individual films, he adds further detail to his concept of the genre by identifying what he calls laws of the genre: e.g., that the narrative should leave ambiguous the question whether the man or the woman is the active or the passive partner (PH, 82), thereby earning the title "comedy of equality" (PH, 121-2); that the woman's mother should be conspicuous by her absence (PH, 18, 57); that there should be no children in the marriage (PH, 58-60); that the films should harp on the identity of the real women who are cast in their leading roles (PH 64, 105-6, 247); that while each of the women central to them must be what she is in part because of her sense of fun, of playfulness (PH 60), she must also recognize her need to learn something further about herself, and hence, to seek education from the man (PH 55-7); that in the conversation through which this education is accomplished the couple should show themselves capable of discussing with interest, not only the promises of love, but also the metaphysics of marriage, problems of identity and difference, and the miracle of change (PH 54-5, 257); that their conversation should lead to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness (PH 19, 50-51, 261); and that the pair should achieve their reconciliation, not, as in classical comedy, as part of a new social reconciliation, but in isolation from the rest of society (PH 123). Call this his account of the laws of the genre.

I

Let us begin our critical examination of Cavell's work by considering whether it is reasonable to regard a film like *It Happened One Night* as being as rich in ideas as Cavell suggests that it is, and how we might decide whether it is. On Cavell's reading this film raises some rather profound metaphysical issues, and Cavell is conscious of "courting . . . a certain outrage" (PH 8) in offering such a reading:

I am not unaware that some of my readers—even those who would be willing to take up Kant and Capra seriously . . . in isolation from one another—will not fully credit the possibility that a comic barrier [the film's blanket], hardly more than a prop in a traveling salesman joke, can invoke issues of metaphysical isolation and of the possibility of community—*must* invoke them if this film's comedy is to be understood. (PH 80)

This is all the more a paradox because, according to Capra's own account, his film was successful because it was "pure entertainment . . . unfettered with any ideas, any big moral precepts or anything else, just sheer fun".⁴ Of course, directors' comments about what they have achieved in a film must always be regarded with a certain suspicion. But here I think Capra is being honest with us. He was a director who took great pride in being able to make films which were phenomenally entertaining and yet had at their heart a strong moral message. If he had thought that his first big hit

contained any profound ideas about the possibility of community, I do not think he would have disavowed them.⁵

One possible answer to this is that what Capra thought he had achieved is irrelevant. Sometimes Cavell suggests that answer, as when he opens his book with the statement that "each of the seven chapters that follow contains an account of *my experience* of a film . . ." (PH 1, my emphasis) or when he explains his central critical notion:

A reading of a film sets up a continuous appeal to the experience of a film . . . Checking one's experience is a rubric an 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 your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track . . . The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently that it is worthy of trust. The philosophical catch would then be that the education cannot be achieved in advance of the trusting . . . 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 . . . I think of this authority as the right to take an interest in your own experience . . .(PH 12)

We might infer from this that Cavell's film criticism is simply an attempt to describe and analyze his own experience of the films, with no claim that anyone else will experience them in the same way. So understood, Cavell seems to be sponsoring a form of subjective criticism in which anything goes. If the purpose of criticism is simply to describe one viewer's reaction to the films, other viewers may report different reactions, but they can hardly challenge the claim that this is Cavell's experience of the film.

Would Cavell be content to claim that his readings are just accounts of one idiosyncratic philosopher's experience of these films? I think not. Even in the passage just cited, Cavell speaks of subjecting one's experience to examination. Typically he presents his readings as explorations of what the films themselves mean. It is characteristics of Cavell to personify the films with which he deals, to say things like: "this film . . . invite[s] us to consider the source of romance . . ." (PH, 49) or "this film knows its complicity in the tradition of romance . . ." (PH, 104) Generally when Cavell speaks this way, we could substitute a reference to the director as author of the film. So the first of the lines just quoted comes from Cavell's discussion of *The Lady Eve* and sum up a paragraph in which Cavell had concluded that

. . . Preston Sturges is trying to tell us that tales of romance are inherently feats of . . . conning, making gulls or suckers of the audience, and that film, with its typical stories of love set on luxurious ships or in mansions and containing beautiful people and horses and sunsets and miraculously happy endings, is inherently romantic. (PH 48-9)

What the film means is what its director meant in constructing it as he did.

Now I am reluctant to get embroiled in the much disputed question of film authorship. Cavell seems routinely to assume that the director is the author of the film. Fine. Though there is an important sense in which this is false, since film is in many ways a collaborative art, there is an equally important sense in which it is true. In the absence of artistic interference by the producer, or the censor, it is the director who takes final responsibility for the completed product.

The fact that film is a collaborative art, where one of the collaborators has a position of special responsibility, complicates enormously the question of determining the intentions of the film's author. Even if Capra is perfectly sincere in denying the presence of ideas in *It Happened One Night*, he may be wrong. One of his collaborators may well have been inspired by the model of picaresque adventures, or even by the philosophy of Kant. But the question of the author's intentions seems inescapable if we are to take a Cavellian reading of a film to be something more than an exercise in autobiography. So how are we to deal with that question?

Cavell's most explicit answer comes in his discussion of *It Happened One Night*. He has been analyzing the recurring theme of food in the film, from Ellie's hunger strike on her father's yacht in the opening scene, through Peter's refusal to let her buy the chocolates on the bus, the breakfast he fixes for her after the first night in a motel, his provision of raw carrots for her when they spend a night in the fields, his refusal to allow her to panhandle from the road thief, and finally, her acceptance of the carrots as they are riding along in the car. Cavell quotes Margaret Mead on the Arapesh: ". . . a man's claim to his wife's attention and devotion is not that . . . she is legally his property, but that he has actually contributed the food which has become flesh and bone of her body". (PH 94) Imagining someone now to ask whether he is seriously suggesting that Capra attaches the significance to the food motif that he does, Cavell replies that the question

. . . strikes me as based on a primitive view of who Frank Capra is, or any authentic film director, and a primitive view of what a Hollywood film is, or film generally, and a primitive view of what having an intention is . . . one would do well to try conceiving of Capra as possessed of as usable a set of intellectual operations as your average primitive mind . . . The primitive mind, the human mind, can mean things because it has the medium of human culture within which to mean them . . . where things stand together and stand for one another. The genre of remarriage is a small medium of this sort, wherein distinctions can be drawn and, hence, things intended. (PH 94-5)

I suppose talk about the genre's serving as a medium within which things can be intended must mean that it provides a context within which things acquire a significance they would not otherwise have. If that is what Cavell means, it seems a fair objection to point out that, on his count, this film is the first member of the genre. So Capra

could not be relying on audience familiarity with the conventions of the genre to interpret the symbolism. But surely Cavell does not mean to suggest only that. His main point, I take it, is that if it is not beyond the powers of a primitive mind to invest a rich symbolism in transactions involving the use of food, then it is not beyond the powers of a mind as sophisticated as Capra's.

It seems clear that Cavell is fundamentally right to treat food as an important symbol within the film. How do I persuade myself of this? Cavell relies mainly on internal evidence, which in this case certainly has considerable weight. The food motif recurs very frequently, in varying ways, and it seems to be given a certain prominence. Cavell's interpretation pulls these details together and gives them coherence. But I find that interpretation to be strongly confirmed by evidence of a kind which Cavell never considers. Capra's film is based on a short story which originally appeared in *Cosmopolitan* magazine.⁶ It's interesting to compare the short story with the film. While the subject of food inevitably comes up with some frequency in the short story, the authors of the screenplay have picked it up and enlarged on it. There is no opening scene on the yacht in the short story, so of course there is no hunger strike on the yacht. But surely the decision to incorporate a hunger strike into that scene is no accident. The refusal of the chocolates on the bus is an addition of the screen play. And in the source story, when the road thief invites them to share his meal, they accept. But why does the story put so much more emphasis on the subject of food when it makes its transition from short story to screenplay?

Here Capra's autobiography is helpful, for we learn there that *The Taming of the Shrew* was a model for his and Riskin's transformation of the short story. I find that Shakespeare's play provides a context in which Ellie's refusal of food from her father, Peter's refusals of food to her, and her final acceptance of food from him, take on a meaning, even if it is not quite the meaning Cavell attaches to them. I take it that in *The Taming of the Shrew* Petruchio's point, in refusing food to Katherine, is to establish her acceptance of his authority, even when it is exercised quite irrationally. Peter, presumably, has no such intention. Though his second denial of food (refusing to panhandle from the road thief) may show a false pride, his first (the chocolates on the bus) seems perfectly reasonable. They do not have enough money between them for her to engage in such frivolous expenses. The interesting point of similarity with Shakespeare's play is that the woman's acceptance of the man's authority seems to be a key part of her being tamed, that is, proving herself to be a suitable wife for the man.

External evidence also helps me simply to see *It Happened One Night* as a comedy of remarriage, an interpretation which needs some justifying, since the man Ellen Andrews marries at the end of the film is not the man she was (apparently) married to in the beginning. Cavell's justification is couched entirely in terms of internal evidence. The first scene of the film raises the question what constitutes a marriage, as Ellen and her father debate whether she is married to King Westley or not—she is of age and has gone through the appropriate legal ceremony with him, but the marriage has evidently never been consummated, they have never lived together under the same roof. Her journey to New York, however, does require her to spend a number of nights under the same roof with Peter, pretending to be legally married to

him. That is the only condition under which they can share a cabin and escape the attention of those who are searching for Ellie. Though this make-believe marriage is never consummated either, Peter and Ellie do develop the kind of relationship which makes their later separation feel like a divorce. They are solicitous of one another; they achieve "something like marital familiarity", sharing their most personal thoughts and aspirations, and taking a certain joy in uniting against the world outside their own semi-private world; they engage in almost incessant bickering, the "knock-down proof" that they are a seasoned couple. (PH 84-6)

The case Cavell makes by appeal to internal evidence could be considerably strengthened by adding external evidence. In the short story Ellie has not in any sense been married. The whole discussion of her marital status in the scene on the yacht is a deliberate addition, not something taken over from the short story. Note also what the writers of the screenplay have done with the closing scene of the short story. In Adams' story, the motel owner's wife says to her husband: "That's a funny couple in Number Seven, Tim. Do you reckon they're respectable?" and gets the answer: "I should worry. They registered all right, didn't they"? In the film this becomes: "If you ask me, I don't believe they're married." "They're married all right, I just seen the license." The film does display a preoccupation with what constitutes a marriage of which there is no sign in the short story.

Again it is helpful to consider the relevance of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The central problem of Shakespeare's play is that of turning the legal marriage of two bodies into the true marriage of two minds; the legal marriage occurs quite early in Shakespeare's play, after Kate and Petruchio have had only one scene together; the last act celebrates their having achieved a truer union. While Petruchio evidently considers it necessary, in order to tame Kate, to remove her from Padua to his house in the country, he does not fully succeed until they are on the road again, on their way back to her father's house. In the play's final scene, Kate's father is so moved by her transformation that he doubles the dowry, proclaiming that he must provide "Another dowry to another daughter, For she is changed, as she had never been", which is as much as to say that what we have at the end is a second marriage of his daughter to Petruchio. It's curious that for all his invocation of Shakespearean comedy Cavell never mentions the one which seems to have exercised the most demonstrable influence on a member of his genre, and to fit most closely his pattern of a comedy of remarriage.

Cavell seems deliberately to disdain the appeal to such external evidence as source stories and autobiographies. But this strikes me as an unnecessary self-restriction, perhaps an over-reaction to some aestheticians' worries about intentionalist fallacies.⁷ True, the film is meant to be appreciated on its own, without knowledge of the biography of its author or knowledge of source materials. But the film is also meant to be appreciated, at some level, on one screening. Yet Cavell rightly insists on the importance of seeing these films more than once. Given the prima facie extravagance of some of Cavell's interpretations, we ought not to forbid ourselves any evidence that might conceivably have some bearing on the author's intentions.

None of this yet justifies the juxtaposition of Capra and Kant. I want to turn now to that issue, because I think Cavell's inclination to look for that kind of depth in the films with which he deals is one of the things that lies behind the charge of pretentiousness sometimes levelled against his work. According to Cavell, the philosophical theme of *It Happened One Night* is the question of metaphysical isolation and the possibility of community, and the blanket is meant to direct our attention to those issues. As human beings, we are, in two important senses, isolated: from the world, insofar as we can never have direct knowledge of it, and from other human beings, insofar as it is very difficult to achieve a relationship with them in which we acknowledge them as autonomous centers of consciousness with dreams and desires of their own. But the former limitation is less radical than the latter. The world of other people isn't barred to us in quite the inescapable way that the world of nature is. It is, in principle, attainable. The only difficulty is that we cannot reach it alone. What we have to overcome in order to achieve community is the will to isolate ourselves from others. Isolation from others is a temptation each of us is liable to. Each of us is capable, in differing degrees, perhaps, of taking pleasure in our own company. But we suffer conflict because we desire the company of the other also, and we know that satisfying the desire of the other requires us to give up some of the satisfaction we take in our own private world. This is at least one reason why relations between lovers are so complex and ambivalent and marked with expressions of hostility.

This is an idea which Cavell finds both in Kant and in Capra. I am not concerned with the question how far this idea is in Kant. But I am very interested in the question how far it is in Capra, or how far attributing an intuitive appreciation of this psychology to Capra will help us to understand what happens in his film. On Cavell's behalf I think we must acknowledge that the film does, in a quite straightforward way, show a concern with the topic of privacy, a concern for which there is much more internal evidence than Cavell's discussion provides. Not only does Peter say to Ellie, when he is putting up the blanket, "I like privacy when I retire . . . Prying eyes annoy me . . .", but she had a similar line to him earlier, just after the thief stole her luggage ("I want to be left alone"). When she goes to the shower in the morning and, not understanding that she must wait in line, bursts in on another woman unexpectedly, the other woman cries: "Can't a body have any privacy around here?" When the detectives invade their cabin shortly afterward, Peter's complaint, as a husband protecting the sanctity of their home away from home, is: "You can't barge in here. This isn't a public park." Is it coincidence that, as he starts to undress, Peter tells Ellie a story, about a man who, in undressing, always took his hat off last: "Finally his secret came out. He wore a toupee!" Or that the sailor's chorus in the song about the man on the flying trapeze says "His eyes would undress every girl in the house." It is also pertinent that the central story line requires Peter and Ellie to share the secret of her identity, a secret which must be kept from the prying of others at all costs.

These lines illustrate a concern with privacy in its more ordinary sense, in which a person's privacy, his desire to be alone or not to have facts about him known by others, is something which can in fact be violated. Other lines illustrate the more philosophical conception of privacy, according to which each person's mental life is inherently inviolable, inevitably a mystery to others, as when Ellie says to Peter, on learning of his plan to help her get to New York and then to sell her story, "There is a

brain behind that face of yours." After their charade before the detectives, he has an analogous line: "You weren't bad. You've got a brain, haven't you?" Each of them does come to appreciate that the other has a mental life which does not appear on the surface and which can only be guessed at from their behavior. If you look attentively at this film through Cavell's eyes, you will find much more detail to support his interpretation than he bothers to acknowledge. There are many other examples of the film's concern with privacy which I leave the reader the pleasure of discovering for himself on his next viewing.

But Cavell's preoccupation with metaphysical privacy seems to me to lead him astray when it comes to explaining what he rightly calls the crisis of the story: Peter's rejection of Ellie when she first breaks down the barrier by coming over to his side of the blanket, and his going off, without waking her, to sell their story to the paper. Peter had just been describing to Ellie his dreams of love, and the kind of girl he'd like to share them with. But he cannot, at first, accept her as that girl:

To acknowledge her as this woman would be to acknowledge that she is "somebody that's real, somebody that's alive", flesh and blood, someone separate from his dream who therefore has, if she is to be in it, to enter it; and this feels to him to be a threat to him . . . if we express the condition of marriage as one in which first kinship is to be recognized and then an affinity established, we have a possible explanation for a genre of romance taking the form of a narrative of remarriage: legitimate marriage requires that the pair is free to marry . . . but this freedom is announced in these film comedies in the concept of divorce . . . We might understand [Peter's] leaving [Ellie] asleep as his intuition that they require, and his going in search of, a divorce; and understand his failure to accomplish this as his discovery that it cannot be accomplished alone. (PH 100-03)

This is a long quote from a longer explanation. I hope it captures the heart of Cavell's interpretation of these events. But if my exposition fails through omitting some subtlety, Cavell's interpretation fails through engaging in too much subtlety. Peter can hardly have an intuition that they require a divorce, unless he also has an intuition that they are already in some sense married. We can hardly attribute that knowledge to him without also attributing to him much more understanding of the Cavellian philosophy of marriage than seems plausible. And a simpler explanation seems to be available. Arguably, Peter must prove, not only to Ellie, but also to her father, that he is worthy of her love. The story has shown her to be an impetuous young woman, who scarcely knows what she wants, but whose father is a shrewd judge of people, who genuinely cares about her interests. Given Peter's sensitivity about class differences, we can well imagine his "having an intuition" that he must establish the legitimacy of his claim to Ellie with her father before he can accept her declaration of love.⁸

This explanation of the events is less interesting philosophically than Cavell's. It *may* pay a lesser tribute to the genius of Frank Capra. But I daresay it's closer to the truth, where it should be understood that claims to the truth are to be judged by our sense of what Capra would be likely to say about what he had in mind, in a candid

interview, with alternative interpretations laid out before him, and explained to him, if necessary, and where our sense of what he would say is to be developed, not only by attending to the visual and verbal details of this particular film, but also by becoming familiar with the body of works produced by the authors of the film, and by gleaning what can be gleaned from the study of sources, from responses to actual interviews, from autobiographies and so on.

I cannot, of course, prove that my reading of these events is closer to the truth than Cavell's. I imagine that in such matters talk of proof is out of the question. If an interpretation must be, in some strong sense, verifiable in order to be worth discussing, then my interpretation is not worth discussing. Nor will any interpretation which invokes the intentions of the author be worth discussing. For my part I would want to reject such verificationism, but for the moment let us put aside that issue, to consider what Cavell might say in response to these criticisms.

I suppose it would be something like this. "What a film . . . thinks it means . . . is not to be taken as final". (PH 84) If we could interview Capra and lay out these alternatives before him, and if he said, with every appearance of candor, that he has had in mind something more like my reading than like yours, that would, of course, settle the matter in my favor. If he said that he hadn't had that explicitly in mind, but that he could see the relevance of it, and if his acknowledgement of the relevance were accompanied by "a sharp recognition, a sense of clarification",⁹ then that would be enough to claim that he had intended something like what I impute to him. If he denied both that he had had something like that explicitly in mind and that he could see any relevance in it, then, though I might have to grant that my explanation of these events was not what he intended, I might nevertheless insist that it provides a useful way of understanding them. If, after re-examining his work, I still find these connections powerful, I might say that what Capra had done, without realizing it, is to rediscover, or discover "for himself, in himself, the intention of [the] myth itself, the feelings and wants which originally produced it". And I may claim, therefore, still to be guided by his intention in my reading of his film.

To this I in turn would reply that it seems to me to stretch the notion of intention too far for my comprehension. No doubt we would be working with too primitive a notion of intention if we insisted that, for Cavell's interpretation to be valid, Capra must have consciously been thinking along those lines when he created his film. But I do not find it really coherent to suggest that a critic may be guided by an intention which the author of the work could not be brought to recognize as having been his. What a film thinks it means may well not be the final word. But if what, on reflection, it thinks it means is not the final word, then I don't know what would be.¹⁰ My central point, however, is that even when Cavell's interpretation seems extravagant, a strong case can often be made for them. Cavell's arguments for his interpretations typically do not invoke all the relevant evidence, and hence provoke more resistance in the reader than they need to.

II.

Let us turn now to some of the problems raised by Cavell's use of the notion of a genre. We have already seen one problematic feature of that use: sometimes Cavell's paradigmatic members of the genre do not seem to fit even his most general description of it. Sometimes Cavell is able to justify their inclusion—*It Happened One Night* illustrates that nicely. But he is not always so successful. Fond as I am of *Bringing Up Baby*, it still seems to me that the case for its inclusion is weak.

That's the one which features Cary Grant as an absent-minded professor of paleontology, David Huxley, who encounters a scatterbrained heiress, Susan Vance (Katherine Hepburn), on the golf course, while he is trying to talk a potential donor into giving his museum a million dollars. At no time during the course of the film are David and Susan married, or pretending to be married. David is, at the beginning of the film, about to marry his assistant, a Miss Swallow, and the threat of that union does prompt Susan to ask, pointedly, "What for?" But on the face of it, that's about as deep as the reflection on marriage gets.

Cavell would no doubt insist that in this film we must look beneath the surface of things, and certainly the film contains a lot of double entendre, which may invite us to reflect on certain aspects of our sexuality. But his central justification for including the film seems to be that here we are entering the myth of the comedies of remarriage in its earliest phase, that we are being shown a couple whose ". . . conversation is such, [whose] capacities for recognition of one another are such that what they are is revealed by imagining them as candidates for the trials of remarriage—as though we are here in . . . the prehistoric phases of the myth". (PH 114) Noting that David and Susan's actions "have the quality of a series of games . . . [which] the female likes . . . and the male plays unwillingly . . ." (PH 124) and that David and Susan seem oblivious to the sexual meanings of the things they say and do, Cavell contends that these facts ". . . add up to a representation of a particular childhood world, to that stage of childhood preceding puberty . . . in which childish sexual curiosity has been repressed until the onset of new physiological demands . . . reawakens it". (PH 125) What we are being shown is not a couple falling in love, but a couple "becoming childhood sweethearts, inventing for themselves a shared, lost past, to which they can wish to remain faithful". (PH 127) That their lives are now inextricably linked is shown by the fact that his attempts at flight are "forever transforming [themselves] into (hence revealing [themselves] as) a process of pursuit". (PH 113)

Fascinating as this is, something like it might be said of any romantic comedy which succeeds in persuading us that the central pair are well-matched. Not that every such romantic comedy will feel like the recreation of a childhood world. But it will have to convince us somehow that the couple shares enough to be able to weather the inevitable storms of married life, and to that extent will have to present them as candidates for remarriage. In any case, some of Cavell's claims for this movie just will not hold up. Do David and Susan really engage in a conversation which shows them to be capable of recognizing one another? True, she recognizes, with the help of a psychiatrist, that she is the object of his repressed desire (PH 114), and the narrative concludes by her bringing him to recognize that fact. Still, do they ever engage in any-

thing rightly called a conversation? Most of the fun of this film depends precisely on that fact that they are constantly talking at cross-purposes. He says something to her (e.g., "You can't climb into a man's bedroom window") and her reply completely misses the point of his remark ("Of course not, it's on the second floor", as if his objection had been to the physical possibility rather than the propriety). If conversation requires some shared understanding of what is being said, then this pair never engages in any kind of conversation.

Doubts of this kind might lead us to ask about the apparent absence in *Bringing Up Baby* of other features of the genre: what, in this film, might be viewed as the man's education of the woman? and what are we to make of the fact that the woman's father is no more present than the mother is? Cavell must think that these lacks are somehow compensated for by something else in the film (as the absence of a shared past in *It Happened One Night* is supposed to be compensated for by a shared commitment to adventurousness. (PH 29). If he were to address questions of this kind, we might learn something useful about this concept of compensation. As things stand, we have so little theorizing about the concept, and so few examples of its use to guide us, that, in the absence of an official pronouncement by Cavell, we can hardly tell whether a film belongs to the genre or not.

Cavell's decisions about what films to include as members of the genre have generally, I think, been felt to be somewhat arbitrary.¹¹ An interesting example of exclusion occurs in his treatment of *Private Lives*. Cavell insists quite emphatically on the restrictive character of his notion of a genre: "I am working with a notion of a genre that demands that a feature found in one of its members must be found in all, or some equivalent or compensation found in each . . ."¹² So although in *Private Lives* Elyot and Amanda show themselves capable of sophisticated and witty conversation, though they appreciate one another more than anyone else,

. . . their . . . exchanges get nowhere; their makings up never add up to forgiving one another . . . they are forever stuck in an orbit around the foci of desire and contempt . . . 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 acknowledgement; to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness . . . (PH 18-19)

Now this seems helpful in explaining why someone might feel the film to have little substance. Arguably it does not, as Cavell's best comedies of remarriage do, have anything to teach us about marriage or the conditions for happiness in marriage. But is that a sufficient ground for excluding it from the genre? Why not instead regard *Private Lives* as an inferior member of the genre, as Cavell does, for example, with Hitchcock's *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, a film he might have criticized in terms very like those he applies to *Private Lives*?

Do these arbitrary decisions matter? Sometimes Cavell seems to suggest that they do not. On the picture of genre he seems to favor,

. . . nothing . . . count[s] as a feature [of a genre] until an act of criticism defines it as such. (Otherwise it would always have been obvious that, for instance, the subject of a remarriage was a feature, indeed, a leading feature of a genre.) (PH 28)

This seems to endow the critic with entirely too much authority. A genre, I should have thought, is created, not by critics, but by the artists working within it. One day an artist finds the subject of remarriage an interesting one and writes a play, or a short story, or a screenplay about it. Some time later another artist come along, takes an interest in the same subject, but wants to treat it differently than his predecessor has done, and invents a variation on that theme. If this happens often enough, then a genre exists, whether any critic has studied the genre or not. No doubt when some critic does begin to study the genre, there will be decisions to be made about what should and should not count as a feature of the genre. But it is for the critic to persuade the reader that counting such-and-such as a feature of the genre (or allowing something else to "compensate" for the absence of that feature) illuminates our understanding of a family of works which not only bear interesting resemblances to one another, but also are, in some sense, causally related to one another, quite independently of any critics who may have decided to relate them to one another.

These remarks imply that a genre will have a history, and that one task of the critic studying the genre may be to reflect on that history. Cavell thinks otherwise. At any rate, he writes that he is not writing history, and implies that there can be no such thing as the history of a genre: "A genre emerges full-blown, in a particular instance first . . . and then works out its internal consequences in further instances . . . it has no history, only a birth and a logic (or a biology)". (PH 27-8) But this genre does have a history, and Cavell seems frequently to acknowledge it, e.g., when he notes the allusions made by the creators of later works in the genre to ideas used by earlier creators, like the homage Hawks pays to McCarey in the restaurant scene in *His Girl Friday* (PH 232; cf. also PH 27).

This is history in the form of causal influence of earlier members of the genre on later members, but there is also history in a different sense: internal development of the genre over time, as when the madcap heiresses of the earlier members of the genre give way to the career women of the later members. It is difficult to see that Ellie Andrews of *It Happened One Night* (1934), or the Lucy Warriner of *The Awful Truth* (1937), have any *raison d'être* except to be beautiful and witty and talented and amorous in a setting of luxury and leisure, with perhaps the occasional act of charity to the deserving poor.¹³ The Hildy Johnson of *His Girl Friday* (1940), on the other hand, has a craft which she takes pride in being good at, and a sense that her craft can be made to serve some larger purpose, perhaps the cause of justice. In the end her decision to forego the dubious joys of married life in Albany for the excitement of life in the big city with Walter is as much a response to that calling as it is to him. Similar comments apply to Amanda Bonner in *Adam's Rib* (1949).

This development within the genre is something a critic might undertake to explain. Perhaps the causes lie to some extent in external social circumstances, but they may also lie to some extent within the genre. I take that to imply that no one

would find the life of an Ellie Andrews satisfying for very long, either as lived or as witnessed on the screen. I take my suggestion to be confirmed by Tracy Lord's exclamation in *The Philadelphia Story*: "Oh, George—to get away—! Somehow to feel useful in the world." If we take the definitive remarriage comedies in chronological order, *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) falls squarely in the middle. Like Tracy, the Barbara Stanwyck character in *The Lady Eve* (1941) is a transitional figure. As Eve, she is the frivolous heiress; as Jean, she is a working girl, who takes pride in her craft, even if she is useful to the world only insofar as she helps to redistribute income from the very rich to the comfortably off. It is a curious feature of *Pursuits of Happiness* that Cavell deliberately avoids taking up his films in their chronological order (cf. PH 34).

Had Cavell thought of his genre as something which develops over time, then he might have preferred a less restrictive conception of it, focussing on its most general features, and regarding some of his "laws" of the genre as defining variations within it. On this less restrictive conception, there would be room in the genre for a later film like *The Marrying Kind*, where the marriage involves a child, and where it is presented as being strong enough to survive the death of that child. I think the ends of criticism would have been better served by a conception of the genre broad enough also to find a predecessor for *It Happened One Night* in *Private Lives*. If Cavell is right to include the Capra film in his genre, and if the Capra film is even half as rich in ideas as Cavell claims it is, then surely it is a paradox that the genre should emerge full-blown in that particular instance. Is it probable that the first member should be so fully-developed a specimen?¹⁴

Of course, Cavell does not think *It Happened One Night* was created *ex nihilo*. There are the Shakespearean and Ibsenite precedents. And it seems that Capra and Riskin did have Shakespeare very definitely in mind when they wrote the final screenplay. So let us grant that the Shakespearean tradition is part of the inheritance of Cavell's genre, i.e., that we can find in the plays of Shakespeare the themes which, on Cavell's analysis, dominate the comedies of remarriage: not only the choice of a mature woman as heroine and the emphasis on her role and on her relation to her father (the mother typically being conspicuous by her absence), but also the creation of a new woman, the finding of a lost love, and the removal of the action to a place of perspective. It is still the case that none of the Shakespearean plays has, in any literal sense, the plot structure of a remarriage comedy. Only if we have that structure firmly in our mind will we see any relevant similarity in such plays as *A Winter's Tale* or *The Taming of the Shrew*. But *Private Lives* does have precisely that plot structure. So why not see it as another part of the inheritance of the later films in the genre, as a first, perhaps superficial, attempt to deal with material which later members of the genre treat more profoundly?

I am encouraged in this suggestion by what I take to be an unmistakable verbal echo of Coward's play in *It Happened One Night*. I have in mind the scene in which Peter Warne confronts Ellie's father for the first time. In the short story, when Peter presents Ellie's father with his bill for expenses incurred in transporting Ellie to New York, the following dialogue occurs:

Mr. Andrews: "Did she kick much?"
 Peter: "There were times when . . ."
 Mr. Andrews: "You'd have liked to sock her. I know . . ."

In the Capra-Riskin film this becomes:

Mr. Andrews: "Do you love her?"
 Peter: "What she needs is a guy that'd take a sock at her once a day whether it was coming to her or not."

Now the notion that a troublesome female may require the application of physical force could perfectly well come from *The Taming of the Shrew*.¹⁵ But to my mind Peter's observation inevitably recalls one of the best-know lines from the Coward play:

Amanda: "I've been brought up to believe that it's beyond the pale, for a man to strike a woman".
 Ellyot: "A very poor tradition. Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs."

If we make allowance for the differences between British and American idiom, this is too close to be a chance similarity. But if *Private Lives* influenced the creation of *It Happened One Night*, that strengthens the case for counting the film version of that play as the first (or at least as an earlier) member of the genre. Loosening up the criteria for membership in the genre would allow us to see it as developing gradually out of imperfect instances. And that seems to me a more plausible view of genre than Cavell's.

III.

One of Cavell's great virtues as a critic is his capacity to bring an incredibly wide range of reading to bear on whatever subject he is discussing, and to make striking connections between things most of us would never have thought of together. The mythic description of the genre makes clear the influence of Freud on Cavell's conception of marriage. But who would have expected a philosophical defense of marriage in the 20th Century to marry Freud with a Puritan poet of the 17th Century? Yet it is Milton's Scriptural defense of divorce which provides Cavell with the key to his own secular justification of marriage. In urging Parliament to enlarge the then very narrow grounds for divorce, Milton had appealed to Genesis:

What [God's] chief end was of creating woman to be joined with man, his own instituting words declare, and are infallible to inform us what is marriage and what is no marriage . . . "It is not good . . . that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmeet for him". From which words so plain, less cannot be concluded . . . than that in God's intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and noblest end of marriage, for we find here no expression so necessar-

ily implying carnal knowledge as this prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man.¹⁶

Where there is a meet and happy conversation, marriage is an honorable estate; where there is not, there is no marriage worthy of the name.

Cavell reminds us that Nora's first complaint, when she sat down with Torvald to explain why she was leaving him, had been that in the eight years of their marriage, they had never had a serious conversation. Consequently their marriage, involving as it did the sharing of a stranger's bed, dishonored her. Cavell's comedies portray relationships where talk takes center stage. Though that talk may not always be probing the metaphysics of marriage, it is consistently urbane, intelligent, witty, and intensely personal. The central pair are learning, or have learned, to speak their own private language. Their ability to communicate with one another in a way not shared with others is the surest sign of their intimacy with and knowledge of one another, a reason why their relationship strikes us as having the quality of friendship, a reason why we find it appropriate to say that "they appreciate one another more than they appreciate anyone else and that they would rather be appreciated by one another more than by anyone else". (PH 84-8, 167) Part of the charm these films hold for us is that they give visible form to an ideal of relationship in which neither party is in bondage to the other, and show us how marriage can be an honorable estate.

Whether or not this is apt as a description of the kind of marriage enjoyed by the central pair in these seven films—I think it is apt for some and not for others—when it is proposed as an answer to the question "Under what conditions is a marriage legitimate?" we may worry about the implications for marriages in general. One of the striking features of Cavell's seven comedies is that typically they do not set their central pairs off against another couple, as *A Doll House* does when it invites us to compare the relationship between Nora and Torvald with that between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad. The principal exception is instructive. In *Adam's Rib* we can scarcely avoid considering the contrast between Adam and Amanda Bonner's marriage and the Attingers'. The film has given us a very detailed picture of the Bonners' marriage. Clearly it would be disappointing for such a match to be permanently dissolved. From what we have learned of the Attingers' marriage, on the other hand—that their conversation turns mainly on her weight problems and his philandering, and that she regularly takes her revenge on him by punching him in his sleep—we can hope for little happiness there. Nevertheless, a scene at the end of the film suggests that the Attingers too will reunite. Cavell's description of the scene merits our attention:

The reporters and photographers . . . have put together not only Mrs. Attinger and her three children but Mr. Attinger with those four and then Beryl Kane with the five of them, posing the six together, all smiling, if uneasy, in a kind of family portrait. Here is a wacky, and no less genuine for being temporary, pursuit of happiness, *one uncomprehended by our laws*. We are not, I believe, happy with the verdict of Not Guilty, or rather we do not know what to make of it, what it should have been. But we are happier with the consequences of the verdict, seeing the children back with their

parents, and we even participate a little in their contrived reconciliations. What else, until the world changes, would be a happier outcome? (PH 225, my emphasis)

What else, indeed? Cavell evidently finds a certain awkwardness in the conclusion of *Adam's Rib*.

One reason for that, I suggest, is that it forces on us the question of the legitimacy of marriages whose partners are not Adam and Amanda Bonner. If the legitimacy of a marriage is tied to the possibilities for happiness in the marriage, and the possibilities for happiness are in turn tied to the possibility of a certain kind of conversation—intensely personal, witty, urbane, intelligent, containing explorations of the metaphysics of marriage—then we must ask whether this view of marriage does not set the conditions for legitimacy too high, i.e., beyond the reach of most members of society.

One way of raising this question is to ask whether it is possible to imagine Judy Holliday as the heroine of a comedy of remarriage. Given a certain understanding of what that kind of comedy involves, the answer would have to be yes, since George Cukor imagined her in that role three years after *Adam's Rib*, in *The Marrying Kind*, a film which shares not only its director, but also its screenwriters with *Adam's Rib*, and a film which seems to deliberately take as its problem the validity of more ordinary marriages, i.e., of marriages between more ordinary people, who may be too inarticulate for the kind of conversation which seems natural between a Tracy and a Hepburn. Though *The Marrying Kind* has the basic plot structure of a comedy of remarriage, it is surely no accident that Cavell never mentions it as a candidate for membership, and that he proclaims *Adam's Rib* "the last of the major remarriage comedies". (PH 226) Surely Cavell did not simply neglect this later film. Possibly he considered including it, but rejected it on the ground that it doesn't succeed in what it tries to do. It seems characteristic of Cavell's criticism that he is not willing to give much attention to films he finds not as good as his definitive seven.

Nevertheless, I suspect that Cavell would regard *The Marrying Kind*, not as a failed member of the genre, but as a film which doesn't belong in the genre at all. We simply cannot imagine Judy Holliday (remaining in character and being) engaged in the kind of conversation Cavell makes a requirement of this genre. Early in the book Cavell had asked why the genre ends when it does—by his reckoning, that would be 1949—and had suggested as an answer that ". . . it ends when the small set of women who made it possible are no longer of an age to play its leads".¹⁷ But if the set of women capable of playing the lead in this kind of comedy is so small, then it seems dangerous to take these films as proposing a solution to the problem of the legitimacy of marriage. A philosophy of marriage committed to denying the validity of most actual marriages must have gone wrong somewhere along the way.

Now it might be suggested¹⁸ that I am here taking the notion of conversation too literally. Clearly Cavell "means something more by conversation than just talk . . . In [the films in question] talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life . . ." (PH 87-88) And it might be suggested that conversa-

tion in these films is a metaphor for something deeper, for a relationship involving mutual acknowledgement and respect. Actual conversation between the pair is not necessary, so long as the relationship it signifies is present. After all, what Nora was really complaining about was not that she and Torvald never discussed serious subjects, but that they never discussed them in a way which showed that Torvald was taking her, her opinions and her feelings, seriously. When Torvald had tried in the first act to explain to her the need to be prudent about their family finances, his manner had been that of a father addressing a small child. Cavell's films express the same longing Nora felt for a relationship based on reciprocity, a longing for mutual freedom and equality. But as romantic comedies they contain a Utopian vision of a couple's achieving a relationship they both desire. In so doing they represent an important stage in the development of feminist consciousness (PH 16-18).

Now perhaps this is what Cavell would and should say in response to the kind of criticism I have been suggesting. But I think it does not represent the most natural reading of his book. No doubt by conversation he does mean something more than just talk. But he must also mean *at least* talk. Otherwise why contend that the genre could only begin after the development of the sound film?¹⁹ If Cavell had intended his notion of conversation to be taken metaphorically, he could hardly have indicated this more clearly than by allowing as a member of the genre a film about the separation and reunion of an essentially inarticulate couple.

However that may be, the line of response we have just been considering does force us to ask whether Cavell's comedies of remarriage really merit the title he claims for them, of being comedies of equality. A feminist, looking to Cavell's films for an expression of the ideal of equality between men and women, might be troubled by the notion that the women in these comedies must seek an education from the men. It may be a sufficient reply to point out that Nora had recognized *her* need for an education, and had rejected Torvald as a husband on the ground that he was not the man to give her that education. Perhaps this is no more than a realistic recognition of the way things are. Given centuries of male domination, how else are women to achieve equality with men but by learning from them?

But what are we to make of those films in the genre in which the principal educating force seems to be the woman rather than the man? This seems to me a surprising feature, not noted by Cavell, of at least three of his films: *The Awful Truth*, *Bringing Up Baby*, and *The Lady Eve*. Of course, I've argued on other grounds that the second of these films does not belong in the genre anyway. And in the first, I don't think the woman's educative role makes it impossible to see the comedy as one where the central pair are equals. But this could hardly be said of *The Lady Eve*, whose hero seems to be little more than a subject for feminine manipulation. That Charles is hardly a responsible agent seems to me the true solution to the difficulty Cavell raises about his repeating to Eve the story he had told Jean about feeling that he had always known her and always loved her (PH 60-61). In the immediately preceding scene, Eve had been describing to Curly her plans to con Charles into a proposal. The scenes are linked by a dissolve which signifies, I think, that what happens in it happens according to her direction, as a fulfillment of her desire for revenge. Does Charles, at the end of this film, have *any* idea what has happened to him?

Some of Cavell's other comedies of equality, on the other hand, show a strong pattern of male domination, most notably, *His Girl Friday*, whose closing image—of Walter racing off to cover a new story, unchivalrously leaving Hildy to tag along behind, struggling with her suitcase—is hardly one of reciprocity. She may be willing to accept a working honeymoon with him, but if my experience of the film is any guide, she would have preferred a more straightforwardly romantic proposition. Cavell claims that Walter's ". . . conduct toward Hildy is guided and limited by two things he wants back from her in a genuine, unmanipulated state, namely, the service of her talent as a writer, and her acknowledgement of her need for him". (PH 165) But it's hard to see that Walter's conduct towards Hildy (or anyone else) is limited by any moral constraints or that Hildy's final recognition of her need for Walter (and of her need to be a newspaperman) had not been brought about by manipulation.²⁰ What would be more manipulative than the reverse psychology Walter uses in the final scene? She begins reminiscing about their past adventures and he reminds her that they could have gone to jail for the things he did. He goes on to argue that she'll really be better off with Bruce, that he can write the story himself. "It won't be half as good as you could do, but what's the difference?" What she really wants is the kind of life Bruce can offer her in Albany. The unfortunate thing is that a part of her does genuinely want what Bruce offered her: the feeling that she came first in his life. The dark side of the film's happy ending is that that romantic desire will never be satisfied. It might be easier to accept this film as a genuine comedy of equality if we felt at the end that Walter was making some of the compromises.

I find a similar pattern of male dominance in *The Philadelphia Story*, where Tracy's transformation of perception takes the form of a recognition that she had not been sufficiently "yare", i.e., not easily enough steered or managed, and in *It Happened One Night*, where Ellie's proving herself to be the right sort of girl for Peter requires her to yield to his dream of the ideal life. Cavell takes the ambiguity over who blows the trumpet to signify that our genre leaves it ambiguous whether the man or the woman is the active or the passive partner (PH 81-2), but Peter's attitude toward Ellie throughout the film is that of the protective male who must make decisions for a woman too immature to make her own. His paternalism would be hard to distinguish from Torvald's. When Ellie does take some initiative in their relationship (e.g., in the hitchhiking scene or on the second night in a motel), he does not accept it well.²¹ Cavell's notion that his films are comedies of equality will not bear much examination.

Early in the book Cavell had claimed that the existence of the genre of the comedy of remarriage proved something about American culture: that, contrary to much opinion, feminist concerns had been able to get themselves "on the agenda of an otherwise preoccupied nation" during the four decades from the thirties throughout most of the sixties:

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 culture. (PH, 17)

That Cavell's films do represent such data seems to be undeniable. But that they express a longing for reciprocity and equality seems to me far more questionable. In fact, I would suggest, the articulation of feminist concerns is a relatively late development in the genre. Of Cavell's seven films the only one with a clearly feminist agenda is the last, *Adam's Rib*. Perhaps it is not accidental that it is also the only one in which a woman (Ruth Gordon) gets credit as co-writer of the screenplay.²² Does Cavell's notion that his genre has no history lead him to project those concerns back into the earlier films?

My discussion of Cavell has been highly critical. I have argued, first, that his interpretations of particular films are often extravagant, if held to any objective standard, such as that of the author's intentions; second, that his conception of this genre is highly arbitrary, both in its decisions about inclusions and exclusions, but also in its denial that the genre possesses a history; and finally, that the philosophy of marriage implicit in Cavell's criticism is unsatisfactory in that it implies the illegitimacy of most existing marriages, and that his paradigm comedies of remarriage are only dubiously comedies of equality between the sexes.

But I would not end on a negative note. If my own experience of the films he discusses is rather different from Cavell's, my experience of teaching a course based on his book at two different universities has taught me to have great respect for his imaginativeness. In particular, I think his claim that this genre of film has its roots in Shakespearean comedy is as valid as it is initially startling. I think he is also correct to claim that these films do raise some very difficult philosophical questions about marriage, and that sometimes they do this quite consciously. If Cavell's work fails to establish all that it claims to, one major reason is that it is an incredibly ambitious book. Even if every criticism I have made of it is correct, it remains true that Cavell has shown these films to be far richer than anyone would have imagined before he wrote. If the function of criticism is to alter permanently our perception of a work of art, to show that it can bear the weight of detailed analysis and discussion, that it illuminates our deepest human concerns, then Cavell has written criticism of the highest order. □

END NOTES

¹ This is a revised version of a paper read to the American Society for Aesthetics in Los Angeles in November 1984. For criticism of various drafts I am indebted to Roger Shiner, Bob Sitton, and George Dickie.

² Not that these films exhaust the genre. Cavell mentions at least five other members, and prima facie there would seem to be many others.

³ "The Thought of Movies", in Cavell's *Themes Out of School*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 12-3.

⁴ See *The Men Who Made the Movies*, by Richard Schickel, (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 73. For similar remarks, see Capra's autobiography, *The Name*

Above the Title, 166-7, when he rejects the interpretation of *It Happened One Night* as a picaresque adventure. Cf. Cavell, 105.

⁵ In *The Name Above the Title* (172-8) Capra dates a decision to provide something more than entertainment to a period of depression and anxiety just after the success of *It Happened One Night*.

⁶ Samuel Hopkins Adams' "Night Bus", reprinted in *Box Office*, ed. by Marjorie Barrows and George Eaton, (Ziff-Davis, 1943).

⁷ Cavell defends his disregard of sources on 25-5, saying that it is unpredictable how a screenwriter will translate a play into the medium of film. But this does not seem sufficient. Part of what we mean by talking about artistic creativity is that it is unpredictable what any artist will do with his source. This does not mean that we cannot learn something about an author's intentions by seeing how he transformed his sources.

⁸ In the short story, there is no declaration of love in the motel; Peter drives Ellie all the way to New York; as they part, she asks whether she will see him again; he says "No". Later, listening to a recording of his conversation with her father, she learns that he loves her, but does not feel he will ever make enough money to give her the life she requires. The film's solution to their separation and reunion is far more dramatic, permitting the race to get to New York and back before Ellie wakes, the confrontation between Peter and his editor, and the brilliant climax at the altar.

⁹ Here, and below, I borrowed phrases from the final pages of "A Matter of Meaning It", in *Must We Mean What We Say?*

¹⁰ Getting the author to speak of questions of interpretation may not be easy. I tried sending an earlier version of this paper to Frank Capra and got the following reply (quoted in its entirety): "I read Stanley Cavell's book on comedy on which you hoped I would comment. My comment is simple: to each his own. I make films, but I leave the commentary up to the experts."

¹¹ See, for example, the reviews by Noel Carroll (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1982) and by Michael Wood (*New York Review of Books*, 1982).

¹² PH 146. In theory Cavell disavows this conception of genre when he writes in favor of an alternative conception, according to which "there is nothing one is tempted to call *the* features of a genre which all its members have in common". I find it very difficult to see why Cavell says this, but the fact that he finds it impossible in practice not to talk about the features of the genre, and not to exclude candidates from membership in the genre because they lack essential features, suggests to me that he does not really have any workable alternative conception of genre to offer.

¹³ Ellie's handout to the boy and his mother on the bus is reminiscent of Amanda's credo in *Private Lives*: "I believe in being kind to everyone, and giving money to old beggar women, and being as gay as possible".

14 I put this question at the level of intuition, but it can only be answered by an examination of the histories of the various genres. Schatz's discussion of generic evolution (in *Hollywood Genres*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981, 26-41) seems to me to confirm it, though I gather that he would regard the gangster film as an exception.

15 Or from the tradition of which Shakespeare's play is now the best known member. It is part of the originality of Shakespeare's play that Petruchio does not, in fact, use physical force on Katherine, though he threatens to. "Petruchio's . . . methods of taming his shrew are positively kindly compared with what happens in most of the other medieval and Renaissance versions of the shrew-taming plot where sadistic violence is common place . . . *Pace* stage tradition, Shakespeare's Petruchio does not carry a whip and insofar as he deprives his wife of food and sleep, he imposes the same deprivations on himself". *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Ann Thompson, (Cambridge, 1984), 28.

16 "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce", in *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Milton*, ed. by Cleanth Brooks, (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 629.

17 PH 26. Cavell does not accept this answer. He goes on to write 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". There follows a discussion of *Starting Over*, *An Unmarried Woman*, and *Kramer vs. Kramer*. So Cavell does not take back, but reinforces, the claim that only a very special kind of woman is suitable to play the lead in a comedy of remarriage.

18 In fact, what follows is roughly what Roger Shiner did suggest in his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

19 PH 18. A bit further on (PH 27) Cavell is more tentative, suggesting that a critic might be able to show that "the fact of sound should not be regarded as essential to the genre".

20 Cavell writes that "it would be reasonable to describe *His Girl Friday* as the introduction of a Shakespearean leading pair into a Jonsonian environment". (PH, 171) But if this implies, as it ought to, that Walter possesses a nature capable of refinement and change, that he is not a cit, mountebank, cozenner, braggart or bully, then it needs a lot more justification than Cavell gives it. Applied to Hildy, the description makes perfect sense.

21 Note that in the short story Ellie takes the initiative in securing their reunion by sending Peter a toy trumpet and going to visit him after she learns of his love for her. In the film their reunion is brought about only by the intervention of her father.

²² It's curious that Cavell finds Amanda's immediate sympathy for Doris Attinger an implausible reaction for an American woman living at that time (PH 197-8). Her reaction is shared both by her maid and by her secretary.