The tragedy of remarriage: letter to M. Cavell about cinema (a remake)

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Introduction

In 1757, Jean d'Alembert wrote an entry on "Genève" (Geneva) in the seventh volume of the *Encyclopédie*, the great encapsulation of the Enlightenment, of which he was also one of the general editors. Among other things, the article proposed that Geneva should relax its sumptuary laws so as to permit the establishment of a theater. It was generally suspected that this part of the article was either written or suggested by Voltaire, who was living in exile there at the time and complaining bitterly to his friends about the lack of a theater.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in Geneva, had contributed many entries to the *Encyclopédie* on music and political economy and was well known as a composer and patron of the theater. He had recently reconverted to Calvinism, however, and reclaimed his Genevan citizenship. Determined to oppose Voltaire's suggestion that theater represented cultural and political progress, he wrote a public letter to his editor and friend. It was published in 1758 as *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (*Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*). It provoked an extended public exchange and represented Rousseau's permanent break from d'Alembert, Diderot and all his former Enlightenment allies.

In our day, the optimistic view that a nation's political culture may be improved by the exposure of its people to spectacles of a particular kind has again become popular. It has been endorsed by many but

celebrated by one distinguished voice in particular, especially with reference to film, that of Stanley Cavell. It is therefore necessary, once again, to rehearse the opposing view, not out of any dislike for that medium, but out of a greater concern for its corrosive effects on our democracy. Not having found any way to improve on Rousseau's style of presentation, I have adapted it to my own ends. As for the arguments, no doubt I have debased them.

Cavell's contributions to aesthetics, philosophy and film theory are immense and anyone who reads what follows will see how much I have benefited from them. I regret that his current poor health makes it impossible for me to address these remarks to him directly or to expect any reply from him, but I trust that the other respondents will hold me to account on his behalf as well as their own. I thank them for this, as well as for tolerating a form of presentation that is out of fashion.

Preface

I am wrong, if I lay my hands on my keyboard on this occasion without good cause. It can be neither advantageous nor agreeable to me to attack M. Cavell. I respect his person; I admire his talents; I love his works; I am moved by the good things he has said of my country. A just response to his decency obliges me to every sort of consideration toward him; but consideration outweighs conviction only with those for whom all morality consists in gratitude. Humanity and truthfulness are our first duties; every time that particular discretion causes us to change this order, we are culpable.

Since not everyone will have M. Cavell's encyclopedic works on film before their eyes, I shall here transcribe some of the passages, from an essay entitled "The Good of Film," that set me, on this occasion, before my private screen.

[M]y attention has over the years rather been attracted to cases that show film, good films, to have an affinity with a particular conception of the good ... It is the conception found in what I have called Emersonian perfectionism.

As a perfectionism it is going to have something to do with being true to oneself, or, in Foucault's title, the caring of the self, hence with a dissatisfaction, sometimes despair, with the self as it stands; so something to do with a progress of self-cultivation ... The decisive difference of Emerson's outlook from that in Plato's *Republic* is that the soul's journey to itself is not pictured as a continuous path directed upward to a known point of completion but rather as a zigzag of discontinuous steps following the lead of what Emerson calls my "unattained but attainable self" (as if there is a sage in each of us), an idea that projects no unique point of arrival but only a willingness for change, directed by specific aspirations that, while rejected, may at unpredictable times return with new power ... The sage in us is what remains after all our social positionings.

[T]he genre of Hollywood comedy ... [that] I name ... comedies of remarriage were working out ideas in Emersonian perfectionism ... The

lives of the remarriage couples ... arrive at a moment in which they have to reaffirm their marriages by taking them intact back into participation in the ordinary world, and attest their faith, or perception, that they consent to their society as one in which a moral life of mutual care is pursuable, and worth the show of happiness sufficient to encourage others to take their lives further, as if happiness in a democracy is a political emotion.¹

This is certainly the most agreeable and seductive scene that could be offered us, but it is, at the same time, the most dangerous advice that could be given. At least, such is my sentiment and my reasons are in this writing. With what avidity will the young of philosophy, swept away by such a sage of our sageness, give themselves to ideas for which they already have too great a penchant? How many young Americans, otherwise good citizens, are waiting for the moment to dash off to the multiplex, believing that they are rendering a service to their country and nearly to humankind? This is the subject of my alarm; this is the danger that remains unacknowledged. I have no more desire to displease M. Cavell than he to do us injury, but, even if mistaken, must I not act and speak according to the world as I have viewed it? Would it not be a treason to that world and my place in it to do otherwise?

Widespread printing and reading destroyed the art of memory; recording and broadcasting destroyed the household practice of music; motorized transportation destroyed the art of horsemanship; the great singing and dancing movies of the twentieth century coincided with the demise of routine instruction in singing and dancing for the middle class. How is it that I, a supposedly well-educated individual of the twenty-first century, can neither recite poetry nor play an instrument, nor ride a horse, nor dance with even the slightest competence? All I am good for is reading and karaoke. Shall we really, then, hope to become better democrats by putting our hopes and dreams for democracy on film and expecting them to inspire us? For what other practice has this method proven successful? For every popular representation that is created, a human activity is destroyed; let anyone who can show me where this is not the law.

¹ Stanley Cavell, "The Good of Film," in *Cavell on Film*, edited by William Rothman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 334–7, 348.

What reception can such a writer expect to receive who defends democracy *against* happiness and perhaps also the reverse, against the greatest aesthetic achievements of the twentieth century. Against happiness! Against art! What delightful recommendations for a book! How slight is the audience with a disposition to tolerate this! Yet, if this letter fails to reach its destination with the public – the small, remnant reading public – there is no place to put the blame but on the hands that type these words. Blessed with every kind of fortune – good health, good friends, a fine family and position – I am nonetheless in the grip of trepidation that I cannot exorcise and I tremble when I consider the duty set before me. I have seen what must be done but lack the courage and wit to do it. Isolation may temper the passions that sociability excites, but it cannot extirpate them nor produce new resources of audacity by itself when the material is lacking. Reader, if you receive this work with indulgence, you will see the moment of substance that casts the shadow; for, as for me, I am less, and more, but not equal to the task.

I

How many questions I find to discuss in what you appear to have unsettled! Whether the cinema, or even just the genre you specify, is good or bad in itself? What it is that attracts us to it? What sort of experience the cinema is? What the time of cinema signifies or whether it signifies anything at all? Not to be of your opinion on some of these points is to make myself clear enough about the others.

Of no less importance: what are the ties – economic, moral, erotic – which make possible the constitution and continuous reconstitution of a people as such from an assortment or multitude of humans? And at what cost to their souls or their individuality? How can the bonds of union be those of liberty?

I believe it was a previous letter writer who first grasped (or perhaps first translated from Greek tragedy into modern terms) the fundamental political problem that the mobility of eros is incompatible

with the political need for institutional stasis.² We must speak precisely here: it is not the irrationality or strength of eros, per se, that is the problem. Avarice, in the sense of desire for money, is a passion both irrational and powerful, but our political and economic theorists have found many ways of channeling it into stable institutions because, for all its irrationality, avarice is predictable. Its object is unchanging and the paths to that object are relatively well known. Eros, however, is not predictable in that way. Its objects are *not* fixed and the paths to them are so various as to be incomputable. Therefore, the institutionalization of eros must, initially at least, be a more vexing task.

Marriage, we might say, is a stable (or unstable) institution of eros in the same sense that the market is a stable (or unstable) institution of avarice. Indeed, the forms and systems of marriage have been various enough that one might define marriage simply as any institution that succeeds in ordering some particular set of erotic desires. But, eros being different from avarice, the mechanism of stability in the two institutions cannot be the same. Nothing is “maximized” in a marriage and certainly not erotic pleasure. How, then, does the institution work, when does it fail, and what is the price of it “working”? And can these mechanisms, however they function in marriage, inform us in turn about the bonds of a democratic political union which faces its own erotic challenge? Is our polity at stake in our system of marriage, as many today for very different reasons suppose? I think perhaps you and I agree that it is, but, again, for reasons very much other than the ordinary.

The democratic state, that is the state that is freely founded and persists in freedom, is some kind of union: on this much many can easily agree. But which kind? To say it is founded by “contract” is no answer, for we use this term in a way that is irreducibly plural. On the one hand, a contract could be a meeting of interests that are selfish and perhaps

² A point well made in Elizabeth Rose Wingrove, *Rousseau's Republican Romance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), and Tracy B. Strong, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1994), wise books from which I have learned much.

economic in nature. But, if we use the word this way when we speak of a wedding contract, we either debase marriage beyond all recognition (though some would do this) or we mean something else. Indeed, we could just as easily turn around the problem (and the metaphor) by referring to economic agreements as a “marriage of interests,” and it is just as plain that we clarify nothing in doing so.

To know whether the cinema of remarriage – the “comedies of remarriage,” as you have called them³ – is good or bad for the union of the state, we must know the second as well, if not better, than the first. Can we really, then, reach a conclusion on this relation by removing ourselves from active participation in politics in order to reflect in a movie theater? But, I suspend this objection, for it applies to so many others, and with such greater force, that it would be unfair to apply it to those who are most conscious of it. Still, we must bear in mind the difficulty and ambiguity of investigating both sides of the equation simultaneously or we will end by adding to the confusion rather than reducing it.

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Postponing some of these questions for later, however, I propose to begin where these questions meet, in Philadelphia, a name with such delicious ambiguity of state, sex, love and marriage that it perfectly encapsulates our problem, and, further, to begin where we find ourselves in perfect agreement, namely, in the judgment that *The Philadelphia Story* is one of the most nearly perfect films ever made. Perhaps in exploring our disagreement in the reflected glow of this particular concord we will reach our destination, the disputed contribution of film to our democracy, that much more quickly.

You have written of this film that it asks the questions of “what is it that constitutes the legitimacy of marriage?” and “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

³ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

securing the pursuit of happiness.”⁴ While you offer no firm answers to these questions, you have repeatedly emphasized how the comedies of remarriage embody the Emersonian perfectionism you champion. Indeed, *The Philadelphia Story* is the film you pair with Emerson himself in your own recently published letters.⁵ But, in what does the perfection of this film consist? Does it consist in the degree to which it perfects us? Or in the degree to which it provides us with an exemplar of perfection, which may lead us to perfect ourselves? Such I take to be your dangerous contention.

This view, I propose to say, is excessively theatrical. It could account for *The Philadelphia Story* as the play almost as much as the film that it became. That the theatrical spectacle could be a site of moral improvement is of course a highly Enlightened and long-disputed position. If a previous letter writer challenged that view purely with regard to the stage, then it falls to me to contest it with regard to cinema. There is indeed a lesson to be gained in understanding the uncanny power of this film, but it is not, I think, a lesson that will reconcile us to our democracy as you hope. Quite the opposite, I fear. While I would not say that the film degrades us, I would say that our attraction to it reveals our degraded condition and that it is in a sense this condition that binds us to it. What perfection the film embodies remains, therefore, out of reach for us and, as such, a hazard rather than a *telos*.

“The miracle at Philadelphia” was the old name for the process of remarriage that gave us the United States as they currently exist, that is, as the “re-United States.” Having been brought into being only a few years before by the unmemorable and unloved Articles of Confederation, the Union, in 1787, was failing. To rebind it, its founders were recalled to the site of its inception for a repair that became, quite improbably, a refounding. They performed this act of reunion in less than four months, working in absolute secrecy. Is *The Philadelphia Story* a sort of re-enactment of this process? You, sir – planting the seed

⁴ Ibid., pp. 151–3.

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2004), chs. 1–2.

for all that follows here – allude to this possibility but do no more.⁶ But, I think it is the key point to understanding the film and, precisely, to understanding it *as a film*, and not as a play or as an adapted play.

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It is instructive, in this respect, to begin our analysis by comparing the film with the play from which it springs.⁷ As a play, *The Philadelphia Story* respected the traditional unities of time and space – the action takes place over twenty-four hours in a single house. The actions of the film, by contrast, are spread out over a weekend but also include a wordless prologue that takes place two years earlier, and the action moves up and down the Main Line with a brief excursion (it seems) to New York.⁸ There are other differences: the heroine Tracy Lord's brother Sandy disappears in the film and most of his dramatic functions are taken over by C. K. Dexter Haven, whose role thus becomes even more substantial. But the most important changes are the ones that indicate both the political and the cinematic status, we might say, of the content of the movie. As a play, *The Philadelphia Story* is an elegant and hilarious drawing-room comedy. There is, as you have observed, an undercurrent of class resentment and reconciliation that also appears in the film, but it is not really emphasized in the play. Class serves more as an explanation of the characters' motives (specifically those of Mike Connor and George Kittredge) than as a dramatic theme.⁹

⁶ See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, pp. 153–4, and, even more briefly, *Cities of Words*, p. 40.

⁷ Why this has not been done more frequently is a mystery to me. Perhaps, on account of the widely known circumstances that the play was written as a vehicle for Katharine Hepburn, that it was a stage success and filmed very rapidly thereafter, it is assumed that there is little difference between the two versions. But there were, in fact, important changes made and, while the film version at times retains its stagey feel, the differences point to a layer of meaning in the film that is not available, and could not be available, on the stage.

⁸ In both the basic plot is the same: Tracy Lord, a rich Philadelphia heiress, having divorced Dexter Haven two years before, is set to marry George Kittredge. Haven shows up at her house, on the eve of the wedding, with two reporters (Mike Connor and Liz Imbrie) at the behest of publisher Sidney Kidd, who is blackmailing Haven so that he can procure a story on this high-society wedding. But Haven also has plans to win Tracy back and, by the end, after an extended flirtation between Tracy and Mike, he does so.

⁹ See Philip Barry, *The Philadelphia Story: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1939). There is a stark contrast here with the earlier *Holiday*, from the same author and stars, which I discuss below.

But the film insists, from its first frame, that politics are at issue. I mean from its very first frame, from the sadly neglected opening credits. As the film begins, the expected names and titles are projected over a series of sketches or reliefs: first, Independence Hall, the site of the Constitutional Convention and, earlier, of the Continental Congresses; then the Liberty Bell; then the statue of William Penn (Quaker, democrat, founder and “Absolute Proprietor” of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia) that sits on top of Philadelphia City Hall; then a brief panorama of the city, emphasizing its Grecian Museum of Art; and finally a return to Independence Hall. These are the only moments of the film that depict any part of municipal Philadelphia proper. And yet, so that we will not miss the point of what is at stake in the film, the final stencil of Independence Hall (where the final credit – “Directed by George Cukor” – has just been displayed) is replaced by the first live-action shot, an exterior view of the Lord mansion where most of the film takes place, the establishing shot of the first scene, but also, thereby, of the entire movie (it recurs twice more at least). The two buildings do not particularly resemble one another, so the transition mostly makes sense as a symbolic rather than aesthetic one, as if we are about to see into the temple of democracy.

But it is this very question of whether we *ought* to see into the temple of democracy that I want to claim is at issue here. For what the film adds to the play at this point is exactly a kind of discursus about the legitimacy of such a viewing, and especially the legitimacy of it in *photographic* form. In the play, there is only a brief mention of photography when magazine photographer Liz Imbrie (Ruth Hussey) says in an early scene that she is “quite a pest” with her camera and Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn), her photographic subject, replies, quite insincerely, that she hopes Liz will take lots of pictures. This exchange remains in the film version but photography, and the invasiveness of photography, have now become a major theme.

In an early scene at the mansion’s stables, which has been added to the film, we are introduced, visually, to *Spy* magazine, which we see being read by Uncle Willy (he holds it, rather unnaturally, exactly

perpendicular to the ground so that we can see the cover). Tracy looks contemptuously at the magazine, replete with photos: "Where'd you get this idiotic thing anyway?" When her little sister Dinah says "I love it – it's got pictures of everything," Tracy replies, with complete disdain, "It certainly has." And when her fiancé George Kittredge shows an unseemly interest in the magazine, Tracy gets positively upset. "Of all the filthy ideas! Coming into a private house with a camera!," she says, flinging the magazine to the ground and later having her horse stomp on it for good measure.

The title of the magazine, not incidentally, has also been changed. In the play it is called "Destiny" magazine, although it is also mentioned that Sidney Kidd owns magazines called "Dime" and "Spy." The stable scene ends with a dissolve from the stomped-on copy of *Spy* to a building engraving which announces that we have arrived at "Dime and Spy Incorporated, Sidney Kidd, Editor and Publisher" (an obvious satirical reference to what was once known as Time/Life International, owned by Henry Luce), presumably in New York, another setting that has been added to the play. In the scene that follows, we see Sidney Kidd, who does not appear in the play at all (though he is often talked about), set the plot in motion by blackmailing Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) so that he will arrange entry into the Lord house for the writer Mike Connor (Jimmy Stewart) and the photographer Liz, the results of which are to be published in *Spy*.

Haven, we learn, also despises the photographic invasion of private life. We are told the story of how he smashed the cameras of the paparazzi (including Liz) who tried to record his honeymoon (later paying for the cameras and writing letters of apology): "I had the strange idea our honeymoon was our own business." Connor protests against the secret, invasive assignment as degrading and undignified, while Liz shows no enthusiasm for it but says, "I can't afford to hate anyone, I'm only a photographer." But Kidd has determined their course of action and, thus, the course of the film. Unwilling as they are, no one has the power to resist him.

What has happened here? Around the core of a romantic comedy where the principals are the maiden and her suitors, the film version has added a conflict between the principals, who wish not to be photographed nor to be seen in public at all, and an antagonist who wishes to put them on film and expose them to the world. (That George Kittredge is the one principal who wants publicity, and wants to appear in *Spy*, is the repeated sign we are given of his utter unsuitability for Tracy and his general bad taste.) But, of course, we are already in the process of watching the film that will only show us more and more intimate moments. These early scenes are posing the question, however, of whether it is perhaps indecent that such a film should exist, and if it does exist, if it is decent for us to watch it. Again, sir, these are questions you raise momentarily, but decline to answer.¹⁰ As much as we wish to identify with Grant, Hepburn and Stewart, the glamorous romantic leads, our position as the viewers of the filmed entertainment instead forces us to identify with Sidney Kidd.¹¹ While it is clear enough in the play that the off-stage Kidd wants to invade the privacy of the Lord family, the film goes out of its way, by all these devices, to emphasize that it is the *photographic* invasion that is the most important, “filthiest” element.¹²

We are forcibly returned to this theme at the close of the film when – his blackmail plot having been foiled – Kidd sneaks into the wedding himself (now the wedding of Tracy and Dexter, rather than of Tracy and George). In a remarkable sequence that ends the film – and which has no parallel in the play – the sight of Kidd drawing a small camera from his pocket and snapping a picture is the penultimate live-action shot we

¹⁰ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 160; Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 41.

¹¹ Liz takes the pictures but she’s “just a photographer,” a camerawoman, so to speak. It is Kidd who directs the action from offstage (and not, as you suggest, Dexter). Pushing the point a bit, one might add that Kidd is played by Henry Daniell, an actor who bears a pretty clear physical resemblance to the director George Cukor, and Daniell’s performance has a slightly bizarre fey quality to it, which further associates him with Cukor, whose homosexuality was well known in Hollywood (Clark Gable had him fired for it), if not to the general public.

¹² I do not mean to obscure here the differences one might notice between still photography and motion photography. My point here is simply that the film itself uses still photography as a metaphor for film and thus comments on itself while appearing to discuss a magazine.

see. In the final shot, we see the wedding party turning toward Kidd's camera and freezing, with looks of surprise and displeasure on all of their faces. Were it not for the theme of invasive photography, it would be hard to explain this final shot, which otherwise spoils the happy ending of the lovers reuniting. What happens next is even more remarkable. This final image of the wedding party turns into a freeze-frame, which is then further transformed into a picture in a magazine. As the camera draws back and the page of the magazine is turned, we see various other wedding pictures with captions that we cannot make out (but which signal with absolute clarity that we are looking at a magazine, presumably *Spy*) and then a final picture of Grant and Hepburn kissing.

It is the classic final image of a romantic movie – it is the only time in the film that they kiss – but the kiss is transformed by appearing as a photograph in Kidd's magazine. And the effect of being photographed is pronounced: instead of being happy, Hepburn looks incredibly uncomfortable. Again, were it not for the running theme of photography, one might think that the director had made a mistake in choosing this image, or that somehow there had been a problem in production and no better shot existed. The closing credits follow, which return us to the sketches of civic Philadelphia, now unquestionably the subject of a photographic exploration.

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At the American Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in May of 1787, on the first day, the participants all swore an oath of secrecy. Although they could not agree on things like whether Africans or Native Americans were fully human, on this point there is no record of any disagreement. And during the Convention itself, secrecy was fully maintained. Indeed, so concerned were the delegates about their privacy that, even though Philadelphia is often very hot and humid in the summertime, the windows to the crowded discussion room were all closed and heavy drapes were put over them so that no one outside could hope to see or hear what was said. It must have been terribly uncomfortable, but everyone present agreed that the necessary negotiations could not be carried out in any other way, and certainly not in public.

There is something here about democracy that we do not like to acknowledge. When we describe the social contract in abstract forms, we tend to characterize it as a *public* promising or exchange (of rights for security, say, or for enforcement of authority). To be fair, or even meaningful, we are apt to say the terms of the agreement must be widely known and the transaction publicly witnessed. And, of course, we can rightly say that the rewritten Constitution could only take its validity from the public endorsement it received from the state conventions in the process of ratification.

What we do not like to say is that such an endorsement is only a public capstone to a secret process that preceded it, as a marriage ceremony is a public acknowledgment of a courtship that is generally not witnessed by anyone. The secrecy of negotiations is difficult to acknowledge in the political context because it seems to cut against the idea of a constitution as a document created by democratic means. It reduces the role of the validators of a constitution to that of mere witnesses to an *act* of which others are the author. In a wedding, of course, the secondary role of the witnesses is not such a problem, but, in a democracy of more than two, the situation is rather different.¹³ If we merely *view* an act of union, if the ones who say “I do” are other than ourselves, then we are hardly the authors of that union or the authority over ourselves that it creates. If we are concerned that public power be only legitimated by the authorization of those it governs, then we can accept nothing less than an autonomous “I do” from every citizen.

In the case of a wedding, we understand that the passions which forge the union are only given a limited and ceremonial display in public. For most – but not all – cultures it would be obscene, for example (but why this is so deserves further consideration), to have the couple copulate in public, even though such physical joining is, in some sense, the acknowledged purpose of the ceremony. But what is the parallel

¹³ The roles of publicity and secrecy in our democracy are canvassed, from a different perspective, by Jodi Dean in the thought-provoking *Publicity's Secret* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). Among other things, Dean calls attention to the way in which the era of the Founding was rife with conspiracy theory.

situation with a political union? Are these bonds so equally sexual that their public display is unseemly? That is unlikely. What then is their nature and why are they so fragile or intimate or shameful that it is difficult to make them public? Is there some cost or a danger here to the souls or individuality of those who enter into such unions? There is a famous painting of the Founders at the Constitutional Convention. You must know it as well as I. Would it have been wrong, if it were possible then, to have recorded a photograph of them at work?

When Tracy Lord discusses the photography of domestic life she calls it, with a great and unexplained vehemence, “filthy,” but the specific photographs she is discussing are explicitly described as mundane (we do not see them). Tracy narrates (or perhaps reads the captions of) a photo-essay in *Spy*: “An average day in the life of a congressman (n. b.). The congressman’s wife. The kitchen where is prepared one banana, sliced, two fried eggs. The congressman kisses his wife good morning.” Regardless of what the camera sees in the congressman’s kitchen, Tracy finds something pornographic about every published photograph of private life and, indeed, the phenomenon of certain kinds of “reality” television confirms that there is something titillating about the photography of even the most commonplace – I might say the most ordinary – elements of life in a famous household, as opposed to the direct experience of them. Were we actually in the congressman’s kitchen – or the Kardashians’ – we might get a kind of quick thrill being there, but what we saw would not be particularly exciting.

We generally use the term “pornography” to refer not just to any photography of private life, but to a specific kind: photography of the normally hidden act of procreation (and, I suppose we should add, of its endless analogs and debasements as well). Is there not a kind of likeness between the ordinary secrecy of procreation and that of constitution-making? Both, we might say, shield a bonding that requires the utmost in intimacy and trust for its performance, even if the *results* are publicly announced. These are acts both natural (if anything is natural) and elemental for the propagation of any society; and yet they are generally held, by diverse societies, not to be fit for public

display, even when they and their results are celebrated. The secrecy of the Constitutional Convention, I would likewise maintain, is not just a veil of ignorance that one draws around horse-trading politics. It also reflects an ambivalence about the decency of the display of the act of conjoining that cannot be wholly explained by, say, embarrassment about logrolling (a term that, not surprisingly, has a sexual meaning as well as a political one).

The Philadelphia Story thus presents itself to us, rather self-consciously, as a kind of democratic pornography. It rewards our desire to see into the making of a bonding of equals even as it chastises us for having the desire. We see there the resistance of all the decent characters in the film to being photographed in their time of union and reunion and we nonetheless enjoy the fact that that resistance is overcome. Indeed, we rather luxuriate in it. Pushing the point a bit, sir, we might even say that there is more than a touch of masochism in the experience of the film. We hear of the filthiness of *Spy* magazine and its readers over and over and yet here we sit all along, the closing sequence tells us, with the magazine in our dirty hands! If we love the characters and events that we have just witnessed (as you and I, sir, certainly do), then we must also be enjoying in some sense the condemnation that those characters and events contain of the voyeurism we, as the surrogates of Sidney Kidd, are practicing. Surely it is not the happiness that results from the fulfillment of *this* desire that you recommend as the founding emotion of our democracy?

Confirming this view of things, I think, is the fact that there is one photograph which *disappears* between the play and the film. In the film, Dexter brings Tracy a wedding present (for her planned marriage to Kittredge) that is intended as an ironic reminder of their shared past: a miniature replica of the *True Love* “a boat he designed and built practically,” a boat that only sleeps two and which they sailed together and alone on their honeymoon, unseen by anyone (the boat is a “haven” from the public). In the play, Dexter brings a *photograph* of the *True Love*, but in the film this has been changed into a working model that actually floats in the Lords’ pool. The idea of the *True Love* is an

important one (if a bit clunky and transparent) in both the play and the movie and several important conversations are centered around it, but these conversations are not changed by the presence of the working model (which itself appears only briefly). There is no reason, in other words, for Dexter to have brought a model *rather* than a photo *except* for the fact that the film evinces a loathing of the photography of love, which the play does not. Given the smashing of the paparazzi's cameras, there really should *be* no images of the *True Love*.

It is significant as well that the photo-essay which Tracy despises and which Kittredge defends concerns a congressman. Kittredge simply calls it "publicity" and says "some people like that kind of thing." When Kittredge asks Tracy, in the next moment, what would happen if he decided to go into politics, she says, brightly, "You'd be elected president!" But when he makes the obvious point that running for president might involve a certain amount of "publicity," she says, equally categorically, "Not in my house!" George then reminds her that, after their wedding, it will be "our house." Tracy sweetly agrees to this, and the point about publicity and politics is left temporarily unresolved between them. But Tracy's ultimate rejection of George means also a rejection of a political life, *if* such a life were to carry a requirement of "publicity."

What, then, are we to take away from this aspect of the film, which shows us an analog or simulacra of a political process we are forbidden to see? What is at stake here in this tension between publicity and its opposite? I hesitate, sir, to call that opposite "privacy" for fear of being misunderstood. For we are dealing here, I think, not exactly with something we hide or hoard from others, but rather with something that we hesitate to share with others but want to, something that can only be shared at the right time and in the right way, not indiscriminately. Food can be distributed from a warehouse, but a meal can be shared only around a table, even if that sharing involves an invitation to outsiders to join in. Although you can steal someone's food, you cannot thieve yourself a place at someone else's meal. Here, perhaps, we begin to see the difference between an intimacy which is shared publically but by invitation and an intimacy that is captured and distributed by a camera.

You have written, sir, that perfectionism's competitors "are the endless debasements of itself,"¹⁴ but here it seems as if we, the observers of the film, are the debasers of all that is on its way to perfection.

But perhaps all this puts the wrong kind of emphasis on a word like "pornography," which I intend only as description rather than as criticism. Indeed, if we attempt to fill out the genre of democratic pornography, I think we would find some of the better films that are directly or indirectly about politics. I would nominate, for example, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Giant*, *Lone Star* and *The Dreamers* for starters – all films that attempt to make visible the elements of democratic politics that inherently resist "publicity." What is it, then, about politics that resists publicity of this sort, that finds it indecent? Surely not the intentions of our politicians, who are largely publicity hounds of the worst sort? What is it, then, that Kidd/Cukor sets out to document photographically and that the principals seek to hide? Is it really a striving for perfection that is so in need of a cloak of invisibility?

I reply, on the contrary, that it is weakness, vulnerability and finitude that are here put on display. I would contend further that all of these are related, in some sense, to the momentariness and fragility of intimacy and union that the film, *against* all of our desires for its permanence, manages to depict. It is this momentariness, I think, that the principals have an instinct to shield from public view, not because it is inherently shameful or disgusting, but because the visibility of it weakens the bonds of union which they are pledged to uphold. Allow me to explain.

It is indisputable, I admit, that *The Philadelphia Story* depicts a kind of growth in moral intelligence, an acknowledgment, as you would rightly call it, of the moral standing of others. This growth occurs principally in the character of Tracy Lord and, secondarily in that of Mike Connor. Both of them begin the film (and the play) as different kinds of moral prigs (she is intolerant of weakness; he is burdened with class resentment). And George Kittredge, who is equally priggish, despite

¹⁴ Stanley Cavell, "The Good of Film," in *Cavell on Film*, edited by William Rothman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 340.

his humble origins, is ultimately excluded from intimacy with the others for his failure to overcome this condition.¹⁵ Nonetheless, I would say that were this merely a tale of moral improvement, it would be a dreary and dull afternoon special – *autant vaudrait aller au sermon* – and hardly the great film of America that it is.

What makes the film so magical and attractive, I would say, is not the outcome just described, but the way in which we get to see the radical contingency of that outcome. While the plot is not one of chance and misdirection (it is not a farce), neither is it one of fate and destiny (recall that *Destiny* has been *removed* as the title of the magazine we “read” – what we see is not what has been foreordained). The growth that takes place is both chancy and erotically charged – also alcohol-fueled. (One could almost interpret the film to say that no one who has not had a serious binge can be a moral person.)

What is it that we see – that we *actually see* in this film – that is at once both entertaining and dangerous? We see, I would say, the unpredictable and vibrant dance of Eros. Mike Connor is variously in love with Liz and Tracy. Tracy is variously in love with George, Mike and Dexter. All in the course of a weekend! Liz and Dexter are steadfast, but their wisdom in the film (born of experience) consists of their ability to let their desired mates pass through stages of erotic entanglement with others in order to find their way home. (“A little too rough?,” says the manicurist to Liz at the moment she catches sight of Mike and Tracy chatting together. “A little,” Liz replies, “but I’m used to it.”) George lacks this ability (he is unable to forgive, but even worse, to understand Tracy’s dalliances) and is thus morally obtuse. (“He’s no tower of strength you know,” Dexter quips, “he’s just a tower.”)

But the wisdom which Liz and Dexter share is not a guarantee of success. In the penultimate scene of the film, Tracy has broken off her

¹⁵ It is rather a problem to your way of thinking, I believe, that the character of Dexter Haven undergoes no improvement but appears from the start as a paragon of moral perfection. Though it is made clear that in the past he suffered from alcoholism and has recovered (more or less through the force of his own will), in the story he is from first to last a moral touchstone that others refer to, but who never himself improves or changes in any significant way.

engagement to George and is pondering what to tell the wedding guests who have assembled in her living room. Mike impulsively proposes to her and, in the moment before she replies, the camera cuts briefly to both Dexter and Liz. Both look terribly anxious that she will accept. Although Dexter has sometimes seemed to preside over the events of the movie as a maestro, in this moment he is for once genuinely unsure of the outcome and it is important that he be so. For the path of love – and indeed of any political union – is not something guaranteed by good morals nor a reward for good behavior. Tracy chooses well but she could have chosen otherwise (and marrying Mike would hardly have been a disaster, merely non-optimal). Mike and Tracy have not merely flirted with one another but have shared something real, “the memory of which I wouldn’t part with for anything,” Mike says.

However, this acknowledgment is *only for us* to see. It takes place in an anteroom and cannot be seen by the wedding guests who will in a moment witness the reunion of Tracy and Dexter. Even this wedding, however, is not, the film insists, a part of destiny. After Dexter follows Mike’s proposal with his own (or rather, in a classic act of ventriloquism, has Tracy indicate to guests that she will now marry him), the two have a simple exchange: “Dexter are you sure?”, “Not in the least but I’ll risk it, will you?” Tracy’s agreement signals that this new marriage is to be different from the old one because it acknowledges the contingency of the feelings of both partners. Their marriage is at risk from the moment of its inception, but perhaps healthier for the fact that both are willing to recognize this fact.

When Tracy breathlessly promises in the next moment to be “yare,” Dexter rejects the promise: “Be whatever you like, you’re my red-head.”¹⁶ “Yare” is an ancient English adjective often used of ships. In an earlier conversation, Tracy gives a curious definition: “Oh, what does it

¹⁶ Dexter often refers to Tracy as “Red.” He is the only one to do so. This element is present in the play and it is hard to know what meaning Barry intended for it, perhaps merely to highlight the special quality of their relationship. In the film, however, it takes on another meaning: it indicates to us that Dexter can see something about Tracy that the rest of us cannot, for the film is in black and white.

mean? ... Easy to handle. Quick to the helm. Fast. Bright. Everything a boat should be ... until she develops dry rot." She gives this definition in the course of explaining to George about the original *True Love*, a ship that all agree was quite "yare." It may seem that in remarrying Tracy and Dexter are merely reboarding the *True Love*, which they had somehow disembarked by mistake, but this is not right. Tracy at one point admits that she herself was not very "yare." In promising at the end to be so, she seems to be trying to correct this fault, but Dexter's reply indicates that it is not a fault in his eyes. He does not seek something "easy to handle," rather he seeks the unpredictability that is Tracy, the "human" Tracy (no longer a "Lord") that she always was but has become more fully now, now that she has rejected that status of "goddess" to which others and she herself were prone to assign her. However yare, boats always rot at some point.

Only that which is not fixed in form can avoid decay. Only as inconsistent, flesh-and-blood human beings can Dexter and Tracy have a relationship that might actually endure. Their union, even if it were like a ship, must still ply violent waters with an unruly crew. Tracy's moral improvement will not compel nature to reward her with a stable, happy relationship. At most, the change will be its own reward in divesting her of the belief that a stable, happy relationship is the natural recompense for her moral stature. In that sense, she now expects less of her second marriage than of the first, and likewise Dexter. Indeed, sir, I would say that they will be the happiest if they expect the least of it – nothing.

But the normal wedding ceremony that Dexter and Tracy, with the assistance of Mike and Liz, dutifully enact in public appears to deny all this. The event that we are shown (taking place, recall, in the Lord house, which parallels Independence Hall) is depicted as utterly traditional. The band plays the Wagnerian bridal theme. The surroundings are covered in crystal and lace; it is no Quaker wedding. Tracy wears white. The father gives away the bride. Every bit of it is a farce, given what has just occurred. And yet the witnesses are, in some sense, deceived. Tracy's little sister wrongly imagines herself to be the author of the happy turn of events ("I did it! I did it all!"). Kidd takes his candid

photographs for *Spy* and, we assume, uses them to report a traditional high-society wedding.

Why go through with such a ceremony? Dexter and Tracy have been married and divorced before, by a judge. Yet their marriage will be all the more real now even as (perhaps because) the ceremony that marks its creation will be all the more phony. Around the reality of their contingent union, they draw up a show of its permanence and solidity. Is that not, perhaps, the meaning of all such ceremonies? And is not the political and social need for such an appearance of permanence and solidity the reason why “decency” – but perhaps we might say here, a generous desire that the benefits of union be liberally shared, like a great family meal – requires us to hide the contingency that precedes such a union? Mike and Tracy will remember their dalliance, as will Dexter and Liz remember it, *but it will not be publicly acknowledged*. Mike is best man both *because* he is part of the couple’s erotic history and *because* he knows better than to speak publically about it. When one invites ex-lovers to a wedding, sir, one does so with the expectation that their good taste will cause them to refrain from speaking about a past relationship at any point during the proceedings.

Putting this point another way, we could say that intimacy and union are things that actually exist only from moment to moment, with no guarantees that they will continue steadily. And yet political life, no less than marriage, is formally and publically predicated on the idea that this is not so, that people can pledge themselves permanently, that humans, as someone once said, are animals that can make promises, promises which bind them forever. Experience shows this to be less than true.

It is often noted that modern, Western marriage takes place in the shadow of possible divorce and that it is thereby fundamentally changed. While this may be true and, indeed, a healthy change, it is not what concerns me here. Although divorce was still a scandal when *The Philadelphia Story* was made, Tracy and Dexter have nonetheless divorced and it would be obvious to anyone that they could divorce again. What the film points out, however, is not that one may love and then cease

to love, it is rather that one's erotic attachments may be violently various, not just within a lifetime, but within a day or an hour. Yet Tracy is not a slut because she loves three men (and at least kisses them) in the course of two days – rather she is, as the film insists, “a human being” who has finally recognized her inability to control her own passions. Presumably, after remarrying Dexter, she won't do this sort of thing very often? But she is not promising that and Dexter is not asking her to promise. *Except in public.*

In public, we pledge our allegiance to an ever more perfect union. Each of us knows, or ought to know, that this pledge is a lie. Not in the sense that our intentions are other than our words, but in the sense that we know, or ought to know, that we cannot guarantee our own intentions, not by words, or ceremony, or law. With beings such as ourselves, there are no guarantees, but to publicize such instability on a daily basis is more than most of us can bear, and is probably counterproductive to the goal of union itself. To advertise the contingency of our union is not to uphold it but to accelerate its demise, to which end we are in no way obligated.

* * *

Yet, excluding this element of our erotic and political life from view ends up inexorably generating its own desire, a desire to tear away the veil of decency, which produces films like *The Philadelphia Story* as well as the audiences that so love to see them. It may be that such a pornographic tendency is an inevitable result of a democracy such as ours, which attempts to forge the bonds of union out of quicksilver souls. But, is it really, then, a desire for perfection that drives us to the cinema or do we rather go to the movies and their splendid common isolation in order to revel in what we cannot publicly acknowledge? Do we leave the show really edified or with palms that are a bit sweaty?

To ask if film is good or bad in itself is to pose too vague a question, as you well know. Films, like constitutions, exist in order to please and bind an audience and, unless they do both, they will certainly fail.¹⁷ Yet what

¹⁷ Thus the role that film might have in a dictatorship is a very different question that I do not address here.

pleases us about the film is precisely how it exposes us in safety to the danger we inhabit personally and politically. Should we call this our perfection or titillation? No doubt it is a noble undertaking to mark and remind us of our limitations. But *The Philadelphia Story* rewards, punishes and amplifies our desire to see what goes on within Independence Hall, our unrequitable desire to see the sources of our own independence, which we rightly fear is not ours because its originary moments are invisible. What would it take for us, instead, to live in a democracy that truly enacted the momentariness of our passions and attachments? Has the film been made which could show us *that*? And, if it were made, would *showing* it really help us toward such a democracy?

Once, in my youth, I took a bicycle trip through New England. I lost my way, at some point, in the vicinity of New Castle, New Hampshire, and presently found myself in a small village that seemed hidden in a valley. It did not seem unusual to me at first, since I had passed through many such villages on my trip, and I stopped at the general store for a soda and something to eat. I am sure there must have been a sign with the name of the village at the entrance, but I have long since forgotten it. It took me some time to realize what was unusual about the place. There was no movie theater – it would have been on the one main commercial street and there was none there. Nothing so strange about that, of course; it was a small village and no doubt there was some theater or other not far away. But most convenience stores in that area and at that time would have had a television going. There's nothing more boring than working in a small-town convenience store in the height of summer when the heat keeps most people in their homes. The clerks need something to pass the time. When I commented on this to whomever had sold me a soda, they told me that the position of the town in the valley meant that no television signals could be received without elaborate antenna equipment. A rich person could afford such equipment perhaps, but there was no one that rich in this little town. So they did without. This was in the days long before video recorders and cable and satellite television, mind you, which only came much later. There were simply no images to be seen there.

I will not contend that the people of this town were simple and virtuous. I will not romanticize, as it would be easy to do, New England in the 1970s or at any other time. Film and television are hardly the only media that could connect them to the outside world and, if they lacked these, they had all the others. But, they did seem a tad friendlier than those of the other towns I passed through that summer, a little more inclined to chat, to be sociable toward a traveling stranger who had come into their midst. Seeing that I was traveling alone and planning to sleep under the stars, a welcoming family invited me to stay in their guest room that night and enjoy their hospitality. I still remember the softness of the bed after many nights on the hard ground. The next day I rode away full of a sweet sentiment toward the family, a warm feeling toward the town, and a slightly improved appraisal of the species.

Now let us imagine that this isolated town were to be suddenly graced by the presence of a theater. Do we foresee that the character or the governance of the town would be thereby improved? Let us go further and imagine a cinema purged of its worst elements – careless violence, unfunny comedy and lifeless romance. It would therefore have to remain dark most of the time, but still we can imagine from time to time a film of quality would appear and, duly approved by the canons of good taste whom we would appoint, merit a screening. The prices would have to be fairly high, of course; without the subsidy of the normal dreck to subtend it, the few good films that played would have to support the whole cost of the institution. So, whatever good the films did would have to be weighed against what they subtracted from the budget of those who attend them. But, let us imagine what may not be true, that the cost is not prohibitive. What then? Would we expect the town meetings to be ennobled? The managers more responsible? The citizens more engaged? Would not the contrary be more likely? Would not the representation of a good conversation undermine the capacity to engage in one, as recorded music has undermined the ability to make music? Would a subtle depiction of intimacy really improve our capacity to engage in it? Or would it, on the contrary, deprive us of both the free time and the components of willingness to do so?

But what am I saying? Even if there is no theater there to this day, there is undoubtedly television via cable and satellite, and film via the various recording devices and internet streams. Geographic barriers have become as irrelevant to media as they have to armies and migrants. Nothing any longer stands in the way of good film, or bad, as it covers the globe. I must say, however, that we have yet to see the benefits of this blanketing of our culture with filmed talk in any improved conversations, marriages or political discourses. Would you not say, rather, that the opposite has occurred? What, then, would it take?

Perhaps, at a minimum, it would take an acknowledgment of the value of non-publicity, of not-open spaces, not as something that a polity must tolerate, but as something that it actually needs if it is to negotiate the delicate relationship between a stable *polis* and the passionate *pathē* that can either support or undermine it; non-publicity, not as something which negates or limits the public, but as something that supports and protects it. From this perspective, the boundary of public and non-public would not be marked by the door of the household, but rather by the ceremonies that acknowledge and stabilize the passions that can either support or undermine the polity depending on how they are negotiated.¹⁸ But, going to the theater, I think it is safe to say, would not be one of these ceremonies. Schopenhauer said that the lesson we learn from experiencing life was not to want it. We might say the same of *The Philadelphia Story*: however pleasurable an experience it is, we can only draw the lesson that life examined by photography is not examined in the right way, for the *living* of a democratic life cannot be furthered by the mummification of it or by the violation of its fragility, however happy. *Neither the truest picture, nor the wisest teacher can substitute for the experience of the fragile moment.* Worse, insofar as we believe ourselves to be instructed in democratic life by its representations, we unknowingly deprive ourselves of the practice necessary to actually perform it.

¹⁸ Far too late have I come to a fuller appreciation of my esteemed former colleague's reflections on these issues. See Debra Morris, "Privacy, Privation, Perversity: Toward New Representations of the Personal," *Signs*, 25:2 (2000): pp. 323–51.

I do not call this a defense of “privacy,” because to frame the relation of the open and not-open as the opposition between public and private is to recreate or reinforce the pornographic tendency of contemporary democracy. It is also to impose a value hierarchy on these two elements of life that leads to an inevitable competition between them. It might make more sense to think of public and non-public as two states of matter through which a polity must oscillate, but by means of which oscillation it can achieve a kind of stability. Or, if that is too abstract, think of them as a structure with two rooms where each room is weighted to lean on the central wall so that the existence of each supports the other. Citizens, each at their own pace and on their own path, pass between these rooms as they do between the various rooms of a dwelling, each space hosting a function that is necessary for the life of the household. We cannot live entirely in the open or in the not-open, nor entirely in the erotic moment or the lawful union, and we cannot learn to balance the two except by the actual movement between them.

II

Every moment is as important as every other moment. By itself, this is an innocuous statement, as banal perhaps, if less common than, “every person is as important as every other person.” Sentences like this only take on weight when they are put in tension with a countervailing value. For the latter, it might be something like “excellence must be rewarded; mediocrity held in contempt.” But, for the first sentence, the counterweight is: no moment can have a meaning in itself, but only as part of a narrative.

That meaning is invested via narrative indicates that, as we experience each moment, we do not experience it in isolation. Each moment, for its content to be meaningful to a human being, must point forward to the future and backward to the past. Whatever is happening, we make sense of it and value or disvalue it with reference to our previous experiences and our hopes and expectations about the future. Even

if we are consumed by immediate sensory experience, like eating or drinking, still we experience it with reference to our prior hunger or thirst, not to mention the meals we have had before and intend to have in the future.

People do, of course, claim to report moments that seem to them to be disconnected from the normal stream of time. They report them as moments of transcendence or rapture (not exclusively in a religious or theological sense), or of passion or boredom, or extreme abjection. Generally, they report such moments as unusual; no one claims to experience such moments constantly, though some claim (with little credibility, I think) to experience them routinely or predictably. You will forgive my tone of skepticism here. In my experience, even the most transcendent events (and it has been my blessing to have lived some) are deeply connected to the world and the relationships to it from which they emerge. Who could experience the divine without some prior notion of divinity? But, even if I am wrong or if there is a category of experience from which a malignant deity has excluded me, you will at least grant me that this is not the ordinary run of things.

Moments of transcendence aside then, how is the relation of moments and narrative accomplished? This is the question to which our consideration of the potential good of film has brought us. *The Philadelphia Story* gives us a kind of answer, an optimistic one, even if we can also discern in it some of the dangers of that answer. But here, sir, we must pause to take note of the dark twin that has not yet emerged in our story. For there was, indeed, *another* film of “national importance,” released on the eve of World War II, that has the identical, very odd structure of the one we have been discussing: a woman pursued by three men, one of whom she has already married. Both films confront the passions of the moment with the political need for stability and constitution. In both films, the woman is estranged from her erstwhile husband, appears to be in love in turn with each of the two others, and ends up returned to her original partner, the man who loves her most sincerely. Yet, while in the *The Philadelphia Story*, which is about America, this is a happy ending – and so, you rightly term it, a “comedy

of remarriage” – in Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game*, which is about France, the ending is anything but happy and we could, with some justice, term the film a “remarriage tragedy.”¹⁹

What accounts for this difference? What indeed: a different mood perhaps, a different director? A closer proximity to the impending war? The different histories of America and France? All of these, no doubt, but something else as well: a fuller sense, I think, of the destructiveness and volatility of eros and the danger that it poses for any polity. The difficulty of reconciling a democracy of moments to a republic of laws is here on full and honest display. In the end, I fear, the plot and characters of *The Philadelphia Story* rely on luck and a sort of superhuman forbearance that it has not yet been my pleasure to experience in my fellow citizens. The characters of *The Rules of the Game*, though often aristocrats like those of *The Philadelphia Story*, are to me more ordinary and therefore more illustrative in their attempts to navigate the difficult time between the moments of passion and the persistence of marriage and state. Their failure is therefore more poignant and more instructive than the successes of their Main Line counterparts. And it instructs us thus: not to expect instruction from that which cannot share our experiences. It is no failure of film if it cannot provide us with what we should never have asked of it. Nor should we be surprised if a film of honest pessimism fails to reach its audience, and thus fails to instruct them. But, I am getting ahead of myself.

* * *

Please have patience with me for a moment while I catalog some of the extraordinary resemblances in these two contemporaneous films,

¹⁹ The exact parallel of structure between the two films was obscured for a long time by the editing history of *The Rules of the Game*. The true original release form can no longer be seen. The film was famously denounced as unpatriotic and a slander on the French bourgeoisie (which it certainly was, although that was hardly the point) upon its debut in Paris on the edge of war with Germany. Director Jean Renoir recut the film, eliminating one entire romantic subplot in the process (the one with a character played by Renoir himself). In the subsequent wartime chaos, the original version was lost. For many years, only the shorter version, distributed internationally after the war, was known. But a restoration effort has produced a version that is much closer to the original and which includes the third romance.

each witnessed originally by separate audiences, and only shown in the other country after the war.²⁰

Each film is structured by its heroine's trilemma. Each, thereby, signals its distance from the common tropes and genres of the day: simple romantic rivalry and class polemic. The classes are indeed visibly opposed to one another, but their virtues and vices are not reduced in either case to an emblematic hero and villain. Neither are the romantic rivals simply good or bad; all have some legitimate claim. Indeed, compared with their creators' previous work, both films mark a conspicuous shift to a less stark relationship with class issues. Two years before *The Philadelphia Story*, the same writers and director, and many of the same actors, made *Holiday* (1938). Despite its impeccable Hollywood pedigree, that film is a class polemic: the working class characters are all witty and virtuous; the rich are stuffy and morally bankrupt. The crossover figure (played by Katharine Hepburn) must, in effect, be a class traitor to be a decent person. In *The Philadelphia Story*, by contrast, decency and indecency are distributed indifferently across the classes. Connor sums this up when he says, toward the end of the film, as if a revelation: "I made a funny discovery. In spite of the fact that somebody's up from the bottom, he can still be quite a heel. And even though somebody else is born to the purple, he can still be a very nice guy."

Likewise in Renoir's earlier works, for example, *Bondu Saved from Drowning* (1932), the simple and natural poor are contrasted with the overcultured and contemptible bourgeoisie. Whereas *The Rules of the Game*, though full of sharp observations about class, is careful to give us imperfect characters on all sides and no simply virtuous figures at all. No doubt the French film is far more pessimistic about relations between the classes (and between the sexes) than the American one. But this, I want to claim, has more to do with its general tragic themes than with a specific indictment of the venality of the upper classes.

²⁰ According to the Internet Movie Database, *The Philadelphia Story* was released in 1940 in the United States and in 1947 in France. *The Rules of the Game* was released in 1939 in France and only in 1950, in a shortened version, in the United States. (See www.imdb.com/title/tt0031885/releaseinfo and www.imdb.com/title/tt0032904/releaseinfo.)

There are a few uncanny parallels. In an early scene in *The Philadelphia Story*, Dexter Haven explains his continuing relationship with Tracy Lord by declaring “You might say we grew up together.” In a comparable place in *The Rules of the Game*, a similar phrase – “I spent my whole youth with her” (*j’ai passé toute ma jeunesse avec elle*) – is voiced by Octave (Jean Renoir), in explaining his love for Christine (Nora Grégor). What is more, in neither case is it literally true: Haven and Lord are from the same town but not the same household. Octave, as a young man (but not as a child), was treated as a son while studying with Christine’s father. However, both films use the phrase to indicate that at least one of the lovers comes to his passion from a familial origin. On the one hand, this origin provides insight: both Haven and Octave claim to know their beloved best, and there is some evidence that this is true, but both also come to their love with a kind of oedipal debt hanging over them, Octave to Christine’s dead father, Haven to Tracy’s family (indeed Haven acts to protect Tracy’s father from blackmail).

In each film, the husband represents wealth and stability. Each husband, however, also has a flaw that threatens to undermine that status unless it remains ignored: Robert is descended from German Jews; Dexter is an alcoholic. Each husband is confronted by two rivals. In each case one is an artist (Octave is a musician in *The Rules of the Game*; Connor is a writer in *The Philadelphia Story*), but an artist who has found no commercial success and who therefore lives by his wits. The second rival in both cases is someone who comes from a modest background but has made a name for himself and even become famous for his accomplishments (in *The Rules of the Game*, André is a celebrated aviator; in *The Philadelphia Story*, George is a prominent businessman and budding politician). There is no point in reducing the characters to types – both films make a point of, and benefit from, the individuality of their characters – but it is not a mistake to say that in each case the woman faces a choice between (roughly) status, determination and creativity; one could also say between an insider, an outsider and a liminal, border-dwelling *arriviste* or *homo sacer*. And, in both cases, in the end the woman does not choose but has a choice thrust upon her, though

with differing degrees of force and compliance; while the *homo sacer* is banished or killed without being murdered or sacrificed.

Further parallels of plot and character could be pursued: both films, for example, have a scene at their center in which the erotic ties which have supported the society of their members are blown apart (in *The Rules of the Game*, the hunt; in *The Philadelphia Story*, the party) and need to be subsequently reconstructed. Equally, of course, one could point to a thousand differences between them; most importantly, perhaps, to the parallel set of romantic entanglements among the servants that exist in *The Rules of the Game* without any equivalent in *The Philadelphia Story*. However, I hope what I have set out thus far is enough to convince anyone that there are important formal and thematic similarities here that would attract the attention of any observer.²¹

Most importantly, though, both films depict a marriage bond, in a substantial house symbolic of the nation in which it resides, under strain from the passions of the moment and ask what will have to happen for that bond of union to survive. Since in each case three men confront one woman, this turns out to be a question of what it will take for the woman to remain with the man to whom she is already pledged.²² But while viewers of *The Philadelphia Story* are led to believe that these burdens are, in the end, quite minimal, those who see *The Rules of the Game* learn that the price to be paid is nearly unbearable. Let us see, then, which film will really instruct us in democracy and which will merely be popular there. For the difference between the films that is

²¹ There can be no real question of influence between the two films. *Rules* opened first, in August 1939, but ran for only three weeks in Paris and was hardly seen by anyone. In any case, *The Philadelphia Story* had already premiered as a successful Broadway play earlier in 1939 and was in the process of being quickly transformed into a film when *Rules* had its limited original run.

²² While one could take the framing of the question as sexist – and find many sexist moments in the films to support this thesis – I think in fact both films use the woman's trilemma (and, given the social conventions of the period, it really could only be the woman's) to ask what the cost to a human being would be of an imperfect union. In other words, it is the women who, for better or worse, run the risks and bear the burdens of the democratic citizen here and it is in their fates that the films locate whatever lessons for democracy they have. Certainly, the women in both films are not passive; although, as we shall see, in *The Rules of the Game* the heroine is reduced to passivity by the end, a conclusion clearly depicted as tragic.

truly important is this: *The Philadelphia Story* was a great commercial success that revived Katharine Hepburn's career and made a great deal of money for its producers, whereas *The Rules of the Game* was so hated by its original and intended audience that objects were thrown at the screen and it was quickly withdrawn from circulation and remained unseen for years. Intended, perhaps, to provoke its audience against a failed and phony nationalism, as we shall describe below, it only provoked its viewers against itself and its makers. If it is a famous film today, it is only because it has been championed by later generations of critics and other filmmakers; in its own time, it was not just a commercial flop, but a treasonous failure, just as *The Philadelphia Story* was a patriotic success.

* * *

Sir, my French is poor, but even I can see that Renoir's title – *La Règle du jeu* – is always mistranslated as *The Rules of the Game*, a common English idiom. "La règle" is singular. Renoir's title is "The Rule of the Game." *Règle*, like "rule," is a flexible word that can be used in a variety of contexts to mean a ruler (the instrument), a measure, a regularity, a pattern or a model – or so the dictionary tells me. But *règle* can mean "rule" in a more political sense (*la règle de Louis XIV* means "the rule of Louis XIV") and it is easy to understand why. To rule a game, or a people, can mean not just to measure or to bring order but to have the authority to do so. To ask what the rules of a game are is also to ask "what (or who) rules here?"

What is the game, then, and what is the rule? What *does* rule here? Certainly none of Renoir's characters are rulers of the game in which they are all enmeshed, though some are clearly more adept than others. Nor is it clear that they all understand themselves to be playing a game, or playing by the same rules. Certainly, they play many games, some more explicit than others: cards, hunting, table manners, adultery, marriage and propriety in general are just a few of these. But are these all part of one game, with one rule or ruler?

A game, we might say, is a series of moments held together by a set of rules, just as our narratives hold together the moments of our lives.

Such was, as you know better than anyone, Wittgenstein's insight into games and the reason for his obsession with them. The position of the pieces on a chessboard at any one time cannot be understood without also understanding their original positions, their permitted movements from that point, how games are won and lost, and so on. Even the most well-regulated games are capable of being disrupted from the inside, as it were, by moves that destroy the embedded narrative.²³ How much more delicate, then, is the balance between moments and narrative outside the context of a well-established game, where no rule book provides us with an agreed-upon framework within which to operate.

However, were such a rule book to exist (and a referee to enforce it), even then a final (or prior) mystery would present itself. The rule of all rules – *la règle* – cannot be given, it can only be experienced:

I cannot describe how (in general) to employ rules, except by *teaching* you, *training* you to employ rules.²⁴

In a political context we might say: a people have laws, rules which serve a publically enunciated end, and then they have a constitution which authorizes those laws. But what is the law that binds them to this ultimate law? Rules can be described, but *la règle* cannot be described, it can only be shown as it is shown to the characters in the film and as Renoir purports to show it to us. It turns out to be a harsh lesson. One may know many games without yet knowing what games one is involved in or what fidelity one will ultimately owe to *la règle*. For there is an authority involved, though not a political or theological one.

Moments may be related to narrative by many different rules, but the attempt to break this relation, to escape, provokes a harsh response, it would seem, from the rule itself. There is no person or clique who rules

²³ Wittgenstein: "I give the rules of a game. The other party makes a move, perfectly in accord with the rules, whose possibility I had not foreseen, and which spoils the game, that is, as I had wanted it to be. I now have to say: 'I gave bad rules; I must change or perhaps add to my rules' ... So in this way have I a picture of the game in advance? In some sense: Yes." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (2nd edition, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 53.

²⁴ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, p. 58.

the game and yet, Renoir will say, we are not free to change the rules that govern it. If *The Philadelphia Story* suggested that the balance of moment and narrative might be accomplished simply through friendship and goodwill, *The Rules of the Game* shows us, if it shows anything, how an absence of malice on the part of everyone is utterly insufficient to regulate the pluralism of erotic attachment.

The “game” of erotic attachment might appear – to a teenager perhaps – to be one with a fixed end, but any mature reflection on the matter – and *The Rules of the Game* is nothing if not that – will tell us that desire is more complicated and multifaceted than the juvenile understands. Indeed, it is not a single game at all but a series of interactions governed by competing sets of rules. People who speak and act by different rules may understand each other, after a fashion, and may even interact as if they are playing together. However, they constantly run the risk, not surprisingly, of *misunderstanding* each other, because they speak the same language but do not play the same game.

An example of this situation, and of its implications, appears in the very first scenes of *The Rules of the Game*. André Jurieux, the aviator, has landed in Paris after flying solo across the Atlantic – a feat of skill and endurance for which he is instantly famous. But, he is disappointed because the woman he loves, Christine (who is married to the Marquis), has not come to meet him at the airfield. He voices his disappointment to a radio reporter and it is broadcast live. Christine, in Paris, hears the broadcast as she prepares to go out for the evening. Although André does not use her name, she knows it is she whom he accuses. She is perturbed, but not overly so, and engages her maid, Lisette, in a curious exchange.

Christine asks Lisette, who has recently married, about her lovers: how they behave, what they want and what they do together (it sounds like they flirt a lot and kiss, but not much more). Finally, Christine, now looking pained, asks whether these relationships have any friendship in them (*l'amitié*). Now Lisette looks shocked. “*L'amitié avec un homme?*” she says incredulously. Then she uses an expression which the subtitlists translate as “when pigs fly!” but which is actually

more like “that’s like talking about the moon in broad daylight” (*autant parler de la lune en plein midi*).

Although she is not sleeping with her lovers, Lisette does not pretend that these are friendships. There is no game of friendship with men for her, but she does not view this as a personal preference. The very concept makes no sense for her. The expression she uses indicates exactly that Christine has made some kind of *grammatical* mistake. André feels quite the same: he has spent many hours with Christine, talking intimately and perhaps embracing occasionally, but nothing more. It does not occur to André that Christine is anything but his lover and when his lover does not support his efforts, he accuses her of disloyalty.

However, Christine, as this scene and others demonstrate, is not (yet) playing this game. In speaking to André, she has been speaking of something else. She has embraced him, it is true, and held his hand. But, as she explains elsewhere, these are to her gestures of affection that she might bestow on anyone she considered a close friend. She does exactly the same with Octave, whom she has known in a familial way for many years. Since they grew up together, he understands the meaning of these gestures very well. But, he instructs her in a later scene, not everyone else will. Christine is from Austria and many characters point out that French is not her native language and Paris not her native milieu. Octave emphasizes that while he, from experience, will not be confused by her open Salzburg habits, others will:

OCTAVE: You throw yourselves around men’s necks like you are twelve years old!

CHRISTINE: So in Paris, you cannot show a man affection without ...?

OCTAVE: No. (He says all this with his arms around her.)

CHRISTINE: Ah, no. Then I’m to blame for everything?

It is one of the originating points of the tragedy in *The Rules of the Game* that Christine is not playing the same game as the others. She has not grasped the rules that govern social life in Paris. But because she *seems* to and speaks French well, she can make moves in the game that

are meaningful to others in different ways from the ones she intends. Christine is not uneducated in the ways of eros; she has just been educated differently. She is deeply committed to her friendships and is upset that André has misunderstood her intentions, which were not at all frivolous, even if they were also not romantic.

As those educated in the ways of theater know, misunderstanding makes for a farce, but not (normally) for a tragedy. And, indeed, it takes some time before the tragic element in the film becomes visible. The drawing-room comedy in *The Philadelphia Story* is framed by a larger question of visibility. Here, too, a drawing-room comedy is framed, but then displaced, by a larger issue that Renoir displays in a way that Wittgenstein cannot: is it love at all – is it life at all – if it is governed by strict rules? Apart from the conflicts that the principals have with one another, is the conflict that they all have with *la règle*. Once again, the woman is the heroine of this battle and once again her transformation is the key development in the story. But instead of changing from a statue to a human being, she moves in the opposite direction. Starting the movie full of life, she ends it nearly lifeless, a ghost of her former self, defeated not by any other character but by a nemesis, a necessity of obedience, that she will never fully understand.

Removed from her native land, where all her customs felt natural, Christine lives in a place that seems to her filled with rules that appear arbitrary. However, she never expresses a desire to return home; instead, she longs for a life that does not feel rule-bound at all, where emotions can be expressed spontaneously. She is not a hedonist or even a sensualist, but she is, in this sense, a romantic and a partisan of the democracy of moments. Her idea of love is that it should be something that escapes rules entirely and is not governed by them. One by one the men in her life disappoint her when, though they love her intensely, they refuse to take this view and subordinate their passions to established norms. When she submits to her fate at the end of the film, the tragedy is not that she has lost her freedom to a man, but rather that she has lost it to *la règle*. Rules can rule with no less cruelty than a tyrant, and with even less feeling.

Let me briefly trace how this occurs: at the estate where most of the film takes place, Christine learns that her husband, whom she has always trusted, has been carrying on an affair for the entire period of their marriage. (In fact, he has just ended this affair, out of renewed devotion to Christine, but she never learns of this.) Dismayed, she attempts to accommodate herself to these Parisian rules by chatting about the affair in an open and blasé manner with her rival, but this proves too excruciating. She then turns to André and wants to take up his passionate offer to elope. What happens next is both painful and hilarious. In the most explicit discussions of rules in the film, André explains that he will be delighted to run away with Christine, just as soon as he and the Marquis can sit down and discuss it like gentlemen:

ANDRÉ: I must tell La Chesnaye [the Marquis].

CHRISTINE: Why?

ANDRÉ: But Christine, because that is what is done (*parce que ça se fait*).

...

CHRISTINE: But since we're in love, what difference will it make?

ANDRÉ: Christine, all the same, there are rules (*tout de même, il y a des règles*).

André's use of the objective tone of voice here indicates just how completely he (the supposed outsider) feels bound by these rules, even in the middle of an act which, on its face, would seem to violate the norms of propriety. But, Christine's love for André was predicated on the hope that he could liberate her from the demands of such rules, which, among other things, demand that she tolerate her husband's affair with good humor. She insists that they leave at once or not at all. What she wants is to inhabit the moment of their passion without regard for how it will fit, or not fit, within the larger social narrative. She is not so much angry with her husband's affair as she is dismayed by a society where such actions are normal and, indeed, regulated by a set of rules. Her desire for André is really over the instant he decides to delay

their departure for the sake of such rules, the author of which he does not (cannot?) name and yet the authority of which he will not question.

André appears to be the rebel – he is young, impetuous and physically courageous – whereas Christine seems to be only a well-bred, slightly naive lady of society. Yet, in the end, it is André who is more deeply committed to the rules and integrity of the society of which he has only recently become a member, while Christine is more devoted to the erotic urge to break free from that society. Even the Marquis, once he gets over his initial anger at potentially losing his wife, expresses his gratitude to André for playing by the rules. If his wife is going to leave him, he says, he is glad it is with “one of our set” (*quelqu’un de notre milieu*). As he says this, to reinforce the point, he helps André back into his tuxedo.

True erotic conflict, the film seems to say, must be in conflict with a rule-bound society. André wants to make a radical move in a game of chess, but still a legal one. Christine, quite differently, wants to play another game, or no game at all. However passionate lovers may appear, when they submit to the rules, they sacrifice whatever spontaneity and individuality their love appears to possess. From Christine’s perspective, the very phrase “love by the rules” can make no grammatical sense. Love, in one of its senses at least, indicates a relationship of such particularity that it cannot be duplicated. Rules, as Wittgenstein well describes, and as you yourself have elaborated, can only be said to apply to an activity that takes place repeatedly.²⁵ Just as there can be no private language, there can be no game that is played only once. The relations between rules and love would, then, appear to be two opposed logics of binding: one singular, intense and unrepeatable; the other repeatable, regular and orderly, or at least capable of being so.

Yet romantic love and bureaucratic routine are merely two ends of a spectrum. In-between them lie families and nations, familial love and patriotism. Can these two opposed logics be made to cohabit? Yes, *The*

²⁵ See James Conant, “Stanley Cavell’s Wittgenstein,” *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 13:1 (2005), pp. 51–65.

Rules of the Game seems to say to us: Yes, they can, at *enormous* expense to the former. At the end of the movie, the rules have been kept, passion destroyed and a man is dead. But the family which represents the erotically bound nation continues. The optimistic *Philadelphia Story* ends with a photographed kiss, but it is still a kiss (and a happy wedding) after all. *The Rules of the Game* ends with no kiss and no joy, but instead with a brief conversation between two minor characters, witnesses to what has just happened, about how, after being threatened, propriety has been well maintained. *La règle* has spoken and it has had the last word. How can remarriage be a comedy when it is so neatly scripted? How can it be a comedy when so much is sacrificed for the sake of a perpetual union? Remarriage, in both films, means the reassertion of the normal and necessary and the demise of the spontaneous and the momentary. Eros has not been destroyed, but it has been tamed. One film, sir, is honest about the cost of this process, though it is not the one you champion.

* * *

One of the curiosities of the *The Rules of the Game* is the Marquis's hobby: collecting and fixing mechanical musical objects. Wind-up figures – birds, men and machines – populate his home and are the object of his constant attention. He accumulates, repairs and displays them. In the climactic party scene, after various guests at his house have performed elaborate skits and songs, the Marquis makes his contribution: he unveils an enormous calliope that he has just purchased and restored. Renoir pans carefully across the machine so that we can slowly take in its many moving parts, which contribute various sounds to its overall tune. No one else in the film shares the Marquis's interest in these objects and, despite being featured prominently in several scenes, they play no obvious role in the story. If the Marquis had another hobby, or no hobby at all, nothing else of the plot would need to be altered.

What significance, then, do these many musical machines and toys have? One scene, I think, gives us a clue. About halfway through the film, Marceau, the poacher, has entered his short period of domestic

service in the Marquis's household. He has begun flirting with Lisette, the gamekeeper's wife and Christine's maid. She happens upon him as he is shining some shoes. She is friendly but, when he tries to embrace her, she pushes him away. Puzzled, his eye alights upon one of the Marquis's mechanical dolls. He puts his hand behind a doll and winds it up, leaving his hand there afterwards so that he appears to be cradling it. The doll begins to move its head back and forth and plays a tune. The camera cuts from the doll's impassive, moving face to Lisette's. She is very prominently holding a bitten apple that she continues to chew. As the music plays she begins to smile (at Marceau). The camera then cuts back to Marceau and the doll, framed together. Marceau also begins to smile. As the music continues, he begins to move towards Lisette in a sort of mechanical dancing motion, as if he too were a wind-up toy. When the music ceases, he pounces. This time Lisette laughs and, although she tries halfheartedly to escape him, it is clear they are now playing the same game and they end up in an embrace that is only prevented from becoming more intense by the arrival of Lisette's husband.

My description is clumsy. All this takes place in a wordless pantomime and seems effortless to the viewer. But what have we witnessed here? A kind of erotic display certainly. But what kind? Does Lisette recognize herself in the musical doll and smile in recognition? Perhaps it is better to say, given the framing choices Renoir makes here, that the doll helps Lisette to recognize herself by recognizing Marceau. When she smiles, first, we are shown the two figures she is smiling back at: Marceau and the doll framed as a pair. By standing where he does with his arm around the doll, Marceau is saying who he is: a man no freer to control his actions than a mechanism. Put a beautiful woman in front of him and he will pursue her, whether or not it makes any sense or is safe to do so. And Lisette, smiling at this, is acknowledging that she is much the same: when an attractive man flirts with her, she will respond, married or not. It confirms, besides, her earlier stated view of the uniformity of male desire: *les hommes sont comme ça*, "men are like that." Men chase women; women tease men.

An early treatment for the film by Renoir bore the title *Les femmes sont comme ça*.²⁶ So, women are like that and men are like that. People are like that. So when the Marquis confronts his collected guests (collected, perhaps, like his hobby objects) with the massive calliope, he is confronting them, in effect, with an image of themselves as mechanically predictable erotic beings. They spend the party chasing after one another in just as inevitable a way as the calliope plays its music, making the same motions and striking the same notes over and over again. And, though the Marquis presides over this as a kind of master of ceremonies, owner of both the calliope and the house in which the music is made, he is no more immune to this than anyone else. All the humans here are dominated by their passions as by a mechanistic fate. It is this world of regulated eros that Christine finds unbearable and seeks to escape. But, within its limits, this system “works” very well: the music plays splendidly (for a time) and the guests play their erotic games in the prescribed manner. It is Christine’s unregulated desire that disrupts the harmony.

Here Eros rules with the force of natural law, not as a force of spontaneity but subordinated to *la règle*. Eros rules because her unruliness has been tamed to the point where the energy she provides, like that of avarice, can be ordered and produces disciplined music, like the Mozart melody which opens the film and which Renoir described as one of his inspirations.²⁷ This is the pathetic Eros that Genevieve, the Marquis’s lover, refers to when she invokes Chamfort early in the film: “Love, in society [my emphasis], is the exchange of two fantasies and the contact of two skins” (*l’amour, dans la société, c’est l’échange de deux fantasmes, et le contact de deux épidermis*). Love outside of society conforms to no grammar and, to sophisticates, sounds like so much noise.

The Rules of the Game, like *The Philadelphia Story* then, contains an internal metaphor for film itself. The calliope is a reproduction of life

²⁶ Jean Renoir, *La Règle du jeu: Scénario original*, edited by Curchod et Faulkner (Paris: Édition Nathan, 1999), p. 8.

²⁷ German Dance No. 1 in D Major. See Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1974), p. 169.

like photography, and in this sense both are akin to film. But the calliope is a mechanical technology of life, and an even starker indictment of that technology than the use of photography in *The Philadelphia Story*, which is dark enough. It reduces life to mechanical movement, a narrative without any moments, as it were, whereas photography gives us a moment without a narrative. While the tendency of the latter toward pornography is regrettable, it is not as dangerous as the tendency of the mechanistic life toward violence and death.

If *The Philadelphia Story* questions itself as a piece of pornography, *Rules* questions itself as an exercise of political power, the power to force an outcome onto other humans at the potential cost of their lives. As the party progresses in the culminating scene, things get out of hand and the music becomes discordant. What seemed a polite game and dance becomes impolite when one of the characters (the gamekeeper) becomes so jealous that he introduces a gun, a real one, into the proceedings.²⁸ Some of the other guests imagine that it is all part of the show and carry on in a lighthearted fashion, while others realize that they are threatened with death and become terrified. Even the Marquis loses his cool and punches André. Renoir has famously said that he could not decide, as he made the film, whether it was a comedy or a tragedy. In the party scene, we see that the difference is really just a matter of degree. The free play of eros animates both, but in a comedy, this seeming disorder is happily managed by rules, while in a tragedy it is brutally policed by them.

In an early scenario, Renoir described his characters thus: "In this film, everyone is sincere. There are no villains." This sentiment is expressed by Octave's famous line of motivational equality: "Everyone has his reasons" (*tout le monde a ses raisons*). If there are no villains, then why does it all end so badly? The tragedy, in fact, is not caused by any subjective evil, but by the conflict between the democracy of

²⁸ Although I do not have space to discuss it here, the gamekeeper (Schumacher) is Christine's double in the servant group that mirrors the bourgeois. Like Christine, he is a foreigner of a kind with a German (Alsatian) name, whose desire for a relationship with his partner unbound by society's rules violently disrupts the regulated dance of eros to which the other characters are accustomed.

moments and the republic of laws. Who was it that said that the rule of law means the law of rules? Rules give meaning to our moments, but their existence also makes moments of true individual experience harder to come by. Violence here is not the result of any original viciousness on the part of the characters, but rather their recurrent dissatisfaction with the rule-bound life to which they are largely, but not entirely, accustomed. It is this conflict that sends them on their various paths that end in dissatisfaction, jealousy and, finally, death.

At times, various characters in the film speak wistfully and hopefully of friendship (*l'amitié*), as if it represented some alternative logic of human relation. Christine, as we have seen, speaks of her friendship with André. The Marquis, much later in the film, also speaks of his friendship with André – a friendship that he apparently hopes will survive an exchange of spouse! But none of the action of the film supports this possibility. Instead, Lisette's sense of *amitié* between the sexes as a preposterous, utopian dream is borne out. While there are friendships within each sex and between the classes, they are utterly inefficacious in preventing or containing the chaos produced by the erotic relations between the characters. Order, such as it is, is restored at the Marquis's chateau by rules and the violence that enforces them. If it is self-consciously a facade, it functions no less effectively for that. Friendship plays no part in it.

Wittgenstein returned habitually to the game of chess when he was attempting to explain rule-bound behavior. But no one plays chess here. They play cards, and they hunt. The hunt (*la chasse*) is regularly invoked, both by the characters and by the film itself, to explain the goings-on. Like a duel or a bullfight, a hunt is a highly ritualized (that is, rule-bound and time-ordered, pre-narrativized) activity with many symbolic elements, but also with a real death at its center.

The film depicts this violence with an almost documentary-style detachment. The hunt scene that appears at the center point of the action begins lightheartedly enough. All the guests at the mansion proceed happily to the hunting grounds. Some are more interested than others, but all participate without objection. At the signal, the servants begin to

flush out the game and the aristocrats take aim. All that happens next is that animals (mostly pheasants and rabbits) are killed, on-screen, over and over. The actual shooting only takes about a minute but, to the viewer, it is a very long minute. We see a dozen or more animals killed before our eyes, some of which die less than instantly. By its own standards, the hunt is a success: there is much game and everyone has a trophy for his or her efforts. And yet, everyone's mood has become foul. Friends accuse one another of poaching. Lovers bicker. They have all become infected by the violence they have enacted. However ritualized, hunting is a brutal business and its brutality spills over into the society that makes sport of killing.

Every commentator has remarked on the brutality of the hunt scene, but in fact nearly every scene in the film is, in effect, a hunt scene. Every scene depicts a rule-bound ritual with a hovering danger and implicit violence. The hunt fails to satisfy, even when the game is plentiful, because hunting, as a sport, is not about the provision of food but about competitive killing in an endless cycle, a game that pauses but never concludes. To succeed in the hunt is not to be rewarded, but simply to have taken a temporary advantage in a sort of economy of violence that masquerades as a social order.

Is it an order that can command our loyalty? In *The Philadelphia Story*, order is restored in a form to which we can easily consent. Lovers are paired off with their appropriate mates and the only one painlessly sacrificed is the philistine. The practical and affective ties of the individuals overlap and reinforce one another, creating a community that is both stable and happy. But, no such happy ending or happy polity is available to us in *The Rules of the Game*. The fate of the animals in the hunt scene presages what will happen to the humans. After quickly tiring of André's rule-bound love, Christine just as quickly agrees to run away with Octave, whose love, he suddenly decides, is not so fraternal after all. But it is not to be. Through a series of misunderstandings and misidentifications, the artist (who is, after all, played by Renoir himself) is excluded and André is killed. He dies, we are told (though accidentally) just like an animal in *la chasse*.

Worst of all, perhaps, is the crushing *inclusion* of Christine that follows this death. Having attempted twice to run away with two different men, she is now symbolically re-incorporated into the family and nation of rules that she was attempting to flee. Nearly lifeless with grief, she is marched back into the house she was attempting to leave, welcomed warmly but quite formally by her husband (with a handshake, not a kiss), all the while with a look of absolute expressionless abjection on her face. Her spirit has fled and only her near lifeless body remains for membership in the polity.

In *The Philadelphia Story*, Tracy is not just the central character – the plot turns on the nature of her subjectivity. Will she be a “goddess”? Or a “first-class human being”? Christine faces a romantic trilemma equivalent to Tracy’s and she is possessed of a strong passion and will as well. Yet her fate is the opposite: she ends the film less human than she began it, but neither is she a goddess. Christine’s absence from the center of the film, where she should have a presence, strikes one more and more as the film goes on. Indeed, rather than growing through her adversity as Tracy does, Christine seems to shrink. In the opening scenes, she may be an outsider, but she is poised and confident. Throughout the film she becomes increasingly desperate until, at the end, she passes beyond desperation and appears numb to her fate. She ends, as do the hunted (and mechanical) animals, as a lifeless prize to be displayed in a rich household.

While she has returned to the family and, indeed, become more fully bound to it, the cost is that the essence of her personality – her strong will and desire to escape the rules – has been effaced and her relations of *amitié* (with André and Octave) have been destroyed. All she has left is her membership. And this is an indictment not so much of sexism or bourgeois manners but of political membership per se, democracy not excepted. If there were only the death of André and the exclusion of Octave, one might conclude that, although something had been sacrificed, something had also been gained if the love of Christine and Robert continued to animate their marriage. But the crushing of Christine indicates that the family is incompatible, not just with certain

individuals or with a certain number of individuals, but with individuality itself. It is more brutal, in its way, than the death of André, which seems merciful by comparison.

Renoir's indictment of France is not merely an indictment of its bourgeoisie. It is not, at the end of the day, even merely an indictment of *France*. It is simply an expression of pain at the cost of association, of the self-constitution of a group of animal individuals as a society. We need eros to bind us together, but, in its undiluted form, the instability and intensity of eros is destructive to any household and any state. The lover must die so that the family and state may live. If the only cost of this exchange were the proliferation of pornography, as *The Philadelphia Story* implies, we might find the bargain an acceptable one. But Renoir filmed the actual death of animals, and killed off his most democratic character, to remind us that the cost is in fact much higher.

No doubt *The Rules of the Game* is a better, more honest teacher of social reality than *The Philadelphia Story*, but we cannot draw the conclusion, on this basis, of the instructive capacity of film. We should instead wonder why such a noble story was banned by both the last French government of the Third Republic as well as the Nazi regime that succeeded it, *and* shunned by the immediate audience of filmgoers whom it initially confronted. To be banned by the fascists is, of course, a great honor, but the democrats received it with no less discourtesy.²⁹ This latter hostility is often explained by the film's supposed assault on the French *haute bourgeoisie*. But, unlike some of Renoir's earlier works, *Rules* is not really about relations *between* classes at all. Rather, there are two social worlds in it, visible to one another and, indeed, reflective of one another. No character here is *defeated* in an attempt to cross class boundaries; no such attempts are made at all. While it is possible to view this as Renoir's indictment of the stratification of French society, I find this implausible. The fact that he goes out of his way to depict the two social sets as mirror images of one another points to the opposite, and darker, conclusion that nothing in particular would change were

²⁹ Renoir himself testified to this; see *My Life and My Films*, p. 169ff.

class boundaries to be dissolved. The two groups are already too much alike; bourgeois and servant already live by the same rules. *The Rules of the Game*, then, is not so much pessimistic about class relations as it is about *human* relations.

It is this pessimism that explains the universal hostility with which the film was greeted at its debut. If it became popular with critics after the war, it is only because the intervening catastrophe so distanced the events and context depicted from their later viewers that they came to be viewed across a comfortable temporal divide and were no longer experienced as a direct indictment of the audience. What better evidence could we have, then, of the commercial necessity of flattering the audience than the universal rejection of a work, however intelligent and moral, which fails to do so? An honest misanthrope cannot succeed in Hollywood, nor, it appears, in Paris. We see here the fundamental problem with the idea of film as an instructive democratic medium: when the lesson displeases the audience, they can shut their eyes against it, and they do. I see nothing in your presentation of the joys of remarriage comedy that could solve this problem or even address it.

* * *

The Rules of the Game was made as the happy family of European nations were about to plunge themselves into the most violent conflict imaginable. Everyone involved with the making of the film well knew that war was approaching. What good, one might ask, is the sacrifice of eros that binds us into nations if the nations themselves simply renew the disorder at a level well beyond the control of any person? Renoir could not have known, of course, about the extent of the violence in World War II, but he had lived through World War I, which had been more violent than any conflict known on Earth before. Perhaps there would be no families and no nations if eros were given free reign, but then perhaps there would be no Verduns and no Shoahs either. Surely a trade-off worth pondering.³⁰

³⁰ See Jacqueline Stevens' *States Without Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Critics routinely refer to the hunt scene as the central scene of the movie and many of Renoir's main themes are certainly found there in concentrated form. However, there is another scene that is, in essence, repeated several times, which perhaps gives another important perspective on these questions. It is also a favorite point of critics to note Renoir's use of deep focus in this film to show action simultaneously in the foreground and background. The hunt does not make particular use of this technique. However, at several points in the film, Renoir trains the camera down a long hallway off which the guest rooms of La Colinière are arranged. In various planes of action, the characters go back and forth between the rooms, sometimes chasing one another, sometimes making music, joking or flirting, sometimes interacting or changing directions, often moving at a very high velocity. It is a repeated scene as lighthearted and unrealistic (training a camera down an actual hallway would never result in such images) as the hunt scene, which directly follows one of these shots, is brutal and realistic (shooting rabbits really does look like that).

What is it that animates the characters as they bounce back and forth with great energy even as they are supposedly about to bed down for the night? The energy of eros, no doubt – the characters are animated, but not quite like billiard balls. They move at similar speeds, but not all in the same way. Why choose to depict eros in this way? The poet Anne Carson has written that we are wrong to think of eros as a dyadic relationship. Eros, she claims, is a “three-point circuit”: the lover, the beloved, and that which separates them. When lover and beloved are finally united, erotic feeling is at an end; it exists only so long as they are kept apart (by a rival, happenstance, time or anything else).³¹ Here the hallway is what separates the various characters in their rooms. They keep attempting to cross that space and make contact with someone else. Each one has his or her own particular beloved, but together the scene shot down the hallway makes a kind of music that is, I think, intended as a reminder of the possibility of an amiable erotic

³¹ Anne Carson, *Eros: The Bittersweet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 16.

community – before that community is torn apart by the hunt and the violent emotions which it harnesses and magnifies. Each person pursues his own erotic object (love, friendship, music, fun) and, if there are jealousies under the surface, everyone seems amused enough by the situation to keep it going.

What happens, by contrast, in the hunt scene, is that the space between the individuals, which fuels their erotic energy, is collapsed. Hunters take hold of their prey by killing it and, in so doing, they destroy the social fabric that sustains their relations. At the end of the hallway scene, nobody has what they want and everyone (more or less) is happy. At the end of the hunt scene, everyone has what (they thought) they wanted and they are all miserable. But, more importantly, their relationships have been put out of kilter and will not be put back into a kind of order until André is dead, Octave banished and Christine neutered.

Remarriage – the reaffirmation of the set of relations that are threatened with erotic disorder – is a tragedy here, not just because someone dies, but because eros is tamed to the point of suffocation. Tracy Lord was lucky, but families, and nations, are not built on luck but on bonds that the inconstancy of eros cannot bear. Christine by contrast is not extraordinarily unlucky. What happens to her is more like the ordinary passage from inconstant adolescence to an adult responsibility and a formalized place in a social structure. The price that she pays is one that we all share in as a cost of the social union; she merely pays in a more concentrated and vivid way.

The entire film is prefaced by a set of lines from *The Marriage of Figaro* (the play by Beaumarchais which became the basis for Mozart's opera):

Est-ce un crime de changer?

Si l'Amour porte des ailes,

N'est-ce pas pour voltiger?

N'est-ce pas pour voltiger?

N'est-ce pas pour voltiger?

Is it a crime to change?
 If Love has wings?
 Isn't it to flitter?
 Isn't it to flitter?
 Isn't it to flitter?

Isn't eros naturally inconstant? Aren't our affections routinely in motion? Is it a crime to change? Not to Renoir, perhaps, but to the family and the state, yes. That is why *The Philadelphia Story* can only legitimate marriage with sleight of hand and blind luck, as if living by the rules were no more costly than miming one's way through a wedding ceremony. In *La Règle du jeu*, eros and union are locked in a perpetual struggle; anyone friendly to both can only view the situation with pity and pessimism.

III

We seem to be at a deadlock. Two views of remarriage, symbolic of democratic union, equal and opposed. In both, the variability of erotic life is in tension with the bonds of union. But in one, this tension is happily mediated by friendship and pretense, while in the other a balance is maintained only by violence and an ugly decorum. What instruction can we find in these antinomies? In viewing them, are we denizens of the grindhouse on our way to being better citizens? Where you find enlightenment, I find only a repulsive clarity.

Perhaps we must ask the question in another way. I hope I will not have to convince anyone that this disagreement goes far beyond the individual films in question and will not be resolved by some discovery about the particular intentions of their creators. Rather, our two opinions about which film is more exemplary of the relation of the medium to a living community derive from something more fundamental. "In a movie house," you have written, "the barrier to the stars is time."³² But I do not

³² Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) p. 155.

believe we have yet really settled on the time of film, if there is such a thing, and what kind of connection or barrier it creates with its audience. I believe that it is here that we will find the key to our difficulties.

Let us begin where the water is shallowest and one can pretend to swim while still standing on ground that is relatively firm. Since nearly the beginning of the era of film and of writing about it, it has been recognized that the distinctiveness of film has something to do with time. Film is a form of photography that captures or reproduces, as still photography does not, something more than a moment, some stretch of time. But film proceeds by means of photography, the rapid succession of still photographs which make visible a moving image. Beyond these elementary points, it is difficult to produce concurrence.

A long debate has taken place, which I do not pretend to recount, about the time of cinema to which we are both latecomers. Whether we should lay emphasis on the frozen photo frame on the filmstrip or on the perception of movement in the eye; whether film is more natural in displaying movement, or less natural in preserving it against a natural destruction; whether, in short, film in its essence is a medium that brings us closer to life or takes us further away from it constitutes a question that has been often asked and contrastingly answered.³³

To solve these paradoxes is well beyond my ability, as others will not hesitate to point out. But to ask these questions in an absolute way is to make them all but unanswerable. Closer to life? What is *that*? Whose life and which moment of it? Who will name for us the universal generic qualities of life or experience to which we can compare the cinema? However, perhaps we can put these paradoxes to use in another fashion by asking a more particular question, one more relevant to our shared concerns with film's contribution (or lack thereof) to our freedom. We can ask whether and how popular or commercial film supports or impedes the democracy of moments and the republic of law. Is the experience of

³³ One would begin, perhaps with Henri Bergson and André Bazin and continue at least through Christian Metz, Siegfried Kracauer, Jean-Louis Baudry, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Laura Mulvey and Gilles Deleuze, to name just a small selection in a large debate, an excellent discussion of which is in Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

film an active or a passive one? Ask, rather, whether it makes for active or passive citizens. Of course, particular films and directors will have their own perspectives, but here the question is whether they (we) are constrained by the medium and the audience in some direction. Godard (very fond of pronouncements), in a letter, called *The Rules of the Game* “the film of films,” meaning perhaps that it was a movie that somehow exemplifies the quality of the medium. But in what way?

Perhaps, too, we can make some headway by contrasting cinema with television, which shares with film the quality of being a mechanical reproduction of images in time while remaining, at least so far, a distinct medium. Originally, of course, the technology of television did not allow for any kind of recording and broadcasts could not be repeated except by re-enactment. Television was live television or did not exist. Later, the development of kinescope and then videotape made possible the recording and replay of television programs. But “live television” is still a substantial subcategory of what we see on television, while “live cinema” cannot exist.

We can agree, I suppose, that there is some sort of difference between the time of film and television. You yourself have called attention to it, although not in a way that I can fully endorse.³⁴ Film always presents itself as a recording, that is, as a reproduction of something that exists in the past (even a future past, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away”). Film is always in the perfect tense, we might say, while television is far from perfect. So, although this limit is not an insurmountable one, each medium has a dominant tense, so to speak, built into its grammar.

The liveness of television is much more, however, than a residue of the history of its technology. For decades there has been nothing technologically necessary about the liveness of television and yet it persists. A great

³⁴ See Stanley Cavell, “The Fact of Television,” in *Cavell on Film*, pp. 59–86. Some today, seeing technology erode the divide between film and television, have come to maintain that it was never that significant to begin with. I do not have the space here to directly rebut this plausible view, but my reasons for disagreeing should become clear in what follows. See Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2007), ch. 1.

deal of what we watch on television remains live³⁵ (news, sports, some comedy, chat and quiz shows, and talent shows including, of course, the most popular kinds like “American Idol”), despite the fact that there might be some considerable advantages to having the opportunity to edit or shape what is broadcast. More significantly perhaps – or what shows the significance of it – much of what is not live on television goes to great lengths to present the *illusion of liveness*. Shows that are taped (I will not say filmed) are taped in front of audiences or have audience-reaction tracks added to their audio so that they have the feel of a live transmission. Others are filmed in a pseudo-documentary style that, although edited, strives to appear unedited. Yet no one, so far as I know, has ever added a laugh track to a film or proposed filming in front of an audience, although, again, the technology obviously exists to do so.

Although we think of television as the venue of constant repetition, this is something of a mistake. Only certain television programs – generally the filmed ones – bear repeating and their capacity to be repeated bears an inverse relation to their liveness. News and sports cannot be repeated at all – no one wants to hear yesterday’s news today and no one wants to watch sporting events the results of which are already known.³⁶ The same holds, to a lesser degree, for chat shows as well as other shows that hold a contest or a secret. When the result is known, the precedent events become inherently boring. A talk show may be shown a second time for those who missed the first broadcast, but it is not repeated a month or a year later. Television seems so repetitive because very little of what is broadcast actually bears repeating at all, and what remains is therefore pressed into double and triple duty while the networks display

³⁵ Or nearly live. I leave aside here such deviations from liveness as the seven-second delay that networks use to purge words they deem unspeakable, the later rebroadcast of live television in other time zones, etc. Since this involves no editing or shaping of the material involved, I treat it, perhaps contestably, as “live.”

³⁶ I realize that in recent years some channels have tried to defy this law by rebroadcasting “classic” sporting events, but I have never met a human being who has actually watched such a rebroadcast and their scheduling late at night and early in the morning only reflects the network’s desperation to have something on the air at an hour when no sporting events are actually taking place. This is the case of the exception proving the rule.

a voracious appetite for new material of any kind to fill up the hours which they feel obliged to broadcast. The present tense of television means that as soon as the events depicted retreat into the past, their transmission is pointless.

With film, by contrast, it is all different and nothing is in the present tense. From the beginning, film was a medium of repetition and not only because a film that is worth watching once is generally worth watching again (and only a small number are really “spoiled” by knowing the ending). While it is certainly true of any narrative that knowing how it will end changes one’s perspective on the whole, good films are like good novels (which is not to say films are like novels) in being endlessly repeatable to those who love them. Even when films affect an aspect of “liveness” (as in *cinema vérité*), they do not escape from this, nor do they really pretend to be live in the way that television sitcoms, for example, pretend to be live. While it used to be that most people would only view a film once, that is no longer true and everyone can (and does) see their favorite films over and over.

Films have this capacity for repetition precisely because they are never present in the first place. They are always preterit, have already gone by. They endure because they were never subjected to the flux of living temporality with its routine passage from possibility to oblivion. It is only the mildest symptom of this difference of tense that historical films are far more common than historical television shows. These categories are far from absolute, of course. One can always speak in a language the grammar of which is unfamiliar; one merely speaks awkwardly. Historical television has surely been made. Equally, one can easily show a film on television and television shows (but usually the more “filmlike” ones) are available for purchase and repeated viewing. But, surely, the distinction I have made tells us something about the nature of film and indicates to us that film is distinguished from television either by lacking the quality of liveness that the latter possesses or by possessing some other quality that overshadows the liveness. This, I think, rather than the mechanical quality of photographic

reproduction is what is important here.³⁷ Photographs, television and film all share this latter quality, so it cannot explain the differences between them.

I have avoided calling the liveness of television “presentness” because I think it is the nature of presentness that is precisely at issue in this distinction. Certainly, it should not be denied that television’s liveness has a certain power. When I viewed the first moon landing, for example, or the destruction of the Berlin Wall, or the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, as each of them happened I had an experience that cannot be resurrected either by viewing those events on videotape or in any kind of dramatic recreation. But events like these are exceptional and certainly do not give us an understanding of what goes on in the *five hours every day* that the average American still views television.³⁸ If the unrepeatable moment seems essential to my citizenship, is the other its complement or its opposite?

Films, on the other hand, never have the quality of liveness. We never suppose that what we see is taking place simultaneously, as we can do with television. As a result of this, we might say, whatever claim to veracity that film might have, it is of a different order from that of television. A temporal distance is always open between a film and its audience, just as you say. But what sort? What is the reason, for example, that the dominant commercial mode of film is fiction, while television is dominated by so-called “reality” shows which at least pretend to documentary status? Documentary film exists, of course, but is only rarely popular. Is documentary perhaps more naturally at home on television, where it sits with its cousins news, sports and chat? We often say that a film “loses something” when seen on television rather than at a theater.

³⁷ That “mechanical” quality is, in any case, breaking down as the technology of digital editing and animation increases in its ability to alter, extend and manipulate what is “photographed” in the traditional sense. We may rapidly be reaching the point where it is considered normal for every frame of film to be something other than a photograph in the traditional sense.

³⁸ Nielsen Company, “Comparable Metrics,” Q4 2015, pp. 6–9.

Does anyone say this of documentary film? Surely this cannot be simply a matter of the size of the screen or the beauty of the images; there are all kinds of documentaries. Perhaps it is rather the case that television has a generic documentary quality, its liveness, that makes that category of films that we call “documentaries” seem more at home there.

When a certain type of critic bemoans the fact that modern humans watch so many hundreds of hours of television in a month, a certain type of reply is often made that we are not really watching at all. The television may be on, but that does not mean we are paying heed to it; we may get up and do something else for a while, our attention may wander, the television may be background noise as we prepare food or converse or otherwise go about our business. But no one would claim that we routinely watch films this way. People do not get up and wander around a theater; while the film is running, people generally attend to it. Sometimes people talk in theaters, sometimes not, but if one can really draw oneself away from a film long enough to turn around in a theater (and what does it say if you have never done this before and if it feels unnatural to do so?) you will see, I wager, well over 95 percent of the eyes firmly fixed on the screen. We go with others, but we hardly see one another when we are there.

Rather than look for a magical quality that film has that causes us to pay attention to it, I think it makes more sense to seek the quality in television that allows us *not* to pay attention to it, and I would nominate for this the very quality of liveness that I have been discussing. It is frequently said that people turn the TV on (as they do with radio) for its quality of “keeping company” rather than for its specific content; but nobody goes to the movies for the company. Or, rather, it is uncomfortable to go to the movies *without* company – that is, without other people in a group – because the film itself provides no company. Only someone as depraved as a critic goes to see films alone. Yet a modern citizen may spend many hours alone with his or her television and not think this incident worthy of explanation. Seeing someone alone at the movies is like seeing someone alone in a restaurant: one can feel simultaneously embarrassed for them and ashamed for the reaction.

Television functions as a kind of substitute for our attention, a substitute for our minute-to-minute consciousness in a way that is different from film. The evidence? That we can pass into and out of attention with television in a way we generally do not with film. We find television and waking life to be easily interchangeable. With film, by contrast, we isolate ourselves in a theater to give it our full attention and, when we do so, we generally do not intend for our mind to wander.³⁹ If it does, we blame the film for being boring or ourselves for lacking focus, but whoever sought to allocate blame for not paying attention to television?

It is a mistake, then, to exaggerate the realism of film; it is certainly less present to us than television. What explains its immersive qualities? The photography of film is no doubt impressive, but one day it will surely be exceeded, for example by virtual reality.⁴⁰ What, then, is film if not a substitute for our waking consciousness? The question of course contains its own potential answer, one that has been offered many times: a substitute for our non-waking consciousness, that is, for our dreams. Only in dreams are we enveloped in an unreal experience the way we are in cinema. Only in dreams do we devote our full attention to a spectacle without prospect of diversion. And only dreams repeat without the repetition feeling unnatural. When dreams repeat, we do not call it, as we might, *déjà vu*.

What effect does this have? I think there is no fact more important in understanding cinema than that it is an experience that produces emotions that exceed or extend (rather than mimic) those of ordinary daily life. There is an entire population that cries only at the cinema and rarely or never outside. Even for those not in this category, surely all but the most hard-hearted have had the experience of being swept away by an emotion at the movies while knowing full well, upon reflection, that a similar experience outside the movie house would produce nothing like it. How many have come home from a good cry over a

³⁹ Perhaps this distinction explains why there is a large population that never goes to the movies at all, but only a tiny one that never watches television.

⁴⁰ There is even an interesting film about this prospect: *Strange Days* (1995), directed by Kathryn Bigelow.

sentimental film to watch the evening news, which is full of real death, disease and suffering and yet produces no similar response? Where else is it in our lives that we experience emotions in excess of our regular ones on the basis of illusory stimuli?⁴¹ The answer can only be in our dreams: arousal, fear, sadness, anger, embarrassment – we experience all of these in a way that is often more intense than when conscious. The most direct example is also the most irrefutable: one can have an orgasm in one's sleep, but I defy anyone to reproduce the result through pure conscious imagination.

I do not claim originality for this thought. It is a commonplace of course that the best film experiences are “like a dream” and many more serious reflections than that have been made on the likeness of films and dreams. But so many of the latter have been made within a Freudian framework, where the unconscious “knows no time,” that they have had to settle for an account of film that finally ends up merely repeating and relying on a vocabulary that, in the end, settles nothing.

What *are* dreams, after all, that the likening of films to them may produce some insight? When Baudry spoke of the cinematic apparatus as producing a dreamlike effect, it is not clear that he had any time in mind at all but rather the undivided space of the infantile imagination that experiences all of the world as part of itself.⁴² Surely, there is an important point here, but we cannot really understand the cinema merely by referring it to a category of experiences that we label as primitive narcissism. What does this really mean in any case? Again, how much will this entail insisting on the necessity of a large screen and a darkened room?

It makes no sense, I think, to ask whether the supplementary emotions of the cinema are true or not true, any more than those of dreams. I do not

⁴¹ There is, I admit, a population that can also be moved to tears by novels and poetry. But these exquisitely sensitive souls, though precious, are so few that we can safely leave them aside here. Do I need to add that no one has ever cried over a book of philosophy (though many have wished to and even pretended to)?

⁴² See Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema,” in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (6th edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 206–23.

know any grounds on which one could distinguish here between reality and simulation. Certainly, it is possible to imagine a world without cinema and without these emotions, but that hardly proves anything. It is also possible to imagine a world without dreams but, however appealing such a world might be to our rationalist friends, it is not one we are ever likely to inhabit nor, for that matter, would there be anything more real about it. Indeed, it would be profoundly unnatural, if anything is.

Some filmmakers, of course, have attempted to reproduce the experience of dreams (Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World* (1991) is an important example that demonstrates the contradictions involved). But this too does not really speak to the issue at hand. When people talk of the "non-linear" time of dreams, they are apt not to indicate a true alternative time, but just a random passage from moment to moment with no logical connection between them. What, after all, could be farther from that than the "ordinary" linear storylines of movies like *The Philadelphia Story*? But dreams are not really non-linear, at least in the sense usually meant. Freud was right about that much: dreams generally make sense, even if we do not always perceive the sense. Nor are their moments randomly connected.

Freud, in any case, was only following Nietzsche in arguing that the experience of the dream was entirely the creation of the dreamer, or perhaps a vast phantasm of commentary on the extremely minimal text of the bodily impressions we receive when asleep: the cool breeze from the window blown up to a narrative about a ship sailing through arctic waters.⁴³ How can we square this with an experience of cinema where we know, before anything else, that something we have not conjured

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche: "Dream and Responsibility: – You are willing to assume responsibility for everything! Except, that is, for your dreams! What miserable weakness, what lack of consistent courage! Nothing is *more* your own than your dreams! Nothing *more* your own work! Content, form, duration, performer, spectator – in these comedies you are all of this yourself" (*Daybreak* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 78). C.f. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), chapter 3, "A Dream is the Fulfillment of a Wish," *passim*; and "Some Additional Notes on Dream Interpretation as Whole," in *Complete Works*, vol. 19 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966–73), pp. 123–8: "Obviously one must hold oneself responsible for the evil impulses of one's dreams. What else is one to do with them? Unless the content of the dream ... is inspired by alien spirits, it is a part of my own being."

is put before our eyes? Do we really want to say that this is a fact we perpetually forget? The pleasure of the cinema must surely include the pleasure of the unexpected and, again, Freud is right to say that, at some level, nothing unexpected can occur in a dream, since it is all our own work. What can the two phenomena really share?

We do not yet have an adequate set of names for the variety of temporal experiences, which is to say that we have only begun to map the terrain in this area. Film has a presence that is not liveness; at least, it does not threaten to substitute for our ordinary consciousness and we do not usually mistake it for that (as we do mistake television when we allow it to occupy our consciousness, for hours on end, without making the slightest impression). Most of our daily thoughts are transient and forgettable, like television.

Rather than mistaking film for an element of our own consciousness, I think it is crucial that we know that it is not. If anything, we make the opposite mistake: part of the power of film's presence lies in our mistaking it for something that is eternal. Film's presence is not fleeting but lasting, but how and why? What is it that film shares with dreams if not the egoism?

Perhaps they share the sense of being a revelation that is, at the same time, a recovery. When dreams are powerful, it is because they are both strange and familiar. Strange in the sense that they reveal to us something we did not know, but familiar in the sense that, in fact, this something is something we knew all along. In the Freudian view (and I think, in this matter, the Lacanian view also), this must always be something about the self, that is, something that is rooted in the individual ego. That is why so much film interpretation in the psychoanalytic tradition always turns films into events of self-revelation (or, alternatively, of revelation about the *auteur*). But, if we relax the rigid bounds of Freudian egoism, we can learn to view the familiarity of film in a different way, one that does not pretend that viewers forget that films come to them from the outside.

In the Nietzschean view of dreams, they were the creative act par excellence. But when Nietzsche referred to Homer as "the dreaming Greek," he meant this to go hand-in-hand with his statement that

“three-quarters of Homer is unoriginal.”⁴⁴ Why unoriginal? Because, in Nietzsche’s view, Homer’s creativity lay in synthesizing existing myths, stories, songs and legends into a whole that was greater than any of these. The Greek world, then, recognized itself in Homer not only, or not merely, on account of his virtuoso originality, but because they themselves had already lived the experiences (heard the myths, sung the songs, etc.) that became part of this greater whole. When we recognize ourselves in a story, this does not have to mean that we suddenly have access to some isolated nugget of our individual unconscious that no one has ever seen. It can also mean that we see the identity between ourselves and elements of the world that are in some sense exterior to us.

What Homer actually accomplished to make this possible was to put these elements into a narrative. That is the “Apollonian” talent that Nietzsche celebrates in the first half of *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is the creation of a time scheme out of the timeless primordial Dionysian chaos that he describes as the core of human imagination.

Putting these points together, we might say that the power of filmic presence derives from its revelation of hidden or lost time, rather than from any particular temporal scheme or structure. Films, after all, have many time schemes. Most follow everyday linear time, sometimes adding flashback or, less commonly, flashforward. Some scramble time or show things out of sequence – *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Amores Perros* (2000) – and a few attempt to work backwards – *Memento* (2000), *Betrayal* (1983) – though in practice this amounts to merely reversing the order of scenes which are themselves shot conventionally. But, whatever it is we want to say about the power of film and time, it needs to apply to all of these and not only to those that get a narrative jolt by disrupting our expectations about linear time.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-too-Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 339.

⁴⁵ Not forgetting, of course, that great monument of comic Nietzscheanism, *Groundhog Day* (1993). I do not know whether it is right to say that any films at all are “about” time, but I would nominate *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Voyager* (1991) and *The Dreamers* (2003) as films which have something important to say about time, but which follow a perfectly ordinary linear sequence.

To say that film shows us a hidden or lost time, then, is not to say that a particular film shows us a particular temporal structure. It is to say, instead, that a film holds our attention by showing us something about ourselves that brings together novelty and memory in a temporal-visual matrix. It is this matrix that puts the film in the presence of our minds, from which point we can accept or reject it (I do not mean that this is a voluntary choice, but simply that not all films that reach us actually remain with us). This is not a matter of recovering experiences we have had and suppressed (*Spellbound*, I think, is a rather dull Freudian exercise). Rather, it is a matter of taking some or several elements of our unprocessed past and placing them in a context which gives them a new meaning, a meaning which nonetheless draws some of its force from the way in which it evokes an element of our own identity. So it ought to be no surprise when televised news of actual tragedy leaves us dry-eyed while filmed melodrama executed with a modicum of skill makes a puddle, for the latter can mimic the qualities of being that daylight renders invisible.

This process need not, in a general way, be exclusive to cinema. My language here is meant to point to our countryman Proust. What, after all, was his famous book intended to accomplish? In recovering lost time, he obviously did not mean that he could have experiences for the second time *as if* they were the first time. The person who dunks his cookie in tea is a middle-aged man remembering his past. Nonetheless, the emotion that is generated by this recollection is *more* intense than the original experience, even though the second experience is the “passive” one of recollection. The recollection, then, can be more intense than the original. Is it always so? Certainly not, but, he hopes, the experience he had spontaneously with the madeleine is one that he can reproduce in his novelistic reproduction of the past. But he did not write the novel so that *he* could have this intense experience of recollection. He wrote it so that *we*, who had not experienced any part of his life, could now experience it as he did, *as a narrative recollection*, with all the accumulated intensity and meaning that it lacked as an original experience. We are, so to speak, the subject and object of

an event of witnessing (a word which brings together the acts of seeing and knowing).

Just as we, who have not had Proust's life, can nonetheless experience his memory in a fictional recreation of it, and thereby have a more intense emotion, so can a film produce for us a revelation which we may experience in part as a memory even if it is not our own. (Is this not the power of *Citizen Kane*'s "Rosebud"? Is this not why so many consider this film as some kind of ur-phenomenon?) Indeed, film may have more tools at its disposal for achieving this aim than Proust had at his, even including the darkened room and the large projection screen. Yet, the grounds on which we distinguish an artform as a genre do not require that its aim be utterly counterdistinguished from that of all other art objects (and not all novels, after all, are Proustian).

Saying, then, that the time of cinema is a dreamtime is not an attempt to ascribe to the cinema mystical powers, nor is it to give sway to the authority of Freudian categories (the two most common mistakes, I think). It is rather an attempt to account for the strength of film's presence in such a way that makes sense of what we know about the phenomenological aspects of the film experience and to relate those to the closest analog possible in an ordinary human life. Dreamtime, in my Nietzschean account, is not a specific temporal structure. Rather, dreamtime is the narrativization of the past in a way that endows it with a novel meaning without destroying the trace of the original experience. Furthermore, we should not say that dreams do this "internally" or "intrapersonally" while films do this "externally" or "interpersonally" – that already puts a certain kind of egoistic characterization on what a dream experience actually is, that is, a distortion. Another person cannot experience my dreams, it is true (but, again, see Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World* for an imagination of the reverse); but dreams are from the start not a "merely" personal experience but a reinterpretation, not of my inner life, but of my whole life, a life that I share with other people. We should not believe people who say they have identical dreams, of course, but we should not dismiss people who report similar dreams, since it is not surprising that people who share a

world, experiences and emotions should similarly reconfigure these in nighttime interpretations.

Time, therefore, *is not the barrier – as you say – but rather the medium by which we receive the force of the filmic experience*, which is to say, the force of the film as opposed to the photography. It is the transmissible template by which representations of being can pass from mind to object and back again. It is, therefore, also the point of ontological contact between the film object that is available to us and the human subject that constitutes that availability. It is, of course, true that the movement in time of a film is an optical effect (let us not say “illusion”) created in the eye or the brain from a series of still images. Since neuroscience seems increasingly set to tell us that ordinary seeing consists of this same effect, there is no cause to indict film (on this point, at least) as being any more deceptive than the world it views. We might do better to say that film as a medium emphasizes the burdens of temporality that it shares with ordinary life, the burdens of impermanence, contingency and chaos forcibly subordinated to an ordered narrative.

How does it do this? Not as a human would. Film is not a mind but a technology and we must take a moment here to appreciate this element of its nature and add it to the picture we have been building. I do not say it is a technology in order to dispute its status as an art. Film is undoubtedly an art, the dominant art of our times, but we cannot understand its qualities and political effect simply through aesthetic categories. Of course, there is a component of technique in the painting of pictures and the printing of books, but books and painting existed in other forms before their modern technological incarnations. Film did not. Film is a spectacle but plays are not pre-cinematic films in the way that cave drawings are pre-modern paintings. It took so long for film to be recognized as art, in part, because it was the first new art form in generations, but also because it was obviously a technological innovation with little connection to previous aesthetic media (photography, at that time, was hardly recognized as an art either). When the first cinema opened, it was a modern marvel, not the rebirth of some ancient art. Film theorists, having struggled for so long to establish the

aesthetic seriousness of their subject, are now in danger of forgetting its technical character.

Film is an art that required, from the start, and as with no other, complicated machines, not only for filming but for editing (and then for adding sound), and for reproduction and display. What does this mean? First of all, that we must treat film, not only in relation to other art forms but also in relation to other technologies like television, computers and telephones. All of the political innovations of the twentieth century (fascism, communism) have disappeared as quickly as they have emerged, while the technics of that period structure almost every moment of our daily life. It is surely the technology of the twentieth century rather than its art or politics that will be remembered in a thousand years.

It has been argued that all technology betrays an origin in a certain picture of the world;⁴⁶ and to the extent this is true, there must be a special account of the technology that ends up producing its own pictures. But this need not mean, as Baudry maintained, that the cinema is primarily a certain kind of apparatus. What matters is that technics like film, as we were saying above, can only emerge on the basis of a certain relationship between humans, nature and time, a relationship that precedes any kind of apparatus. We may be born *to* a mediated relation with nature, but we are not born *in* one, so the manner in which we enter this relation makes all the difference.

In this view, we must not think about the technology of film simply as this or that machine, but as something that mediates our relation to the world in a way that is unavailable to the animals. What separates us from the animals is not our intelligence or our sympathies (animals have some quantity of both, it would seem), but simply our availability for this kind of temporal mediation. In order to see a picture, that is, one must first have the ability to see it *as* a picture and not simply as another piece of the world. The apparatus of cinema has changed and

⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 115–54.

will continue to change (soon there will be no film or tape at all), but the picture-sight that gives the apparatus its function is not subject to that kind of technical evolution.

The animal does not lack for intelligence, or not only. It lacks, as I have claimed elsewhere, the human experience of time. What does this mean? We might just as easily say that it is humans who lack something here; they lack a connection to the world that captivates them such that time stands still for them. The animal is not a machine – not in the least – but it interacts with the world according to patterns that do not change from day to day or year to year, or, for many species, from generation to generation. It sees the world in a way that does not change and it cannot be brought to see the world in a different way. It cannot have one picture of the world because it cannot have two pictures of the world; it simply has the world, picturelessly. If it is true that technology has a picture of the world or produces one, that is only possible as a result of its human origin and does not subsist in the physical properties of the machine.

A human sees the world, but also sees others seeing it and thus begins to admit to the possibility of seeing the world differently. It is not as if time invades the human mind and takes root there as an alien force. Time has no force and cannot force anything to happen. It is better to say that the ontological barrier between the animals and time is dismantled or collapses by the same process that makes us visible to one another as humans, that is, as individuals who share a collective identity as humans. That Aristotle, Linnaeus and others later projected the concept of species back onto the world of differentiated animals means only that we see them through the lens that we use to see ourselves. A mediated relation to time and nature becomes possible when the space between individuals acquires an erotic significance as a space that could be closed, that is, as a space whose closure would be meaningful. Animals have eyes as we do; their sight lacks nothing physical (indeed, it often exceeds ours) but only the longing to see the world as others do, to share a vision. That is, they lack the erotic distance that

is the basis both for disruptive politics and for a genuine pluralism of perspectives and minds.

The signal difference between dreams and waking life is not in what or how we see – that is, there is *no specific difference of content* between them – but rather in the fact that in dreams, as in cinema, we see *without being seen in return*. Normally, to see something that appears, one must also stand in some place in the world and appear oneself at the same time that one sees others. Consciousness is something we must share with others. In conscious perception, seeing and being seen go together. Alone on an island, we would never know whether we were asleep or awake. But, in dreams, as in cinema, we are the seers that do not reveal ourselves to anyone in seeing. In exchanging social appearances for filmed pictures, we trade a kind of seeing that requires that we participate with others in a moment of exchange of visibility for a viewing that isolates us from others and gives our seeing a sense of false control. In so doing, we return, in a sense, to the captivation of the animal in a world without sociality.

We imagine that cinema extends our vision. Does it not let us see things that are far away? In the sky? Under water? In fact, it restricts our vision, not as to what is in the field of view itself, but in the sense that we see as if absent from the public moment of seeing. Our vision is restricted not in terms of space and time but reciprocity. We have the vision of the animal, which sees everything except another perspective.

We believe ourselves in control of our experiences at the movies. Have we not paid to see the film and chosen it? But, just as in our dreams, the opposite is the case: we are captivated by these images we do not control. Just as in sleep, we generally cannot choose to wake up from a dream that displeases us, so in a film we are locked in to an experience which we only judge, if we judge it at all, when it is over. Can we not walk out of a film that displeases us? In principle, yes. Yet how many times have you done it? How many times, instead, have you endured a film that you knew to be pointless or even degrading and satisfied yourself with a negative judgment as you left the cinema. As if that weak reply made you the master of the experience! I have woken

myself out of an unpleasant dream at least as often, perhaps more often, than I have taken myself out of an unpleasant film. And yet, in only one of these situations am I supposed to be unconscious! Why do we not demand a fast-forward control in a cinema, like the one that we use at home with the television? Foolish media executives who think that consumers want control of their media! Control of their money, yes! Of their films? You have missed the point of the cinematic pleasures of captivity.

By contrast, in the waking world, the democracy of moments is something that can at least be experienced. You can and do experience each moment separately, let it find its purchase in a variety of narrative possibilities rather than being yoked to a story given in advance that you passively accept. This is not to say anymore that you are a master of your own experience. Let us thank the heavens that we are not! To be a master of your experience would mean that you were limited to your own imagination, the pitiful singular imagination of a single human. Instead, we routinely have blessed moments that transcend our imagination not because they are visibly (or visually) spectacular, but because they exceed our available interpretations (and thus simultaneously rely on them). An animal is subjected to no political power and yet this democracy of moments is not available to it because the sociality of consciousness is not available to it either. The animal can never exceed its own imagination. In compensation, you could say, the animal will also never experience all the deprivations of consciousness and eros that humans are subjected to.

The artful technology of cinema is not generically pleasing because it provides us with something new or some narcotic, but rather because it subtracts from our experience, however temporarily, a source of our suffering, our decaptivation. That is why one can enjoy the basic experience of movie going, even when the film itself is awful. We relax into the comfort of a prehuman isolation only to enjoy the spectacle of human travails. We enjoy, that is, a deprivation of community and citizenship that we would protest loudly if it were forced upon us by some political power.

Why is the language of friendship unavailing in *The Rules of the Game*? In place of this question, ask instead whether you have ever made a friend in a movie house. I wager, and this is my last wager on your experience, that you have not. Before a film? Yes. After a film, talking about it? Yes. Waiting on line or in the restroom? Why not? But *during* a film? Never. We go to films with preexisting friends precisely to compensate for enduring the loneliness of the experience. For, however marvelous an experience, it is a lonely one, not one that can be truly shared. Are we not afraid to go to sleep precisely because we cannot bring others along with us to share our dreams and nightmares? Do you fear the content of your nightmares or the fact that you must endure them alone?

Friendship arises from shared activity: walking, talking, building, destroying, learning, parenting, eating, drinking, fighting, hiding, even philosophizing – there are endless examples – but what does it say that film-going is not one of them? It does not impede friendship certainly and so may be an inert part of an ongoing relationship, but if all you can do with another person is see movies together, you must know that the relationship is at an end, or never began. To share someone's perspective, you must first acknowledge its difference from your own; cinema affords no space for this experience.

An experience of citizenship is surely one that can be shared, that indeed must be shared, and which therefore makes a friendship (and an enmity) possible, though certainly not necessary. Citizenship, like consciousness, is a social activity. However much I have learned about friendship from film, however many friends I have made through and around film, I have never yet made a friend *in* a film, and I expect I never will. Friendship does not avail in *The Rules of the Game*, "the film of films," because it cannot really exist in that world any more than love, citizenship or any other joint experience. You might as well expect to make friends in your sleep.

The experience of film, taken in through the medium of narrative, does not put us in the presence of another mind, but, because it *seems* to, we are apt to let it take the place of those more truly democratic

experiences, until the day arrives when we have lost our ability to tell the difference or, worse, when we prefer the dream, which we think we control, to the waking life, which we know we do not. The reciprocity between individuals, like the oscillation between moment and narrative or public and not-public, must be free and uncontrolled if it is to serve its purpose of creating and sustaining a union of democratic experience. This experience may be terrifying, and it is understandable that we would shrink from it and seek alternatives, but it is also ultimately sustaining and conjoining – the alternatives are isolating and deadening.

In film, we always see the democracy of moments subordinated to the republic of laws. It can either pretend that this subordination is free and costless, as in *The Philadelphia Story*, or it can display the costs vividly, as in *The Rules of the Game*. But which of these films was met with an adoring audience? And which nearly instigated an armed revolt? Film succeeds commercially when it disguises the subordination that it embodies, and, when it reveals it, it fails. So, if *The Philadelphia Story* instructs us to be happy and claims this as a democratic emotion, it is an instruction as profoundly false as the phony wedding which Tracy and Dexter stage for the guests. It is a myth of optimism that happiness and freedom walk hand in hand. No, freedom is not a guaranteed tragedy, but it always risks one, and an honest account or remarriage will have to risk it too.

IV

Let us waken, then, from this reverie and return to Philadelphia. It will be asked how a man who so loves the cinema can stage a criticism of it. I ask in return whether any of us really has his or her loves and ideals in perfect alignment? Must a cinephile be a bad citizen? Let us just say that I am a very bad citizen and leave it at that.

Is there no place at all for cinema in a democracy? In democracy, we fetishize the publicity of politics and insist upon the openness of political institutions. But, since perfectly transparent institutions, like

perfectly transparent personalities, are impossible, we inevitably lapse back into episodes of secrecy. Our refusal to accept this necessity means that the boundary between the open and the not-open cannot be a stable division but rather an endless provocation to our imagination. Instead of a division of labor between public and not-public we have instead a tortured dialectic in which we repeatedly seek both to construct walls around certain behaviors and to tear those same walls down with excessive relish. The endless political cycles of “scandal” and “reform” that have been with us, it seems, since the first days of modern democracy are the mildest incarnation of this pattern. It is only natural, then, that film, with its propensity to show us lost or hidden time, will easily become recruited into this dialectic and produce the genre of democratic pornography (among others, of course).

In a country such as ours I would deny to no woman or man the pleasures of cinema, but neither would I imagine that we could build democratic institutions on such pleasures or that they might instruct us on such a project. Cinematic pleasure is as real as any other, but it is not freedom. The tension between the two is the essence of the pessimism to which Rousseau committed himself in his *Lettre à M. d'Alembert*. Pleasure is our attachment to objects which can have no permanence in this world; freedom is our actions and experiences in a world that are autonomous in that they refuse enslavement to such object-desires (which does not mean that we must ignore them). Dreams can tell us what we want, but the daylight world outside the movie house tells us we cannot hold on to such things. The pleasures of a Philadelphia story end when the story ends; they cannot be preserved, anymore than we can hold on to our dreams. When the moving pictures turn into a static arrangement, they bring joy neither to the participants nor to the audience (the joy of the climactic moment is immediately followed by the disappointment, the little death, at the end of the show). Likewise, we cannot as public democratic citizens enjoy the heady transient exercise of constituent power that the framers shrouded in secrecy.

More important, though, is our continuing ambivalence about this chance and contingency that are hidden at the root of our union. This,

it must be admitted, is something that film has the capacity to show us in a way that few other art forms do. Films like *The Philadelphia Story* get their charge in part by satisfying our desire to observe this phenomenon, but to observe it in such a way that it remains contained within a dreamlike experience, one we enjoy in isolation from other citizens. It is indeed a sweet dream, but do such dreams make better citizens? I have given the reasons why I believe they do not. One learns to have sex very badly from pornography.

A phrase that is repeated several times in *The Philadelphia Story* is that what is necessary to be fully human is “to have some regard for human frailty.” It is a wise maxim. “Frailty,” which can indicate a fragility both physical and moral, is our fate, but naming a disease makes us no healthier. Worse, we may be deceived into thinking that our reception of wisdom is the same thing as our display of it, or as an action predicated thereupon. “The time to make up your mind about people,” says the drunken Tracy, “is never.” Nothing could be truer, but the time to act is always now. The dreamtime of film is always closer to never, the viewer, like the dreamer, held quiescent by an image of beauty. No one learns to act in a dream; one watches and perhaps learns how to watch better. If the very best of films teaches us not what it is to be better, but only how to watch it, what can we hope for from the rest of them?

If we leave the theater exhilarated by a display of warm chaos, are we really motivated, thereby, to introduce such a form of life into our waking existence? Or are we simply motivated to return that much more quickly to the world of dreams? Are we motivated to effect political change or are we sated by a discharge of psychic frustration that might otherwise find its way into the political realm? It may well be that, with real national politics at such a remove from the life of the individual, we should blame neither filmmakers for making such works, nor citizens for enjoying them, if there is no other option. But would anyone really believe that, even if our multiplexes were filled with films as edifying as *The Philadelphia Story* (which they most certainly are not), our nation was thereby being repaired? To ask the question is to see its absurdity. It may, indeed, be a loss to our imagination that we are now more likely to

spend our days watching television than our nights watching films, but our imagination is not the same thing as our polity and from that perspective neither medium seems like a path to perfection, Emersonian or otherwise.

As I peer out of my window here in Los Angeles – that city of breathing, speaking people that provides the geographic surround to Hollywood, and which partakes of Hollywood only as a consumer – I see the students making films in the garden beneath my office. Shall I pretend that they are thereby being trained to be better citizens and teachers of their fellow citizens? Even they, I think, would not dare to claim so much.

Rather than seeking to educate the city, they are attempting to leave it, to leave the actual place of spontaneity, luck, eros and disorder that is their home with others for the world of beauty and permanence where their films will stand as monuments to their solitary selves. If there is a generic criticism to be made of pornography it is that it has the effect of eternalizing what should be momentary. If we are to experience a democracy of moments, we can never learn to do so from an art that exists to subvert them.

Sir, you have proposed a solution fit for the smallest of republics at a time when the size of nations has never been larger! Where would a film like *The Philadelphia Story* do good? The Geneva of the eighteenth century, perhaps, with fewer than 50,000 souls, fewer by far than walk the streets of your own city of Cambridge on any given day. A tiny republic with a small population, secure defensible borders and limited contact with the outside world. Here, it might be appropriate to imagine every adult having some nodding acquaintance with every other adult. It might be appropriate to imagine a form of friendship and personal trust, however limited, among the citizens, which could mediate all the conflicts created by other emotions and interests. Though the Genevans were Calvinists, we can at least imagine them becoming a Quakerly Society of Friends and carrying on their politics under the watchful eye of William Penn.

However, even the smallest of nations today, leaving aside a few islands and emirates where perhaps these ideas could have purchase, is composed of millions of people. We distort the concept of friendship beyond all recognition if we pretend that it can apply to such large polities. Such a people may (or may not) share laws, culture and history but they cannot share a friendship. Friendship and love require some kind of appreciation of particularity and the sheer size of today's nations absolutely precludes this. If we recognize no other fact about modern life as relevant to our political theory, we must at least recognize the scale and scope of modern states – they are gargantuan.

Here is a final place where we must fault your comedies – and your celebration – for a political optimism that cannot be sustained. For in “solving” the erotic problems of citizenship through the mechanism of remarriage they might lead us to believe that the violence of eros can be tamed once and for all. That is, in essence, what happens between the principals in these films, whose irregular hearts might cause them to hate one another were it not for the new constellation of relationships that they come to share. But the friendships of *The Rules of the Game* fail to stem the violent tide. If this seems like happenstance or bad luck when the two films are compared as household dramas, it seems more like a point of realism in *Rules* when viewed as a national epic. For, in truth, no single household could contain the general erotic conflicts that a modern state must manage. What is finally inimitable politically about films like *The Philadelphia Story*, then, is not the chaos of its emotional conflicts but the miniature solution of them. The microcosm cannot become the macrocosm and so remade families such as these cannot teach nations how to endure, they can only teach the limits of their endurance, as *Rules* does.

Is there no place in the modern world, then, for a comedy of remarriage? In totalitarian nations, perhaps, they may do the most good. In those places where friendship itself is in danger of extinction from a government that turns citizen against citizen until no trust between them is possible. The descriptions of Soviet Russia and Maoist China that we have, where spying and denunciation were ubiquitous features

of everyday life, sound like this. Belarus and North Korea still have such systems in place. Here a defense of friendship is needed, as a minimal condition for a human life. Here an appreciation for the micro-foundations, as our political science friends like to say, of decent daily interaction with our fellow citizens may be required. Indeed, in any modern society where humans are tempted to dispose of friendship, to view it as a luxury, as we are sometimes persuaded to do, they may do some good. However, the good they do will not form the basis (or at least cannot form anything like a full basis) for political renovation. For that we must look elsewhere.

The terror of wideawake relationships, of citizen interactions that are fully reciprocal and uncontained, needs an institution that can be scaled to something approaching the size of modern states. Friendship is open-ended; it has no *telos*, and although it cannot bear *anything*, it can certainly tolerate more variation, more turbulence, than other erotic relations. Since friendship has no goal, it need have no end; it never fails from want of achieving something. We cannot expect of citizens that they will all be friends with one another, however irreplaceable the experience of friendship may be in itself. Friendship is a localized bond and, even in small states, a politics of friendship inevitably morphs into cronyism and exclusion. Film, at least, is mass entertainment – mass friendship seems a contradiction in terms.

If a community of friends cannot sustain itself, how could it sustain a state? Through its representations? Do we really think our state could be improved by the institution of film festivals? I have given my reasons for thinking otherwise. But, I will be asked, what shall we have in their place? Every society needs festivals, no doubt. What action or institution is there that can unite a people while respecting their freedom? Where shall we look for it? Could there be any festivals in the democracy of moments? Is there any way to bind moment and narrative without destroying the one or reifying the other? Can the movement between public and not-public be stabilized in a fruitful oscillation? Or is this only possible at the microscopic level?

In response to these questions, I ask: what would it mean to approach our shared life together through the logic of a quest? This is not the occasion, nor have I the ability, to give a full account of a pessimistic public life. But you would think me ungenerous to have emptied your cup of optimism and to have left you with nothing in its place. You sometimes refer, wistfully, to that time in American history, before television, when fully half the population went to the movies every week. And, as the release of films was then controlled by the studios, the choice in any given week was small, so many millions of people saw the same film.

I can think of a moment when even more people saw the same thing and saw it together. On July 20, 1969, at least 500 million people saw earthmen land on the moon and later walk upon its surface. I, myself, recall being woken out of a sound sleep by my parents for the first extra-terrestrial steps of mankind, which took place long after my normal bedtime. It remains perhaps the single greatest simultaneous gathering of human attention. No human could be indifferent to such an event, an event that nonetheless altered almost no one's material circumstances. So nothing changed, and yet too everything did and I doubt whether you can find a living human being with a memory of this moment who will say that he or she was unaffected by it.

We can think of the quest for space as relatively small government program, begun on a certain date, with certain resources and discontinued once its goals were met. But I do not think that the world's attention focused on this event from that perspective. Here was a real-life drama, centuries in the making, which organized the efforts, in fact, of millions of people over many generations. Indeed, a great many people continue to this day to make sense of their world from the perspective of this quest and its offshoots. This is not mass entertainment, but it is an example of a large-scale civic enterprise to which citizens can contribute without captivation and with reciprocal engagement. It may not appeal to everyone, but perhaps there are other equally modern-sized projects that might, for example, the curing of disease or the restoration of the planet.

To view the world as it may best be seen, is that not the goal that our rival inquiries, after all our disagreements, still share? Isn't it only from space that the world can be viewed, really and fully viewed? All but a tiny number of humans, therefore, have never viewed it and never will view it except in filmed or televised images. What if we set the goal of giving every soul the chance to view Earth as a whole, an opportunity, therefore, to encounter it and to consider and render judgment on the whole. What would that be like? To truly view the world, we must have the opportunity to leave it, to look back upon it in retrospect. We can worry that, separated from Earth, we would lose all basis for judgment, all affection for terrestrial life. I, for one, would wager that the sense of wonder which we are so apt to lose in front of the screen, but which is excited even in high-altitude aircraft when the world begins to bend beneath you, would be empowered and emboldened by such an experience, and that we would return to Earth better citizens of our respective countries and of the Earth for having, for once in our lives, viewed the world.

Nothing, you will agree, compares with the excitement of making a country; certainly not the boredom of having one. So inconsiderate of the founding generations of our modern states to keep the honeymoon to themselves and to leave the dotage to others! But, we must not look to recover youthful passions in dreams of the past but rather seek outward, toward new democratic vistas, even vistas of the whole world, to stimulate our wonder and affections. A vista occurs when the world presents itself to us and when we put ourselves in a position to receive its presentation. It does not occur when we represent the world to ourselves; that is when we avoid its presentation in favor of our own recreation. To see a vista is to be awake; otherwise, in representing ourselves to ourselves, we dream. The best thing to be said about film is that it is a captivation we can emerge from. We can leave it and leaving it is liberating. (With television, as we know it, there is no escape.)

It is the logic of exploration, then, the logic of the quest, the search for new vistas, and not the logic of the story with an ending, that combines moment and narrative in a way that preserves the openness of

both, a friendship with the world and not with a single other person. The moon shot, whatever its base motives, was such a quest, a worthy festival for democracy. Obviously, there was a goal involved, but perhaps it was just a stepping stone, the first island in an archipelago of discovery. Is it so hard to imagine others? Having viewed one world, should we not seek others? Please forgive my foolish enthusiasm. No doubt I have seen too many movies. But, if you ask me what I would put in the place of remarriage, I say: in a quest, we can meet each other as citizens and share a moment without the associated narrative dominating or captivating us and yet embracing the open-endedness of our association, its contingency and its dangers. It is a mutual vision that is, potentially, reciprocal and uncoerced. That is a citizenship I could embrace. It would make a terrible movie.

A democratic vision is a vision of others and of the Earth, a shared moment, however difficult, of seeing and being seen. In dreams and cinema, no one sees us, which means that, in the end, we see only ourselves. To dream is human, but to extend that human capacity by prosthetic means until it displaces all others is to fall, with Narcissus, in love with our own reflections. It is to lose the democracy of moments and to gain only some pretty stories in return. We learn to dance by dancing, not by watching Fred Astaire. We learn to explore by exploring, not by watching documentaries. Likewise, we learn to politick by politicking and we learn to democratize by democratizing. If our cinema does no harm to this process, let it flourish in all its beauty! But, if it impedes us or retards us on our quest, well ... let us at least refrain from recommending it lest more terrible measures become a duty.