

The phenomenology of the political: a reply from Saturday Night to Mr. Dienstag

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τὸ μέντοι κεφάλαιον, ἔφη, προσαναγκάζειν τὸν Σωκράτη ὁμολογεῖν αὐτοὺς τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμῳδίαν καὶ τραγῳδίαν ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέχνη τραγῳδοποιῶν ὄντα καὶ κωμῳδοποιῶν εἶναι.

But the substance of it was, he said, that Socrates was driving them to the admission that the same man could have the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy – that the fully skilled tragedian could be a comedian as well.

Plato, *Symposium*, 233D

I confess, my dear friend, that I am unable to find the appropriate disguise in which to respond to you. That of, shall I say, “Monsieur”? No, “Mr.,” for he writes in his native tongue. That of *Mr. Cavell* himself is too seductive, and too dangerous: one false word and the whole matter implodes. And that of your erstwhile friend and editor to whom the quasi-eponymous you addressed a famous letter is also just slightly discordant. Indeed, M. d’Alembert seems to hold a position such as that which you think Mr. Cavell is advocating when he says, responding to your quasi-eponymous predecessor’s letter: “According to you, when one goes to a spectacle, one goes forgetting those to whom one is close, one isolates oneself from one’s fellow citizens and one’s friends. On the contrary, a spectacle is of all our pleasures that which calls us the most to others; it does so by the image that it gives us of human life, by the impressions it makes on us and that stay

with us.”¹ There may be some truth to this,² but the problem with any association of this particular judgment with that of Mr. Cavell is that M. d’Alembert also thinks that “all music that depicts nothing is only noise”³ and places music in “the last place in the order of imitation”⁴; whereas, as voice, Mr. Cavell thinks music does not represent and places music highest of the human arts, perhaps ironically, for I note that so does M. Rousseau, whose voice you have assumed. The question of voice and music will return.

Let me rehearse, therefore, what Mr. Cavell thinks the place of film in our lives should or can be. His first claim is that there are films the viewing of which can or should be thought of as part of an education. Here “education” has resonance to the German *Bildung*, a formation of self and character. His second claim is that those films that can be thought of as part of an education are precisely those films that can stand up and respond to as rigorous a criticism as anyone is able to bring to them.⁵ Note that not just anything will count as a criticism, one must make available something that is there and was not available before. Note also that it does not in some sense matter if those who “made” the film had explicit conscious intentions to include all that

¹ Jean d’Alembert, *Lettre de d’Alembert à M. J.-J. Rousseau sur l’article “Genève,”* from *l’Encyclopédie*, vol. 7. Online at: http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Lettre_de_d%E2%80%999Alembert_%C3%A0_M._J.-J._Rousseau_sur_l%E2%80%999article_Gen%C3%A8ve (accessed January 19, 2016): “On va, selon vous, s’isoler au spectacle, on y va oublier ses proches, ses concitoyens et ses amis. Le spectacle est au contraire celui de tous nos plaisirs qui nous rappelle le plus aux autres hommes, par l’image qu’il nous présente de la vie humaine, et par les impressions qu’il nous donne et qu’il nous laisse.”

² C.f. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone, 1995); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

³ Jean d’Alembert, *Discours préliminaire de “l’Encyclopédie.”* Online at: http://fr.wikisource.org/Discours_pr%20, p. 17.

⁴ D’Alembert, *Discours préliminaire*. See my “Music, the Passions and Political Freedom in Rousseau,” in Stanley Hoffmann and Christie McDonald, eds., *Rousseau and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); see also “Rousseau: Music, Language and Politics,” in Keith Chapin and Andrew Clark, eds., *Speaking of Music* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 86–100.

⁵ Stanley Cavell, “The Good of Film,” *Cavell on Film*, edited by William Rothman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

criticism can reveal. Whatever the intentions of the film are, they are in the film itself and one need not search outside it.⁶

A third claim is that film functions in our contemporary lives much in the manner that opera functioned in the nineteenth century.⁷ There were, even in America, opera houses or performances in most towns of even a middling size.⁸ Literally hundreds of operas were written and produced, most of them now forgotten, much in the way that most films have been forgotten. Attendance was regular and high.⁹ I doubt that you have ever heard/seen *Emilia di Liverpool*, an opera that Donizetti cranked out in 1828, one of the *seventy* he wrote in under thirty years, roughly the rate at which a director might turn out B-movies. There are, however, great films, just as there are great operas. How did/does opera function? What is it about music and voice?

Mr. Cavell's last claim – one we have known since Plato – is that the interplay between the “personal” and the “political” is such that they cast light on each other and show what possibilities for each – at first unrealized – exist in that interaction. Film can thus be a key conveyor of both the individual and political perfectionism that Cavell finds at the center of his thought. Here the model is already found in Milton:

He who marries, *intends as little to conspire his own ruin, as he that swears Allegiance: and as a whole People is in proportion to an ill Government, so is one Man to an ill Marriage. If they, against any Authority, Covenant, or Statute, may by the sovereign Edict of Charity, save not only their Lives, but honest Liberties from unworthy Bondage, as well may he against any private Covenant, which he never enter'd*

⁶ This position Cavell holds from his earliest writing. See his analysis of *La Strada* in “A Matter of Meaning It,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Scribners, 1972), pp. 230–6.

⁷ See Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch for Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 136.

⁸ See John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁹ And it continues. There are at present approximately 125 professional opera companies in America; annual admissions are estimated at 20 million (about the number that attend NFL games). See Jonathan Leaf, “America’s Opera Boom,” *The American* (July 20, 2007). Online at: www.aei.org/publication/americas-opera-boom (accessed January 20, 2016).

to his mischief, redeem himself from unsupportable Disturbances to honest Peace, and just Contentment: (Address to the Parliament).

From which words so plain, less cannot be concluded, nor is by any learned Interpreter, than that in God's intention a *meet and happy Conversation* is the chiefest and the noblest end of Marriage: for we find here no Expression so necessarily implying carnal Knowledge, as this prevention of Loneliness to the mind and spirit of Man. (I, 2)¹⁰

I have italicized the words that are of note here. I know you resist this conversation of public and private. The first paragraph legitimates the possibility and necessity of divorce on a model drawn explicitly from the political, and of the political as modeled on a true marriage. The second suggests that a true marriage, and therefore politics, is that of a conversation. The question has to be how these elements are related to each other in film and what the relation of the film is to those who view it. The “remarriage comedies” to which Mr. Cavell draws our attention, and the intention of which you wish to contest, are thus presentations of the achievement of a “meet and happy” marriage. They show us perfected marriage, not in the sense of the best of the best, but in the sense of having become more of a true marriage. There is no Platonic *agathon* here.

Perfectionism, it should immediately be said, thus does not hold that we are ever to move higher to the single best self or solution, nor recover a lost “true” self. Rather, perfectionism thinks that we can learn – only a piece at a time – that what a transformation would make of us is a bit more of what it is ours to be. Mr. Cavell calls this “philosophy” or “the education of grown-ups.”¹¹ These films are thus about adults growing

¹⁰ These citations from John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce: Restor'd to the Good of Both Sexes, From the Bondage of Canon Law* (1643, 1644). Online at: www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/ddd/book_1/index.shtml (accessed January 19, 2016). Is it worth noting that Milton's wife, Mary Powell, left him shortly after their marriage? He had, however, been thinking about divorce before his marriage. See James H. Hanford, “The Chronology of Milton's Private Studies,” *PMLA*, 36 (1921): pp. 268–9, 272–4.

¹¹ Stanley Cavell, “Philosophy as the Education of Grownups,” in Naoko Saito and Paul Standish, eds., *Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 19–32.

up, with the implication that most of us are most of the time not grown up and have to learn to be such. As Mr. Cavell writes in his book on *Walden*, “For the child to grow he requires family and familiarity, but for a grownup to grow he requires strangeness and transformation, i.e., birth.”¹² Rousseau himself had already said in his *Emile* that “We are born twice, once to exist and a second time to live.”

I think the next thing to say here is that these films do *not* show us what we *should* do. Contrary, I think, my dear sir, to what you seem to believe, film is not and cannot (nor should not) be in the business of portraying moral or political truths as an imperative. Film, rather, “shows what showing the truth is.”¹³ In this sense, I find that you mislead us when you assume that Mr. Cavell thinks that it is the role of film to teach us lessons. Rather, films can prepare us by making evident a possibility. After all, he writes:

[I]f these films are studies in perfectionism, then we have a small laboratory for studying moral conversation not as the attempt to persuade someone to a course of action, or as the evaluation of a social institution, but of something I think of sometimes as prior and preparatory to these familiar goals of moral reasoning, sometimes as subsequent and supplementary, namely the responsiveness and examination of one soul by another.¹⁴

Before exploring what this entails, a certain amount of ground clearing is necessary. Clearly, you exaggerate when you assert that there is a danger when good young American citizens (although I do hope there are as many such as you assume) “dash off to the multiplex” in the hope of “rendering a service to their country and nearly to humankind.” Mr. Cavell speaks not of all films (think of all those forgotten operas!), but

¹² Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 60.

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, “La règle du jeu dans *La Règle du jeu*,” in Antoine de Baecque and Christian Delage, eds., *De l'histoire au cinéma* (Paris: Complexe, 1998), p. 148. I owe this reference to Keith Reader, *La Règle du jeu* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010). The rest of the citation says that cinema is a “performance of truth” and does not “show truth as theater does.” “Performance” seems wrong to me.

¹⁴ Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, p. 339.

only of those the viewing of which may be thought to be or to become part of an education; Mr. Cavell does not urge that we render a service to our country, but that we call it (and ourselves) to itself, to its promise. It is not like climbing a mountain, but more like marking and pursuing one's path in a woods. And it is not about "one's country," but about America, at least *The Philadelphia Story* is, as are the other "comedies of remarriage." If you do not start from the recognition that America can break your (and Mr. Cavell's) heart – and that it comes and has come close to doing so – you will never grasp the political immediacy of his work. These words were written in 1970:

It has gone on for a long time, it is maddened now, the love it has had it has squandered too often, its young no longer naturally feel it; its past is in its streets, ungrateful for the fact that a hundred years ago it tore itself apart in order not to be divided; half of it believes the war it is now fighting is taking place twenty-five years ago, when it was still young and it was right that it was opposing tyranny ... Yet what needs doing, could he [the American] see his and the world's true need, he could do, no one else is so capable of it or so ready for it. He *could*. It's a free country. But it will take a change of consciousness. So phenomenology becomes politics.¹⁵

When reading Cavell – on anything and also on film – I come away with the strong sense of the degree of his disappointment and/or distress with his country. But, to be disappointed, one has to have an idea of what the country (or a marriage) could be. The model from Milton is that of a conversation. Thus, Mr. Cavell's disappointment comes from the fact that it's (our) speaking – the words that our citizens use to talk with one another, to talk about themselves, to talk about their country – "keep becoming unintelligible, to it and for it."¹⁶ (Surely you share the sense that recent episodes in American political life exemplify this,

¹⁵ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, pp. 345–6. There is more where this comes from. See Anne Mahon, *The Ironist and the Romantic: Reading Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 52–5.

¹⁶ Cavell, "Philosophy as Education," p. 212.

in spades?) It is thus centrally important in *The Philadelphia Story* that again and again the same words are reconceived and their truer meaning (for that context) appears. The morning after the episode with the drinking, the swim, and Tracy's return to her bedroom carried by Mike, George remonstrates with his fiancée. She replies to him in apparent agreement that a man "wants his fiancée to behave. Naturally." Dexter corrects or rephrases this as "wants his fiancée to behave naturally." The removal of the full stop turns Tracy's partial acquiescence to George and his conventional standards into a critique of George and a reminder to Tracy that she is, one might say, facing the wrong way, that she is not behaving according to her nature (a nature about which she has needed to be educated, and not one to which she can be recalled). Or, again during the exchange with George about Tracy's behavior the previous night with Mike, George says to Tracy that her "attitude is a little difficult to understand." Dexter interjects: "Not necessarily." George snaps back: "You keep out of this." Dexter: "You forget. I am out of it." That is, it should be obvious to *anyone* who has eyes and ears (which George manifestly does not) that her attitude is *not* difficult to understand. Or, again, Mike tells the story of depositing Tracy on her bed and returning to George and Dexter, "as you will doubtless remember." To which Dexter says, "Doubtless without a doubt," thereby giving confirmation and reality to the episode, such that it sets up the exchange between Tracy and George that will lead to their breakup.

It is significant that Dexter is generally the character who reformulates words so that they acquire meaning in terms of the plot of the film. The Dexter role is in fact an amalgamation of two roles from the play: Sandy, Tracy's brother (who sets up the relation with Kidd and *Spy* magazine) who does not exist in the film, and Dexter himself. The whole set of events then can be seen as having been hoped for by Dexter; he does not make it happen but he knows or senses that Tracy can be something other than a "goddess." The elimination of Sandy is important for it means the film is about the relation between (potential) husband(s) and wife. Dexter does not transform her – she must do that – but he does make possible the circumstances in which she may

be able to transform herself. This is what we *see* and why the film does not instruct us; it is not didactic. It *shows* us a world in which transformation is possible. As Rousseau says, it “persuades without convincing.” When Dexter does try to instruct her (as in the “virgin goddess” speech), the effect is to put an end to all possibility of conversation (“Stop using those foul words,” says Tracy). He must, I might say, show her (and thus us) her (actual) self.

Such showing is at the root of what distresses you. The core of your distress with Mr. Cavell comes from your distress about the role of the erotic in the political realm. You write: “The mobility [do you mean “motility”?] of eros is incompatible with the political need for institutional stasis” (p. 78). Stasis, I note, has two meanings: it refers in contemporary English to an equilibrium, but for the Greeks it referred to an ongoing struggle between two opposed and competing forces. You mean, I think, equilibrium. (I shall return to this question.) And you pleasantly seek to undercut my anticipated response here with a reference to a book in which I have addressed the question of the erotic in relation to Rousseau. It seems to me that your conclusion rests on the belief that the erotic is the fundament of marriage, something I would argue that Rousseau did not accept, whatever his worries about the relation of the erotic to the political: “Marriage,” you say, “is a stable (or unstable) institution of eros.” Yet Milton tells us:

Marriage is not a meer carnal Coition, but a *human Society*: where that cannot reasonably be had, there can be no true Matrimony. (I, 13)

It would seem that for Milton the erotic is not sufficient to make a marriage and certainly not its foundation. What makes a marriage? What impediments keep a marriage from being a marriage? What is to be done about these impediments? Perhaps it is this:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

Shakespeare tells us that a true marriage will triumph over whatever impediments anyone might propose. The morning after the scene where Mike brings Tracy back from the pool in his arms and puts her in her bed, Dinah, who had seen the whole thing, purports to relate the episode in a dream and, with reference to Mike carrying Tracy back in his arms and in her bathrobe, says to Tracy (in ministerial tones), hoping to *prevent* her marriage to George: “If anyone knows any just cause why these two should not be united in holy matrimony ...” Dinah functions as a kind of chorus. She knows, as do we in the audience, that George is not a “true mind” for Tracy (at least from when he says that he wants to “put [her] on a pedestal and worship” her) and we sense that Tracy can become such. (Her last words as she goes in to marry Dexter acknowledge her leaving of her father and the hopes he had expressed for her: “I feel ... like... a human being” – no longer a would-be goddess, this is her transformation achieved). Thus, there *are* impediments to the marriage of George and Tracy: they are consequent to the fact that they are not “true minds.” The effect of Dinah’s question is to make possible Tracy’s marriage to Mike and/or to Dexter, despite what might appear as impediments. The remarriage to Dexter is now one of two true minds and all the impediments the film has made manifest to us matter naught. But, as we shall see, confronting those impediments is important.

You are the author of a book on, and with the title of, *Pessimism*. I admire it: I have a blurb endorsing it on the back cover. Your intention is to show the political importance of pessimism for what one might see as the chastening of the claims of the political realm. It is clear from your insightful comparison of *The Philadelphia Story* with *The Rules of the Game* that you find the characters in the French film “more poignant and more instructive [in their failures] than the successes of their Main Line [i.e., *The Philadelphia Story*] counterparts.” You applaud what you see as the pessimism of the French film. Yet, what is this pessimism? *The Rules of the Game* is not precisely a tragedy. As all commentators note, it is modeled on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French comedy – and, indeed, the opening tune over the credits is from Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, itself an adaptation from Beaumarchais’ play, referring us to

comic opera. The film starts as a comedy¹⁷ and moves *toward* a tragedy. Wondrously, during the chaos of the theatrical show and the overlapping attack by Schumacher on Marceau, the Marquis turns to the imperturbable majordomo (appropriately named “Corneille,” the paradigm of the conventions of French theater) and orders him to “Put an end to this comedy.” He replies “Which one, Monsieur le marquis?”¹⁸ With explicit irony, the story is *prevented* from becoming a tragedy publically to, that is, those in the film as the Marquis de la Chesnaye¹⁹ addresses the assembly as an audience from the steps of the chateau giving out the pretense that the death of Jurieux was a “deplorable accident” (the gamekeeper is said by la Chesnaye, quite untruthfully, to have thought Jurieux was a poacher and to have shot him *comme c’était son droit*; the General then opines that with this prevarication the Marquis has demonstrated “class”), a pretense that only underlines the tenuousness of the conventions that were barely keeping bourgeois society possible.²⁰ Note, though, that the Marquis has defended the necessity of violence and in his pretense has taken over the position that Schumacher had earlier espoused (“During the war I shot fellows who had done less than he has,” or, as he says to his wife Lisette, “A shot in the dark, in the woods, and no questions asked”).²¹ Four months after the release of the film the world would explode into flames, but the director of this comedy could foresee disaster without making his film a tragedy. La Chesnaye’s words save the situation as it is and they are the wrong words; the conventions are retained, nothing is changed, and

¹⁷ Renoir has said that he started off wanting simply to adapt Alfred de Musset’s *Les caprices de Marianne*. Traces of Marivaux, Molière and Beaumarchais also appear in the script.

¹⁸ *Comédie* in French means any theatrical performance.

¹⁹ In the cast list in the film his name is given as “La Cheyniest.” The above spelling has become standard, apparently.

²⁰ There is a double identity mix-up which is the stuff of comedy, as is the exchange of clothing and so forth: Octave is planning to run off with Christine; her maid Lisette has given her cloak to Christine; Lisette convinces Octave not to run off with Christine; Octave gives his coat to Jurieux when he urges him to go and run away with Christine; Schumacher thinks that Octave is planning to run off with Lisette (given the cloaks) and shoots Jurieux (thinking him to be Octave), who has in fact come, on Octave’s urging, to run off with Christine. It could be Plautus except that people die.

²¹ Schumacher is Alsatian, hence born as a German, as Alsace was annexed by Germany in 1871 and France only recovered it in 1918. The French pronounce his name SchoomaCHAIRE; the Austrian Christine pronounces it SchuMAKerr.

that means that this comedy calls up the immanent *possibility* of tragedy. There are lessons to be learned from comedies, as there are (other?) lessons to be learned from tragedies. The lesson from this film is what is learned when the film fails (purposely) to be either. *The Philadelphia Story* would be a tragedy if Tracy and Dexter did not come to acknowledge the fact that they are in actuality still married to each other and that what is necessary is for them now to say the right words in the right place. They do and it is a comedy.²²

So you do not think that film can be “instructive.” Certainly, you might seem to be wrong about some films: *Dead Man Walking* tells us that capital punishment is bad; *Gandhi* tells us that civil disobedience can be a good thing. But, you are right in the sense that these films give us none of the sense of complexity that we know is the actual stuff of moral and political decisions and situations. So, what do we learn from films like *The Philadelphia Story* or your excellent counterexample *The Rules of the Game*? What are the lessons and are they different?

Both films raise the question of our relation to rules and conventions. The Renoir film is more properly titled “The Rule of the Game”; the plural is an Anglophone addition. *The “rule of the game” is that there are rules: the question is what our relation to them is or should be.* In *The Philadelphia Story*, I believe the only explicit reference to rules comes, again, at the confrontation after the night at the pool. Mike indicates that he simply put Tracy in her bed and left. Tracy, somewhat miffed, asks why, was she not attractive? Mike responds that she was indeed very attractive but notes that she was, however, “somewhat the worse ... for wine” and that “there are rules about that.” Tracy acquiesces: “Thank you, Mike. I think men are wonderful.” After Dexter’s and Tracy’s discussion about the events with Mike, Dexter responds to Tracy’s assertion that “I don’t know anything anymore” with: “That sounds very hopeful.”²³ Rule(s) is here the social

²² See here Stanley Cavell, “Moral Reasoning,” in *Cavell on Film*, p. 355.

²³ The exchange is more extended in the play, but amounts to the same. In the play, Dexter says: “occasional misdeeds are often as good for a person as – as the moral virtues,” and finds that the event with Mike may signal her “coming of age.” Philip Barry, *The Philadelphia Story: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, 1969), pp. 108–9. See Liz’s comments just after.

conventions *that can only be properly reasserted as our own after having been broken*. Rules are broken all the time in this film: Dexter as the divorced husband should not be at the wedding with George; Tracy's father should be there to give away the bride-to-be and not exiled by Tracy; the uncle is a lech; the father *is* a philanderer; and so on. As Liz says at one point: "We all go haywire at times and if we don't maybe we ought to."

The matter is different and darker in the Renoir film. Those who adhere to "the rule" are the gamekeeper Schumacher, who turns to violence; La Chesnaye, who keeps to social rules and finds fulfillment in mechanical toys²⁴ (the greatest of which is destroyed by Schumacher's shooting at Marceau), and, as noted, Jurieux, whose insistence on explaining to La Chesnaye that he is going to depart with his wife ("there are rules") leads to his being shot by Schumacher. In fact, despite multiple attempts or desires to, social conventions are *not* ever broken in this film, and the point of the film is to make it clear that *they should have been*. (Octave only does not run away with Christine after Lisette, the maid, insists on social conventions by pointing out that "Madame needs things" and that Octave is too poor to be able to provide them, at which point he sees himself in a mirror and acquiesces.) The preservation (not refunding) of the existing social order has required the sacrifice of Jurieux and the departure of the two characters (Octave and Marceau), who were not part of that order.²⁵ For the others, social conventions persist. When Julie is collapsing after the shooting of Jurieux, Lisette tells her to hold herself together as she is "an educated person" and Christine warns her that "people are looking at you." The Marquis's marriage is saved, but he has not remarried; as he ushers his wife into the house at the end, they do not embrace; Schumacher and his rifle are restored to the role as keeper of order. Nothing has been made anew. This society rests on violence.

²⁴ Renoir said that the shot of La Chesnaye presenting his great harmonium took thirty takes and called it the best scene he ever filmed.

²⁵ It is no accident that for the theatricals Octave chooses to be a bear; Marceau is a poacher, by definition not part of, even if living off, social convention.

It turns out, then, that personal growth and the avoidance of violence, disaster and conventionality is only possible by a breaking of the rules and a revitalization of those rules after their infringement, as if their true worth needed to be made apparent. At stake between us here is precisely what to make of your requirements for “political and institutional stasis.” I think that you have a sense of the tenuousness of rules (as the end of *The Rules of the Game* makes clear), but that you think, like Burke or Bagehot, that precisely because of that tenuousness it is important that their fragility not be exposed. Yet the point made in *both* films is that the rules cannot straitjacket behavior: only after they are or could have been broken can they be truly reasserted as one’s *own* rule. (If you hear an echo here of Kantian autonomy and his urging that one take one’s *eigenes Weg*, you are not mistaken.) Moreover, rules are broken in *The Philadelphia Story*, but *not* in *The Rules of the Game*. What we learn from the French film is that these rules *should have been* broken. Furthermore, when the polity is in trouble – as are the relations in each of these films – then the rules that govern it must be challenged if they are to be reinvigorated. Civil disobedience breaks existing rules in order that they be reformulated as rules that are truly our own. You tend to speak as if each of these films (or at least the American one) confronted a predetermined and continuing situation rather than one that wanted to be corrected or perfected. (Thus, toward the very beginning of *The Philadelphia Story*, a key to the possibility of change comes when Dinah wants to see Dexter and says so in the middle of a conversation about Tracy’s scheduled marriage to George.)

Your second major claim is thus, that film “exposes us in safety to the danger we inhabit personally and politically.” You argue, correctly, that such seeing would be a form of pornography, the pleasure in seeing what we should not see from a position of self-privilege. And here is your Rousseauian point: when viewing a film like *The Philadelphia Story* we are, you hold, on a kind of moral holiday. Your underlying argument is that politics requires what Burke had called a “politic well-wrought veil” that keeps in secret that which is essential to its functioning. Thus film, by allowing us to see “secret” functions, is fundamentally non-, or

a-, or anti-political, or rather is dangerous to political stasis. Politically, your two critiques come together in your sense that democracy requires secrecy, that it is founded on that which is not to be in public view. You point out that the debates that gave rise to the Constitution were done behind closed doors and in secret and could not have been exposed to the open.²⁶ “*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 (p. 26).” As you continue, you point out that, despite all the films that we have seen, “we have yet to see the benefits of this blanketing of our culture with filmed talk in any improved conversations, marriages or political discourses (p. 28).”

This last sentence seems to me to knock at the wrong door. What do you think books, films, that which is composed, can do? One could of course make your same complaint about your books and mine. But perhaps you hold that films cannot be like Greek drama – a civic and moral education to citizens – and that Mr. Cavell’s mistake is to assume that they can. Let us explore this, for there are parallels. The American film relies, as did Greek plays, on stichomythia, alternating lines between two characters. Dinah (who is supposedly fifteen, but plays about a year past puberty²⁷) serves as a chorus, mostly commenting on the action rather than participating in it (she wants to join the adults with a cocktail early on and is told “certainly not”). Like a chorus, she does nothing, but does see the whole as it develops and asks questions as matters evolve. There are resonances to Greek or any drama.

However, this is a film and not a play. Nevertheless, the similarities (such as they are) raise the question of the place of theater and of its relation to film. *The Rules of the Game* not only has an extended theatrical episode, but on two occasions explicitly sets up other scenes as in a theater: first when Octave recalls Christine’s conductor father, and

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of this and related matters that goes behind and beyond the closed doors, see Pauline Maier, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787–1788* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

²⁷ At one point her mother suggests that something is wrong with the fall of her dress in the back, to which Dinah responds that “it is me.”

second when La Chesnaye explains the death of Jurieux. Both scenes taking place on the proscenium of the steps of the house, the first addresses everyone (or no one: that is, the film audience) and the second the cast of the film (minus Octave and Marcel). Similar theatricalized scenes occur in the American film: the first part of *The Philadelphia Story*, for instance, comprises an extended acting out by Tracy and Dinah in “welcoming” Mike and Liz as supposed friends of their cousin, and that is followed by Tracy’s requirement that her uncle play the part of the absent philanderer father.

Both of these films, then, recall theater to us. Let me then ask what we learn about our political realm in these films? (I will deal later with the importance of theater as opposed to film in this education.) As a play, *The Philadelphia Story* was purposively set by Philip Barry in what was probably the most class-conscious American city at the time, class-conscious to the degree that Grace Kelly (the daughter of a very rich but Irish Catholic Philadelphia family, in 1956 to play the Tracy role in *High Society*, the Cole Porter musical version of this story,²⁸ and later the bride of Prince Rainier of Monaco) could not be invited to “come out” in the de rigueur elbow-length white gloves at the Philadelphia Assembly Ball, as were the daughters of the older Protestant families.²⁹ The character of Tracy Lord

²⁸ The film was directed by Charles Walters and starred Bing Crosby, Grace Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong.

²⁹ See Ian Irving, “The Real Philadelphia Story,” *The Sunday Telegraph* (April 16, 1995), p.1: “Philadelphia society then exhibited an extreme type of class-consciousness. The flood of wealth that created American family fortunes in the late 19th century settled around a handful of cities and was expressed in different forms of conspicuous consumption and elaborate social behaviour – as chronicled by Edith Wharton in novels such as *The Age of Innocence*. In dynamic New York and Chicago, Vanderbilts and Astors, Fields and McCormicks vied with each other in glitter and the acquisition of European titles through their marriageable daughters, but mere wealth usually provided a sufficient entree to their society. “In more traditional Boston and Philadelphia, however, society turned almost feudal, almost English in its attitudes – ‘old’ money and ‘old’ families counted for everything. The very term WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) was coined to describe members of Philadelphia society – its most characteristic institution was the Philadelphia Assemblies Ball. This is the oldest and most exclusive social gathering in the United States. Held every year since 1748, it is strictly reserved for members of the city’s Social Register – no amount of money will allow entry; blood is everything. It was here, down the staircase to the great ballroom of the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, that Hope Montgomery, in ballgown and elbow-length white kid gloves, made her entrance as a debutante in 1922.”

was in fact modeled on Helen Hope Montgomery Scott, a friend of Barry's and a rich socialite of much the same age and breeding as Hepburn. (Scott lived until 1995; the fortune of the extended Hepburn family was estimated at half a billion dollars: her mother was heiress to the Corning Glass fortune.) Class comes up several times in the film. Mike refers to it; Liz fantasizes about trading places with Tracy; most notably, when George realizes that he is being thrown over (and not at that point for anyone in particular), he spits out: "You and your whole rotten class. You're on your way out, the whole lot of you and don't think you aren't." Yet, it is clear in the film, as it is in *The Rules of the Game*, that while class is a reality, it does not, or need not, determine the outcome in the end. (La Chesnaye, though Jewish, is defended by *both* the aristocratic General and the cook.) Differences in the role that class plays derive to a great degree from the differences between Renoir's Popular Front sympathies and the very American recognition that, as Mike says as a discovery, some can come from the lower classes and be a "real heel" while others can come from the upper classes and be all right. This is echoed in the irony of the General announcing at the end that the Marquis "has class." Each setting is itself clearly political and class-conscious. At this first level, the films show us a world in which class exists but is not definitive. As such, the message is perhaps important but not very profound, especially given the American and Popular Front sympathies. What difference does it make that this is cinema?

Films are cinema and not theater. Indeed, Mr. Cavell has said that *The Rules of the Game* may be said "to establish the ascension of cinema over theater."³⁰ This ascension is due to two qualities. First is the ability of film to see from different angles, not only from the audience but from the wings or, as in the *danse macabre* sequence, from behind the players (thus in comment on the fact that the event is staged for an audience as a theatrical performance). It thus takes us behind the rules and the social conventions that they legitimate. In the theater, on

³⁰ In a talk to the Harvard Film Association in 2010. See also Cavell, *A Pitch for Philosophy*, p. 137.

the other hand, we only watch from our seats in one direction. At the end of the film, where La Chesnaye addresses the participants from a stage (with only the rifle and person of Schumacher in-between), we see him as a theater audience. The scene is thus a theatrical reassertion of theater and social convention and, in doing so, in fact calls its tenuousness into question. However, when this scene occurs, Octave, played by Renoir himself, is absent, as is Marceau. One may suppose that he has resumed his role as cinema director; the last scene is, thus, an assertion of the fact that the players are caught by and in their roles (except for Octave and Marceau) and so of the conclusive primacy of film over theater.³¹

What, then, is the ascendancy of cinema over theater? In *The Rules of the Game* it is, I think, this: when society (the polity) and theater become so intertwined that we risk losing the humanity of the social-political world in its theatricalization (when rules threaten to take over), then cinema can show us that this has happened (is happening) and thus give us a critical view on our world, an estrangement from it. Hence the social world depicted in Renoir's film is in fact a world that cannot manage to escape its own rules: Octave's absence (and implied return behind the camera: in the conducting scene he tells Christine that he wanted to be a conductor) lets us see what is wrong with that.³² Nietzsche's most sour accusation against Wagner was that he had theatricalized opera.

However, do these thoughts reflect on *The Philadelphia Story*? Here what is important is the role the camera plays in this film. Cameras are important all the way through: in particular, they are resisted. We learn early on that Dexter smashed the cameras of all those who took pictures of his first marriage to Tracy; Tracy hates the idea of having cameras come into the house; various comments are made about Liz's photographing and we have a sense that she is doing something inappropriate as she takes pictures of the wedding gifts. At the end, Sidney Kidd, the editor of *Spy*, appears at the wedding with a camera. His camera

³¹ This is my reading of Cavell, "More of *The World Viewed*," in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 221–3.

³² If I read him correctly, this is what Cavell is saying (*ibid.*, p. 225).

clicks. We then get a frame or two of the wedding party, with Mike almost so far forward as to make it seem that Tracy might be marrying them both. However, the freeze-frame that comes next (we assume) was taken a slight moment *after* the first, as the wedding party is turning to look at Kidd (Tracy's mouth is open in surprise and distress in the second, but not in the first). The photo, however, recalls for us the fact that film is a set of photographs joined in time. These cameras are not smashed, as this marriage is for real.

This leads us to the second element in the ascendancy of film over theater. An immediately subsequent photo of the entire wedding party then turns, as if a page in an album, and we see a photo of Dexter and Tracy kissing, by themselves. The film camera moves to focus in on their still-kissing heads, insisting, as it were, that they are now the only two in the frame. Others were necessary to get there, but this marriage is *theirs*. What have we learned from this movement? The effect of Kidd's appearance, of the click of his camera, and the resultant photo/frame is to distance us from the feeling of a participation in the film that we had before. While viewing the film, we were (almost) there. We look, however, *at* the photos. It thus makes us question what our relation to the film is: Tracy's surprise in the photo is our surprise also. The photo of the kiss shows us that marriage (and its conventions) have been re-established, but now as a real marriage. And, as it is now a real marriage, *we are no longer privileged to look at it*. Here, and only here, is there a danger of your pornography. So the film instructs us in what you think we should never have done at all.

Cameras have been resisted all the way through the film, yet the film ends with camera shots. It is as if what happens on film could only happen if the photograph were kept at bay by the development that the temporality inherent in film makes possible. Yet the photograph reappears and closes the film out, except for a reprise of the drawings of the Philadelphia buildings (which in its fixity perhaps underlies the atemporality of the photograph). Kidd's appearance at the wedding in fact confirms George's earlier judgment: "this wedding is of national importance." *But now it is Dexter who says that line*: now the (re)marriage

is truly of such importance, for it is a true marriage. Dexter's use of those words again gives them their true, living meaning, that is, the true (re)marriage between Tracy and Dexter is a model of what could happen in the nation. Conventions have been broken and are now reaffirmed, somewhat transfigured, as *our* conventions. (Perhaps one might think of civil disobedience for civil rights.) Or, to pick up the parallels offered by Milton, one might say that the political model proposed in *The Philadelphia Story* is that of a meet and happy conversation. What the photographs do is to renormalize, reinstitutionalize, the conventions of society, but only after they have been broken: only now are they *our* conventions and not ones we have been caught in (as are the characters of the French film). The slightly annoyed looks on the faces of each in the photograph (and, indeed, the freeze-frame) only serve to confirm this.

It is in and by the conversations that our rules are questioned and made our own. And what, over the course of the film, have those conversations been about? They have explored: 1) the relations of different classes; 2) what it might mean to be a "first-class human being"; 3) the question of luxury and inequality; 4) the importance of the availability of leisure; 5) the importance of class and lack thereof; 6) the question of creativity. All these are in the relation of the players to each other and such matters are precisely the substance of the discussions that took place behind doors in Philadelphia during the Constitutional Convention. We view them and learn from them without, however, our being seen by the characters in the film. It is as if we had a cloak of invisibility at the Philadelphia Convention.

What do we see/have we seen? Tracy is upper class, moneyed, and appears to inhabit a magic kingdom. (They are expecting 500 guests for the reception (not a problem!) and, when the mother worries about rain, Dinah says that Tracy will not permit it to rain; Tracy changed her sister's name from Diana to Dinah, wanting, presumably, to retain for herself the only role as virgin goddess.) She grows such that she can pursue her newly perceived vocation, "to be of use to the world." George is self-made from the lower classes, but his expulsion signifies

not the triumph of the upper classes but the rejection of a man who cannot be other than externally defined. A “first-class human being” has qualities that are, in principle, available to all, even if most do not choose to pursue or avoid pursuing that path. (So Nietzsche taught us in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, a judgment with which Mr. Cavell agrees.)³³

What we learn, or rather what we see, in the film is that transformation by conversation requires a set of circumstances, and that is a political as well as a personal lesson. However, the transformation is something that an individual must do once the circumstances have made it possible. The circumstances do not make it happen. Thus, in the exchange between Tracy and Dexter after she emerges from her room quite hungover, he offers her as a remedy “the juice of a few flowers” to “open her eyes.” (Do we hallucinate if we hear here an echo of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*? It, too, ends with weddings.) Dexter helps make the circumstances, but he cannot do it alone. If Dinah does claim (in her chorus role) during the marriage ceremony that she “did it all,” we know this to be exaggerated and it is in counterpoint to George accusing Dexter of “having something to do [with the breakup]” and Dexter responding with a line, only in the film script: “Some. But you were a great help.” Importantly, George is as necessary to Tracy’s education as Dexter and the others. What we have here is something like the model of education in Rousseau’s *Emile* – where the Tutor does not instruct but places Emile in a sequence of problematic situations, the finding of the solution to which will help him grow – but the model here is not for children but for grown-ups. For children, conversation follows dealing with the situation; for grown-ups it precedes it or is concomitant with it. One might – I begin to go afield here – think of what happens in the film as examples of what Heidegger calls *Fürsorge*, “solicitude.” Dexter marks the moment of successful solicitude as the departure of George by pumping his hands up and down the candles on the table and singing the tune of the waltz “Sobre las Olas –The

³³ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 156.

Loveliest Night of the Year” (you will know it from *Sesame Street* as “George Washington Bridge”). Shortly after he breaks into song, the orchestra starts the classic wedding march from *Lohengrin*. Music carries us to the end.

So, this comedy is not, in my reading, pornographic. What it shows us is how transformation (of a couple, of a nation) requires circumstances that make exchange – conversation – possible. Those circumstances can be helped, but they depend on a combination of actors, not always in concert. And they must be taken advantage of. If this were opera, music would make this transfiguration available, would allow us to experience it. This is film: the camera makes the experience of transfiguration available in that it shows us that the actor could become another character.³⁴ The movement of film in time is for the viewer the equivalent of the effect of music in opera. So I resist M. d’Alembert’s judgments about music.

This transfiguration must, therefore, be understood at a level that lies, as it were, under that of the right and the good and the prudent. It corresponds, one might say, to the achievement of a moral and political consciousness adequate to a “first-class” life; it sets it before us as if to say “look! It is possible.” In the end, my friend, it seems to me that you miss the fact that (these) films are not about moral behavior or political stasis: they are about what one has to become *in order to be capable of moral behavior and/or political stasis*. The political lesson from *The Philadelphia Story* is to have shown us that we – as individuals and as our nation – can be more than what we have thought to settle for – that we need not live “lives of quiet desperation” – and, or *but*, that it is up to us to take advantage of the circumstances that would make that possible. I began with Plato and I end by recalling a passage from Pindar (*Pythian Odes* II, 72), three-fourths of which formed Nietzsche’s favorite encomium: γένοι’ οἷός ἐσσι μαθών “(having learned, become who you are)”. On Saturday night at the cinema, we can learn such from comedy as well as from tragedy.

³⁴ Whereas in theater the character can be taken by other actors.