CHAPTER 1

Hollywood Reconsidered: Reflections on the Classical American Cinema

America's experience of film is virtually unique in that in almost every other country, the impact of film cannot be separated from the process or at least the specter of Americanization. In America, film in no sense represents something external; it is simply American. But what is American about American film?

For a decade or so after the first film exhibitions in 1895, film shows presented a grab bag of travelogues, news films, filmed vaudeville acts, trick films, and gag films. The audience for film in America was disproportionately urban and was made up of recent immigrants, largely from Eastern Europe. (The extent to which that was true is a subject of some contention among film historians.) In a sense, film has been involved, even in America, in a process of Americanization – "naturalizing" recent arrivals, teaching them how Americans live (and also breaking down regional differences, a process that television has taken over with a vengeance). However, following the sudden growth of nickelodeons in 1908, exhibitions were skewed to be more "upscale." The theatrical narrative – especially adaptations of "legitimate" novels and stage plays – became the dominant form of film in America, as it has remained to this day. Griffith's early films made for the Biograph Company were clearly intended for an audience of Americans who, like Griffith himself, could take for granted the fact, if not the meaning, of their Americanness.

Of course, the question of the Americanness of American films is complicated by the fact that in every period, foreigners played major roles in their creation. From Chaplin to Murnau to Lubitsch to Lang, Hitchcock, Renoir, Ophuls, Sirk, and Wilder, many of the most creative "American" directors have been non-Americans, at least when they began their Hollywood careers. This is almost equally true among stars, screenwriters, and producers.

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Indeed, there are entire genres of American film, such as film noir and the thirties horror film (with their influence of German expressionism), that can seem to be hardly American at all.

But then again, virtually all Americans either are born as non-Americans or are recent descendants of non-Americans. One might think that there could be no such thing as a specifically American culture, but that is not the case. In the nineteenth century, for example, what is called transcendentalism – the philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau, the stories and novels of Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James, the poetry of Whitman – is quintessentially American. However, this example underscores a distinctive feature of American intellectual and cultural life. There was no nineteenth-century French philosopher approaching Emerson's stature, but had there been, young French men and women today, as part of the experience of growing up French, would be taught his or her words by heart and learn to take them to heart. But in the process of growing up American, young men and women are not taught and do not in this way learn Emerson's words or the value of those words. Americans, as compared with the English or French or Chinese or Japanese, are unconscious of the history of thought and artistic creation in their own country – unconscious of the sources, American and foreign, of their own ideas. Nonetheless, through mechanisms that are at times obscure, American ideas such as those of Emerson remain widespread and powerful in America. It is one of Stanley Cavell's deepest insights, to which I shall return, that Hollywood film of the thirties and forties is rooted in, and must be understood in terms of, the American tradition of transcendentalism. That this is so and that Americans remain unconscious that it is so are equally significant facts about American culture.

Some may challenge the American pedigree of American transcendentalism, arguing that it is only a belated flaring of a worldwide Romantic movement whose genesis had nothing to do with America, but grew out of the Transcendental Idealism of the German Immanuel Kant, who in turn built on the work of Locke, Hume, and Berkeley in Great Britain, Leibniz in Germany, and Descartes in France. Emerson and Thoreau, voracious readers, were conscious of these sources, but conscious as well that although Romanticism was a source of their own thinking, America in turn was a central source of Romanticism. It is no accident that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was contemporaneous with the creation of the United States of America or that Descartes – Shakespeare's contemporary – was writing at the time of the founding of the first French and English colonies in America.

The American and foreign roots of nineteenth-century American philosophy and literature cannot be disentangled: This is part of what makes that work so American, as is the fact that it takes the identity of America to be a

central subject. What America is, where it has come from, and what its destiny may be are central themes through which American culture has continually defined itself. In the crucial period from 1908 to the country's entrance into World War I, the period when narrative film was taking root, American film took up this question of America's identity, culminating in *The Birth of a Nation*, the film that definitively demonstrated to the American public the awesome power that movies could manifest. Indeed, in the work of D. W. Griffith, the dominant figure of American film during those years, America's destiny and the destiny of film were fatefully joined.

Griffith started out with an idealistic vision: America's destiny was to save the world, and film's destiny was to save America. By the time of *The Birth of a Nation*, however, he had drawn closer to the more ambiguous, darker visions of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville. He had made the disquieting discovery that in affirming innocence, the camera violates innocence; however idealistic their intention, movies touch what is base as well as what is noble in our souls. This knowledge, with which he struggled his entire career, is Griffith's most abiding – if least recognized – legacy to American film.

In *Indian Film*, a landmark study, Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy shrewdly insist that neither historians nor sociologists can give us precise answers regarding the impact of film on society. They limit themselves to a qualified endorsement of the claim, made on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Indian film industry, that film "has unsettled the placid contentment of the Indian masses, it has filled the minds of youth with new longings, and is today a potent force in national life."[1] In other words, although we may well never fully understand film's efficacy in causing or resisting social change in India, we can at least say that film has been centrally involved in the process by which Indian society has adapted itself to modern ideas. In the clash between modern ideas and orthodox Hindu canons on such matters as untouchability and the role of women, film in India (at least until recent years) has been allied, implicitly or explicitly, with the forces of modernity.

Griffith's attitude toward modern ideas, especially concerning the role of women, was ambivalent. That ambivalence was most pointedly expressed in the tension between his flowery, moralistic intertitles and the dark mysteries he conjured with his camera. Griffith combined a Victorian conviction that it was proper for women to be submissive with a profound respect for the intelligence, imagination, and strength of the women in his films. And what remarkable women he had the intuition to film! As I ponder Griffith's

[1] Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 102.

spellbinding visions of Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Blanche Sweet, and others, I am struck equally by the voraciousness of his desire for women and his uncanny capacity to identify with them.

After the war, the American film industry grew to international dominance. The postwar Hollywood in which Griffith struggled fruitlessly to reclaim his preeminence clearly allied itself with the libertarian spirit of the "Jazz Age." But with all their glamour and spectacle, their Latin lovers, flappers, and "It" girls, Hollywood films of the twenties never really made clear what that spirit was, nor it sources, nor the grounds of its opposition to orthodox ideas, nor the identity of the orthodoxy it was opposing. Following the withdrawal or repression of Griffith's seriousness of purpose, the years from the end of the war to the late twenties are the obscurest period in the history of American film.

We are taught that that was the "Golden Age of Silent Film," the age when film became a glorious international art and language. Yet those were also the years when Hollywood's power over the world's film production, and its hold on the world's film audiences, came closest to being absolute. Strangely, except for the occasional cause célèbre, such as von Stroheim's *Greed*, the magnificent comedies of Chaplin and Keaton, and Murnau's *Sunrise* (which, together with Chaplin's *City Lights*, provided the swan song for that era), no American film of that period still has an audience (beyond a core of hardened film buffs), even among film students.

Coming at a time of creative crisis, the simultaneous traumas of the new sound technology and the Great Depression (which brought about changes in studio organization and ownership) disrupted the continuity of American film history. There was an influx of personnel – directors, actors, writers, producers – from the New York stage (and, increasingly, from abroad, as political conditions worsened in Europe). By and large, the Broadway imports (unlike the Europeans) were unlettered in film. They approached the new medium with ideas whose sources were to be found elsewhere than in the history of earlier film achievements. Then again, "the talkies" were a new medium for everyone, even for movie veterans for whom filmmaking had been their education.

When Hollywood movies began to speak, no one could foresee the new genres that would emerge. It took several years of experimentation, of testing the limits, before a new system of production was securely in place and a stable new landscape of genres and stars became discernible. The release of *It Happened One Night* in 1934, the first year of rigid enforcement of the Production Code, can be taken to inaugurate the era of what has come to be known as "the classical Hollywood film."

Such films as *It Happened One Night*, for all their comedy, revived Griffith's seriousness of moral purpose and his original conviction that film's awesome power could awaken America, in the throes of a nightmare, to its authentic identity. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that classical Hollywood films leapfrogged Griffith to link up directly with nineteenth-century American transcendentalism.

It was Stanley Cavell who first recognized the implications of this. In his seminal book *Pursuits of Happiness*,[2] Cavell defined a genre he named "the comedy of remarriage" (the central members of this genre include: *It Happened One Night, The Awful Truth, Bringing Up Baby, His Girl Friday, The Philadelphia Story, The Lady Eve*, and *Adam's Rib*).

In remarriage comedies, men and women are equals. They have equal rights to pursue happiness and are equal spiritually – equal in their abilities to imagine and to demand human fulfillment, as Cavell puts it. In these films, happiness is not arrived at by a couple's overcoming social obstacles to their love, as in traditional comedy, but by facing divorce and coming back together, overcoming obstacles that are between and within themselves.

Indian film, in siding against orthodox Hinduism, and Japanese film, in siding against feudal consciousness, endorse the claim that women have the right to marry for love. There are classical Hollywood films – *Camille* is one that comes to mind – in which feudal attitudes and religious orthodoxy obstruct the course of love, but such films typically are set in the past and set elsewhere than in America. American society, as presented in the remarriage comedies, already sanctions the right of women to marry and even to divorce for reasons of the heart. It is marriage itself, the nature and limits of its bond, that is at issue in these films – at issue, that is, philosophically.

Cavell understands the women of these films, played by the likes of Katharine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert, Irene Dunne, and Barbara Stanwyck, as being on a spiritual quest, like Thoreau in *Walden*, Emerson in his journals, and the poet in Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." A non-American source he cites is Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who leaves her husband in search of an education he says she needs but she knows he cannot provide. The implication, as Cavell points out, is that only a man capable of providing such an education thereby could count for her as her husband. The woman of remarriage comedy is lucky enough to be married to a man like Cary Grant or Spencer Tracy who has the capacity, the authority, to preside over her education, her creation as a new woman.

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

In "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman," a paper Cavell delivered in 1984 at a forum on psychiatry and the humanities, he goes on to ask himself:

> What of the women on film who have not found and could not manage or relish relationship with such a man, Nora's other, surely more numerous, descendants? And what more particularly of the women on film who are at least the spiritual equals of the women of remarriage comedy but whom no man can be thought to educate – I mean the women we might take as achieving the highest reaches of stardom, of female independence as far as film can manifest it – Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich and at her best Bette Davis?[3]

This question leads Cavell to discover a second genre of classical Hollywood film, which he calls "the melodrama of the unknown woman" (*Blonde Venus, Stella Dallas, Random Harvest, Now, Voyager, Mildred Pierce, Gaslight, Letter from an Unknown Woman*).

One cost of the woman's happiness in the comedies is the absence of her mother (often underscored by the attractive presence of the woman's father), as well as her own failure to have children, her denial as a mother. In the melodramas, the woman does not forsake motherhood and is not abandoned to the world of men. No man presides over her metamorphosis, and it leads not to the ideal marriages the comedies teach us to envision but to a possible happiness apart from or beyond satisfaction by marriage. As in the remarriage comedies, it is not society that comes between a woman and a man – not, for example, the threat of social scandal or a law that can be manipulated to separate her from her child. Rather, it is the woman's absolute commitment to her quest to become more fully human.[4]

In "Virtue and Villainy in the Face of the Camera," I argue that *Stella Dallas* – one of the films Cavell includes within the genre of the melodrama of the unknown woman – in no way glorifies a woman's submission to a system that unjustly denies her equal right to pursue happiness. My understanding of the film, like Cavell's, rejects the generally accepted critical view that such melodramas affirm a woman's noble sacrifice of her happiness, that they affirm that there are things more important than a woman's

[3] Stanley Cavell, "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman," in Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, eds., *Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis, Cinema* (*Forum for Psychiatry and the Humanities*, Volume 10, 1987) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 11–43.

[4] Cavell notes that this feature distinguishes films in this genre from *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*. It may also be pointed out that it equally distinguishes the American melodramas from the films of Kenji Mizoguchi in Japan, which might seem to offer a parallel. Actually, Ozu's films probably have a more intimate kinship with the American films.

happiness. When Stella, standing outside in the rain, unseen, watches her daughter's wedding through a window and then turns away with a secret smile, she is not a figure of pathos, but a mysterious, heroic figure who has transformed herself before our very eyes, with no help from any man in her world. This is a transcendental moment of self-fulfillment, not self-sacrifice.

Through such genres as the remarriage comedy and the melodrama of the unknown woman – and, by extension, the whole interlocking system of genres that emerged in the mid-thirties – classical Hollywood films inherited the Victorian faith in the marvelous and terrifying powers of women and fulfilled a deep-seated nineteenth-century wish by placing a "new woman" on view.

In the decade or so after 1934, Hollywood films were intellectually of a piece, like network television today. The diverse genres were not in ideological opposition, but derived from a common set of ideas and a common body of knowledge – at one level, knowledge about the medium of film. But by the mid-forties, that commonality began to break down. Although extraordinary films like *Adam's Rib, Letter from an Unknown Woman*, and *Notorious* continued to keep faith with the classical Hollywood vision, a regressive tendency was ascendant.

I think of film noir, for example, as regressive because it disavows the vision of classical Hollywood melodramas and comedies without addressing their ideas. In *Double Indemnity*, there is a moment that is emblematic of this failure. As Fred MacMurray is struggling to kill her husband, Barbara Stanwyck sits silently in the front seat of the car. The camera captures the look on her face, which is meant to prove that she is the incarnation of evil. Yet in the face of the camera, she remains unknown to us, like Stella Dallas (also Barbara Stanwyck, of course) when she turns away from watching her daughter's wedding and smiles a secret smile. *Stella Dallas*, like other classical Hollywood melodramas and comedies, interprets the unknownness of the woman as an expression of her humanity, hence of our bond with her, forged from within. *Double Indemnity*, withdrawing from that understanding without acknowledging it – an understanding about women, about humanity, about the camera and the medium of film – interprets the woman's unknownness as a mark of her inhumanity, which makes it rightful for Fred MacMurray to kill her – alas, too late – at the end of the film.

By the fifties, American movies were divided on ideological grounds in ways that mirrored the political divisions – and, unfortunately, the debased political rhetoric – of a country racked by the paranoia of the McCarthy era. Within each of the major fifties genres, "liberal" and "conservative" films struck opposing positions, as Peter Biskind argues in *Seeing Is Believing*,

his study of Hollywood films of the period.[5] But except for a number of directors of the older generation, such as Ford, Hawks, and Hitchcock, the classical Hollywood voice – and conscience – had fallen silent.

Hollywood's audience was fragmenting. The older generation, once the audience for classical Hollywood films, stayed home and watched television. Why the men and women of this generation abandoned movies, or were abandoned by movies, is no less a mystery than why they once demanded movies that spoke to them with the greatest seriousness. Surely they could not really have believed that America in the fifties fulfilled the transcendental aspirations expressed by the movies they had taken to heart. Yet they opted for television's reassurance that what was happening now was not really passing them by, that they were plugged into a human community after all. At the same time, rock 'n' roll (with its seductive promise of breaking down barriers now), not film (in which a screen separates the audience from the world of its dreams), fired the imagination of the young. The fate of film in America, and the longing to become more fully human that it expressed, hung – and still hangs – in the balance.

In the fifties, a new generation of American directors, Nicholas Ray perhaps the most gifted among them, made the "generation gap" their subject in films that, identifying with the young, dwelled on such matters as the failure of American fathers to pass on something of value to their sons. An avant-garde attempted to create a new American cinema – unfortunately, without undertaking to learn the first thing about the old. "Method acting" struggled to infuse film with an authenticity that was eluding it, as did cinema-vérité documentary in the sixties. But despite this activity, Hollywood tended to drift farther from its sources and from even the memory of its past achievements. America was losing a knowledge it has not since reclaimed, as witness the creative crisis today facing a film industry mostly intent on producing products that are the moral equivalent of video games – films that parody our perilous existence as human survivors even as they deny that anything important is at stake.

When I say that knowledge has been lost, I certainly mean to imply that there has been a failure of education and, in turn, of criticism. Even today, film students in America are taught (and most contemporary film criticism underwrites this) to dismiss remarriage comedies like *It Happened One Night* as mere "fairy tales for the Depression" and to despise melodramas like *Stella Dallas* for their supposedly regressive attitude toward women.

It is especially poignant that the recent upsurge in feminist film criticism has so far remained less than fully attentive to the depth of the feminism

[5] Peter Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

of classical Hollywood films. In part, this blindness testifies to the current extent of the dogmatic acceptance, within academic film departments, of a number of seductive but flawed theories. Especially influential among feminist film critics is Laura Mulvey's theory that classical Hollywood films subordinate women to the status of objects of the camera's male gaze. Accepting this premise, feminist criticism has failed to recognize that the camera in classical Hollywood films cannot simply be identified with the authority of the patriarchal order. Rather, the films take up and explore the implications of one of Griffith's central discoveries about the camera, also one of the deepest sources of film's universal appeal: In its passivity and its agency, its powers of creation and the limits of those powers, the camera is male *and* female. (This is one of the central themes of *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze*.)

The blindness of criticism to the achievements of American film goes deeper than the transient influence of any particular theory. After all, I have been suggesting that until the publication of *Pursuits of Happiness* forty years after the films were released, no critic had even articulated what the remarriage comedies – among the most popular films ever made – were really saying.

The gap that needs to be accounted for is not between readings like Cavell's and the ways audiences have experienced these films (I do not believe there is such a gap) but between the ways we experience films and the ways we ordinarily speak about them. What makes this gap possible is the fact that movies address matters of intimacy and do so in a language of indirectness and silence. From the beginnings of film history, what it is that actually takes place within and among silent viewers in those darkened halls has been a mystery. In the thirties and forties, film was the dominant medium of our culture, and yet public discourse about film (no doubt this was true of private conversation as well) virtually never attempted to probe the truth of our experience of movies. But perhaps this should not surprise us, for it simply underscores the fact that movies expressed ideas that had no other outlet in our society. Except within the discourse of films themselves, America's experience of film, its knowledge of film, has always been and remains primarily unarticulated, unconscious. If we are to understand film's impact on society, this knowledge must be brought to consciousness. Criticism must finally fulfill its role.

Movies exercise a hold on us, a hold we participate in creating, drawing on our innermost desires and fears. To know a film's impact, we have to know the film objectively. To know a film objectively, we have to know the hold it has on us. To know the hold a film has on us, we have to know ourselves objectively. And to know ourselves objectively, we have to know

the impact of the films in our lives. The idea of a criticism that aspires to be at once objective and rooted in the critic's experience (yet another idea whose American and non-American sources cannot be disentangled) is one that Stanley Cavell has taught me to associate with the names of Kant, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein – and Cavell himself. Such criticism forsakes the wish – without denying the depth of its motivation – to find a "scientific" methodology that would give us an unchallengeable place to stand outside our own experience. It is a central tenet of American transcendentalism that such a place must always be illusory: We cannot arrive at objective truth without checking our experience.

Feeling legitimized by the latest "postmodernist critical methodologies," too many academic film critics today deny their experience of classical Hollywood films, refuse to allow themselves to take instruction from them. Predictably, the resulting criticism reaffirms an attitude of superiority to the films and their audiences. Echoing a long-familiar strain in American cultural life, such criticism furthers rather than undoes the repression of these films and the ideas they represent.

We critics can play our part in undoing that repression only if we perform our acts of criticism in the spirit of classical Hollywood films. Like the Cary Grant character in *The Philadelphia Story*, we need the sagacity to demand to determine for ourselves what is truly important and what is not.[6] Equally needed is the capacity Grant reveals in *Bringing Up Baby* when he makes up for his lack of worldliness by announcing to Katharine Hepburn, in the final moments of the film, the truth of his experience of their day together: He never had a better time in all his life. We cannot play our part in reviving the spirit of the films we love without testifying, in our criticism, to the truth of our experience of those films: We never had a better time in all our lives.

[6] For an appreciation of the relevance of this example and the example that follows, I am indebted to Marian Keane's "The Authority of Connection in Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 13(3):139–50 (Fall 1985), the most insightful and reliable essay concerning Cavell's writing about film.