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## The Awful Truth: On Metonymic Rationality in Hawks and Cavell

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When Stanley Cavell analyzes Hollywood comedies of remarriage, he mobilizes their narratives as the platform from which to address America as a political and a philosophical project. This is also where Cavell acknowledges the affinity of the cinematic narrative and psychoanalysis, most notably perhaps in his sustained interest in the Hollywood woman as a spectacle of crisis and critique. With this in mind, I propose to discuss the Cavellian woman, of his cinema books, who dominates the “green world” of the Hollywood remarriage comedy: the bucolic story-space which Cavell associates with the Emersonian vision of America and identifies as definitive to its critical character. I focus however on the comedy in which there seems to be no climactic green world – Howard Hawks’ *His Girl Friday* (1940) – and argue that Hawks’ woman mobilizes metropolitan courtrooms and the adjacent spaces in a similar fashion, as if to suggest that the Emersonian green world is not absent from Hawks’ film but rather metonymic to the positions America would assign to (pure) reason. Finally, I show how this Cavellian complex corresponds to Gilles Deleuze’s philosophical fascination with woman, film and America.

*Keywords:* Stanley Cavell, Howard Hawks, American cinema, philosophy of film, metonymy

### 1.

I would like to address a difficult place in Stanley Cavell’s book on the Hollywood comedy of remarriage, the one Cavell acknowledges, but does not pursue. It concerns the fact that one of the comedies definitive to his argument – Howard Hawks’ *His Girl Friday* (1940) – fails to engage what Cavell (1981: 168-172) calls “the green world”, like the others.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The seven comedies that Cavell takes as exemplary of the genre are *It Happened One Night* (dir. Frank Capra, 1934), *The Awful Truth* (dir. Leo McCarey, 1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1938), *His Girl Friday*, *The Philadelphia Story* (dir. George Cukor, 1940), *The Lady Eve* (dir. Preston Sturges, 1941) and *Adam’s Rib* (dir. George Cukor, 1949).

Other remarriage comedies feature the green world, the American countryside, the expansive bucolic imaginary, where the narrative climax takes place. Insofar as the narrative climax in these comedies implies remarriage, this position is fundamental to Cavell: because remarriage signifies a pure, disinterested power of contract and agreement that is symptomatic of the political health of America. In Cavell's words, "the fate of the marriage bond in our genre is meant to epitomize the fate of the democratic social bond"; also, "the word 'contract,' at this climactic moment, to my ear names the social contract that was to express the consent that constitutes lawful society, the doctrine that replaces the divine right of kings" (Cavell 1981: 193). This is of a piece with the comic constitution of these comedies, because „the genre of remarriage may be said to find the humor in this state of affairs preferable to the humor derivable from a state of affairs in which divorce is not a moral or religious option, to the farce, say, in adultery“ (Cavell 1981: 193). As a result, this particular configuration allows Cavell to address not merely the political health of America, but America as the project whose sense depends on securing political health.

The fact that *His Girl Friday* features remarriage without the green world is therefore critical: how can *His Girl Friday* be definitive to Cavell's idea of comedy and of remarriage without mobilizing the climactic world where the rationale of America is reassembled and, with it, America as such? In order to answer this question one needs to consult Hawks' narrative logic in the positions where Cavell has failed to take it into account.

The story is set in a city, among its journalists, and the same is true of *The Front Page*, the 1928 play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur (set in Chicago), on which the screenplay was based.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on what is urban about the newspaper culture is strong and marked. There is even a suggestion, in both the film and the play, that abandoning the city amounts to the betrayal of America, insofar as journalism, with the ruthless cunning of its editors, ultimately ensures that the public debate continues and with it the political health of America, which is something American political institutions cannot do. This however is not incidental to Hawks but foregrounds the complex formative to Cavell's comedies: Cavell (2010: 203) notes that "the image of the newspaper almost never fails to appear significantly in these films".<sup>3</sup> The sentiment occasioned by the loss of this city is described in Hecht and MacArthur (1941: 140) as *Heimweh*. *Heimweh* here

<sup>2</sup> Hawks took part in writing up his films and intervened in all the places critical to the story and the dialogue, even though he would not take a writing credit. See Harvey 1998: 461. The reason he later gave for this atypical reticence was that „if he had, (...) he'd never have gotten all the best writers to work for him – people like Jules Furthman and William Faulkner (his two favorites) and Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer“ (Harvey 1998: 461). The writing credit for *His Girl Friday* went to Charles Lederer.

<sup>3</sup> Both Cavell and Hawks insist on the supremacy of journalism in creating public opinion where public opinion is instrumental to political decision-making. On public opinion as decisive to the formations of thought in (post)revolutionary societies, see Lefort 1986: 146-152. Hollywood was evidently sensitive to this dynamic – and to this logic – because it was on the brink of being oversaturated with newspaper comedies. See Harvey 1998: 439.

signifies not the nostalgia for the old world, experienced by the immigrants to America, so much as the nostalgia for that America which presented itself as *the* destination to *all* immigrants, to immigrants as such, and therefore as a political dream irreducible to any one destination. Implicit to this dream is a radical freedom of movement, the freedom implicit also to the constitution of America.<sup>4</sup>

This is the world dominated by the Cavellian couple: the film opens with Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) returning to the offices of *The Morning Post* after a lengthy vacation, in order to inform Walter Burns (Cary Grant), her boss and former husband, that she is leaving the newspaper in order to marry Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy), an insurance agent, and move to provincial Albany. Here already there is a suggestion that the America of Hawks' newspapermen does not entail insurance, indeed, that insurance is the one thing this world needs to shed in order to constitute itself. Put differently, insurance is the lie of this world, against which its truth can be discerned: an American truth of self-reliance valid only insofar as there is no insurance on which to fall back.

Hawks mobilizes his story around this insight: when Walter learns that he is about to lose Hildy to Bruce, he proposes to buy an expensive life policy and thus make Bruce and Hildy a substantial sum of money, if she should agree to postpone her trip to Albany and cover for the newspaper a case of capital punishment. The case is critical, because the mayor and the chief of police are doing all they can to withhold the governor's reprieve and execute the prisoner, as that would secure their reelection. When Hildy accepts Walter's proposition, also the profit from his life insurance policy, she reveals in fact that her choosing the reliable Bruce (over Walter the trickster) corresponds to how the local politicians are making use of life and death for their personal gain. Hildy's accepting to investigate the case of capital punishment entails therefore her accepting to investigate her reasons for choosing Bruce (over Walter); this amounts to her addressing her reason, as well as addressing that in the film which she keeps doing against her better reason. As a result, Hildy is mobilized into a spectacle of investigation, until no story is left unaffected by or through her. This is also how Walter's performance comes to the fore. He galvanizes that which is critical to and about Hildy, and Bruce does not; indeed, trickster is how Cavell describes Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday*, calling attention to "Hawks's discovery of Cary Grant's photogenetic tendency to thoughtfulness, some inner concentration of intellectual energy" (Cavell 1981: 164). Moreover, this is how Walter's performance dovetails with that of a film director or a psychoanalyst, not least where his mobilizing all of Hildy entails her mobilizing the narrative into a critical instrument.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Freedom as mobility is the Jeffersonian accent of the American political project; Hannah Arendt exults it as axiomatic not merely to the American Revolution but to revolutions as such and, consequently, to the *raison* of politics in modernity. Arendt argues that the Jeffersonian accent on freedom as movement (where the new continent warrants the new man) was definitive to the American Revolution. See Arendt 2006: 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Felman claims that the theoretical validity Freud granted to narratives is constituent to psychoanalysis. See Felman 1983: 1021-53. In turn, constituent to classical

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The case Hildy covers is therefore never merely a narrative excuse to Hawks, divorced from the true interest of the story (the Russell-Grant romance). Conversely, the case remains the position where the logic of the story is tested. It is certainly symptomatic that the case revolves around the question of reason: Earl Williams (John Qualen) is sentenced to death for killing a police officer apparently without reason. This is why his reprieve depends on an insanity plea. Williams however refuses to plead insane; in fact, he does little in the film but plead that he is sane. Thus claiming "I am sane", as he does repeatedly, indicates not sanity or the lack of it so much as the crisis of negotiability embedded in the institutions that claim reason for their operation: the court, for one, where *His Girl Friday* takes place for the most part. This ultimately exposes the court itself to be premised less on the law than on a set of contractual positions, to which the law is an operable phantasm.

Indeed, Hawks' comedy is staged in the dark, grey criminal courts building, which houses a pressroom. Cavell (1981: 172) calls it "a terrible world, not golden, not green; a black world" and suggests that this black world replaces the usual green world of the remarriage comedies, so that a disturbing substitution takes place. Yet the Hawksian black world refuses to be streamlined into the logic of cuts, substitutions and replacements. Instead, it is a warren of spaces adjacent to the courtroom: there is the pressroom with its bustle and its incredibly busy door and windows, the yard with an easy access to the pressroom, the strangely airy cage where Earl Williams is kept, the court office which stages a psychiatric evaluation and makes for an easy escape, all of them intersected with corridors and staircases... This warren is markedly claustrophilic and its places swarming, cramped, caged, tight and crowded. In fact, much of the comedy's comedy depends on Hawks' people never having enough room or fighting for space, in a kind of Marxian *Schwärmerei*: Bruce and Walter keep fighting for seats in the restaurant scene, the restaurant table is so overcrowded that Hildy kicks the waiter in the shin instead of kicking Walter, Earl Williams climaxes for the story when he hides inside an *escritoire* "like a turtle". The underlying principle of this world is that of addition and contraction, mobilization and metonymy, not that of metaphor, which characterizes the law. It is telling that Earl Williams, a convicted murderer, moves more swiftly and freely in this world than Bruce

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Hollywood is the so-called invisible style where narratives seem to take the day over editing and similar cinematic properties, the implication being that editing merely services a smooth presentation of the story. Rather than taking this view, I would like to argue that narrative in classical Hollywood cinema works similarly to narrative in psychoanalysis and should be granted the theoretical validity – Hawks' *His Girl Friday* being a case in point.

- <sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1997a: 166) notes "the claustrophilia of certain of Hawks' films", so that "the unexpected, the violent, the event, come from the interior whilst the exterior is rather the location of the customary or premeditated action, in a curious reversal of the outside and the inside".

Baldwin, who – thanks to Walter’s ingenuity – is kept mostly behind bars for the duration of the story.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the green world in Hawks is not replaced or erased by the black world of the criminal courts building, as Cavell is suggesting. Rather, the Hawksian black world is structured like the green world of the other remarriage comedies. This then is the proposition far more radical than that of other remarriage comedies, where the grey, streamlined and urban zones counter the zany green zones: because here, in Hawks, all of the world turns out to be metonymic.

Hildy travels this world with surprising alacrity; along with Earl Williams, she is the only one in Hawks’ comedy traversing most of its places and positions. This is how Hildy and Earl Williams are conjoined into an assemblage, signifying movement and metonymy. It comes as no surprise therefore that the film should climax in Hildy’s interview with the convict, which is also when the logic of the story is canvassed, or else when the story is canvassed as a peculiar logic.<sup>7</sup>

It is as if the film derives its intelligence from this scene: in her interview with Williams Hildy needs to think up a script that can accommodate both the assumption that the murder was committed without apparent reason, and Williams’ claim that he is sane. For this she depends on the structure of dialogue, so that the resulting story is the one that Williams can think up along as a story of the self. Furthermore, as this narrative is to change death for life in the Williams case, it aspires to reconstitute the rationale of the verdict and, with it, the reason of the law. The story is finally this: after losing his job Williams was despondent and roamed the city, open to various and compelling narratives for the sense that he was to make of his life, until he finally responded to the slogan claiming that production was for use – so the murder that he eventually committed is to be blamed on the “production for use” of guns and on the logic of capitalism. It is Hildy now who performs similarly to a psychoanalyst or a film director; indeed, Hildy is to

<sup>7</sup> It is important that the climax takes place in conversation or as conversation. This is due, in part at least, to the lingering fascination of cinema with the discovery of sound, as if sound was needed for cinema to address its constitution. Cavell attributes the frantic pace of conversation in the remarriage comedies to this telling fascination, and proceeds to identify continued conversation as the condition of the American political project: as if to suggest that America is the primal scene of Hollywood. Hawks is particularly relevant here, because he was known for directing dialogue as overlapping and alliterative, so that conversation itself became a zone of contraction and addition, of mobilization and metonymy, of *Schwärmerei*. According to Harvey, Hawks went farther than others “in the capturing of a certain conversational sound – almost a drone, unisistent but resistless. Hawks people talk *at* as well as to each other; often they just talk, interrupting, talking at once, cutting in or breaking off or going unflappably on. This was one important way scenes got rewritten on the set – to accommodate these real-life sounds, the obliqueness and overlap and even confusion, to a degree that no writers working beforehand ever could” (1998: 462, emphasis J. H.). Or, in Deleuze’s words, “Cukor, McCarey and Hawks make *conversation*, the craziness of conversation, the essence of American comedy, and Hawks was able to give it an unprecedented speed” (1997b: 232, emphasis G. D.).



Williams what Hawks was to Hildy and Rosalind Russell, and back.<sup>8</sup> Yet, instead of gain, there is a price Hildy needs to pay for the intelligence thus turned loose on the world: because this intelligence is transformative, it cannot support dreams of insurance, settling down and having a home, which is the script Hildy advertises for herself at the beginning of the film. This means that the intelligence constituent to Hildy (and to cinema) goes against her better reason, this being her awful truth.<sup>9</sup>

This is why the truth of Hawks' film depends on yet another conjunction, again to do with Williams. John Qualen, cast by Hawks as Earl Williams, engages in *His Girl Friday* the narrative structure that corresponds almost to the letter to the one he takes up in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, as Muley Bates. Like Williams, Muley traverses the line between sanity and insanity after losing his life's work and – nearly – shooting a man in authority; in both films this immediately provokes a comprehensive insight into the character of American capitalism. Also, in both films this constitutes the traumatic pre-history to the main story, which Qualen relates to the lead actors (Russell in Hawks, Henry Fonda in Ford) in order to mobilize them fully as narrative agents. Finally, the two films were in production at the same time, in the fall of 1939, so that Qualen was simultaneously Muley and Earl Williams; his two roles could be described as cross-fertilization.<sup>10</sup> Yet where Williams loses his job in the city, Muley loses the land, the loss foregrounding an acute sense of territoriality, constituent to Ford's cinema. Put differently, land is never quite lost in Ford because it remains the reason of and for the story as well as metonymic to reason as such; this is why *The Grapes of Wrath* reads actually as the specimen story of Fordiana. It is in this sense that Ford and Hawks work as an assemblage, with Qualen as its lynchpin:

<sup>8</sup> Hawks was famous for his work with actors: "[i]n the end he tailored nearly everything to his actors – lines, camera movements, characterization, story, which might take a whole new direction (...) if the performance suggested it". Also, "the experiences with [Frances] Farmer and Grant and Russell (...) seem to have made a turning point for him, showing how far he could go both in bringing a talented actor out and in shaping the movie character around him" (Harvey 1998: 461-462).

<sup>9</sup> Reference here is to McCarey's *The Awful Truth*, another remarriage comedy important to Cavell. Interestingly, when Cary Grant, in *The Awful Truth*, fails to sustain the suave, rational act in face of Irene Dunne's presumed infidelity, she says that he is "out of his continental mind". This could well be the awful truth of their narrative: that there is a mind apart to America, a type of rationality independent from inclusions and exclusions constituent to the continental mind (and philosophy). Also, there is more to the McCarey-Hawks affinity than the fact that Cavell finds both definitive to remarriage comedy. Hawks built heavily on the story of McCarey's film, down to taking over portions of dialogue. In both comedies Cary Grant is the divorced husband and a notorious metropolitan trickster, engaged in reclaiming his wife (Irene Dunne in McCarey, Russell in Hawks) who plans on marrying the reliable Ralph Bellamy and moving to rural America. It is as if Hawks wanted to draw out the logic dormant in McCarey: to articulate what exactly constitutes the awful truth of McCarey's film, or – more precisely – to articulate what about this truth is awful.

<sup>10</sup> That Ford and Hawks consulted each other's work is a documented fact; see for instance McBride 2003: 459-460.

Ford's understanding of territoriality in *The Grapes of Wrath* corresponds to Hildy's astute intervention in Hawks, suggesting that the green world is metonymic to American rationality or constituent to it in metonymic terms.

That this rationality bears relation to psychoanalysis is suggested also by the fact that Williams is to undergo an official, binding assessment by a psychiatrist, from Vienna, a doctor Egelhoffer. It is as if the two Williams interviews, the first one with Hildy and the second one with the good doctor, signal that Hildy's performance is to be judged alongside psychoanalysis. Compared to Hildy, however, doctor Egelhoffer proves inefficient, suggesting that Hildy is better at this kind of conversation, indeed, that Hildy's is a corrective to European psychoanalysis. Again, Hawks suggests that Hildy's performance entails the knowledge of America, and vice versa. Namely, it transpires that Egelhoffer was also invited to assess the sanity of the American administration in Washington. To be sure, Hawks' newspapermen are leering at the fact, but as Egelhoffer serves to show off Hildy's (psychoanalytic) prowess, it follows that it takes the knowledge specific to Hildy to assess the American administration, even America's constitution – precisely the rationale of Cavell's philosophical interest in American cinema.

This is exactly how the resolution plays out: Williams makes use of his interview with Egelhoffer to break out, only to end up yielding to Hildy again, depending for his life on her wit and resourcefulness. With Walter along, she hides Williams in an *escritoire* in the pressroom of the criminal court building, while talking the mayor and the chief of police into admitting to their wrongdoing. Even though Williams emerges from the *escritoire* before the talking has run its course, his life is saved, as if to suggest rebirth, an unlikely resurrection, a curious parthenogenesis to which Hildy is mother and the *escritoire* the womb. With this, all Hildy's plans to marry Bruce show as untenable, while remarrying Walter descends upon her as a Deleuzian event, similarly to a catastrophe or a revolution.

### 3.

Hawks' narrative logic comes across even more fully when compared to that of *The Front Page*, the Hecht/ MacArthur play on which the screenplay was based. In the play, Hildy Johnson is a man, not a woman (Hildebrandt instead of Hildegard). He wants to leave the Chicago newspaper in order to marry a Peggy Grant, and move to New York City with a new career in advertising.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, there is no (re)marriage of Walter and Hildy, just as unchecked

<sup>11</sup> Hawks was clearly amused by how the names of Peggy Grant and Cary Grant alliterate, merging into a zone of resonance until the distance between character and actor has been cancelled, in favor of a metonymy of becoming, or of becoming as metonymy. (Hawks later directed Grant specifically around becoming a woman, in *I Was a Male War Bride*, 1949.) That this made Hawks tick can be evinced from the dialogue, when the mayor (Clarence Kolb) threatens Walter with a prison sentence and says: "I'm not gonna help you this time, we're thru", to which Walter/ Cary Grant replies: "The last man who said that to me was Archie Leach just a week before he cut his throat". Cary Grant was born Archibald Leach and changed his name after his arrival in Hollywood.



sexuality is missing from their exchanges, in favor of a father-son complex where sexuality is tied up, almost too neatly, in classic Freudian configurations. Equally symptomatic is Hawks' decision to change New York City for Albany. Symptomatic about it is not the fact that Albany is provincial compared to New York City, so much as the circumstance that the two places share a geography and configure into a metonymy: Albany is situated in upstate New York and is – as Bruce Baldwin proudly claims – the state's capital. Rather than reinforcing the binary of the rural and the metropolitan, which is crucial to Cavell's "green world", Hawks signals that there is a capillary logic to his America, a kind of microphysics whereby America is constituted, which is intrinsic to its freedom of movement (and its movement as freedom). In other words, this world is constitutently metonymic. In this world New York City is not cut away from Albany but is metonymic to it, just as the criminal courts building metonymizes into pressrooms, yards, cars, city streets, staircases, corridors and uterine escritorios. After all, Hawks chooses not to name the American metropolis where the story takes place (unlike Hecht and MacArthur), as if to suggest that the layout of his criminal courts building is metonymic, not metaphoric, to America itself.

The same applies to Earl Williams. In the play, he is an anarchist with an articulated political agenda to his shooting the policeman; the play abounds with the references to the Red Scare that haunts America in the wake of the October Revolution. Hildy thus engages in no interview with Williams, because there is no story to think up in dialogue with the convict – the story is already there, that of poster anarchism. This is also how Williams is macguffinized in the play and removed from the logic of its coherence.<sup>12</sup>

In Hawks, Williams is stripped of the political agenda and reduced to an almost Agambenian spectacle of bare life. Critics have noted this departure in Hawks and all but attributed it to Hawks' shying away from possible censorship.<sup>13</sup> Yet the reduction of Williams to bare life, which Hildy is invited to investigate, reintroduces politics at its purest, now in the positions where

<sup>12</sup> MacGuffin is the narrative device widely used by Alfred Hitchcock. In itself, it is "nothing at all", an empty place, a pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion": like "the formula of the warplane engines in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, the secret clause of the naval treaty in *The Foreign Correspondent*, the coded melody in *The Lady Vanishes*, the uranium bottles in *Notorious*" (Žižek 1992: 6-7.) MacGuffins "are both at the core of the action and completely irrelevant; the highest degree of meaning – what everybody is after – coincides with an absence of meaning" (Dolar 1992: 45). According to Hitchcock, "the logicians are wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it's beside the point. The only thing that really matters is that in the picture the plans, documents, or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters. To me, the narrator, they're of no importance whatever" (Truffaut and Scott 1985: 138). Interestingly, Hitchcock refers to his looking for one such MacGuffin with Ben Hecht when they were working together on the screenplay for *Notorious* (1946). He emphasizes that Hecht "was very keen on psychoanalysis" and "was in constant touch with prominent psychoanalysts" (Truffaut and Scott 1985: 167, 163).

<sup>13</sup> The screenplay, says Harvey (1998: 440), "jettisons any of the play's troubling or controversial political references".

America is decided as a political project. Consequently, the questions of rights, universalism and revolution, which in the play were confined to its MacGuffin and were thus macguffinized themselves, reenter in Hawks in all the positions where investigation is invoked. Which is in all the positions traversed by Hildy and/or the director – so that politics becomes metonymic to the narrative and capillary to it.<sup>14</sup> This is how politics becomes the truth of the Hawks narrative (precisely the truth that Hitchcock evacuates from the MacGuffin). In turn, truth and reason thus configured is where Cavell accesses the classical Hollywood as a scene of instruction for philosophy, if philosophy is to address the rationale of America.

To sum up: in the play there is no climactic interview that refracts psychoanalysis (and Marxism, with its “production for use”); no Hildy’s particular intervention into the thinking up of the story; no Hildy as woman; and no remarriage. This is important because, in Hawks, it is in these positions that truth and reason configure metonymically in order to designate America. As these are also the hallmarks of Cavell’s philosophical engagement with film – conversation as education towards contract and beyond self; education as definitive to the political project of America; remarriage; psychoanalysis; woman as the positionality where education and psychoanalysis are tested – it follows that the rationality on which Cavell depends in his cinema books is constitutently metonymic.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4.

It is with this in mind that one should revisit Cavell’s claim that the black world of the Hawks criminal courts building erases and supplants the conditions of the green world: because his claim implies that the reason fundamental to the courtroom (the reason of the law, the type of rationality productive equally of law and of metaphor, also of continental philosophy in the wake of Plato)<sup>16</sup> overrides the *raison* or the intelligence or the knowledge implicit to the green worlds of these comedies.<sup>17</sup> This position is further ensconced in Cavell’s appreciation of remarriage as generic to the comedies he analyzes, because remarriage is

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<sup>14</sup> It follows that the logic of MacGuffin in Hitchcock should be assigned to metaphor.

<sup>15</sup> In an interview he gave to Peter Bogdanovich Hawks said that he had decided to rewrite the play during a reading-through with actors, when he had asked a girl to read Hildy’s part, while he had read Walter. Ernst Lubitsch, the masters’ master of classical Hollywood, described the rewrite as a stroke of genius. See Harvey 1998: 433.

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze (1989: 81) remarks that “[t]he classical conception of the law found its perfect expression in Plato and in that form gained universal acceptance throughout the Christian world”.

<sup>17</sup> It is in this position that Cavell’s reading of Hawks anticipates the foundational argument of his book on the Hollywood melodrama of the 1940s and the 1950s: that the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman constitutes a *negation* of the remarriage comedy. See Cavell 1996: 6.

premised on divorce, or rather on the structural possibility of divorce, to which the black world of courts is foundational. In a word, it is only with *remarriage* that marriage becomes fully reducible to law (at the expense of that which about contract is singular, an event).

On the other hand, Cavell takes the concept of the green world not from philosophy but from literature. He derives it from Northrop Frye's reading of Shakespeare (1981: 49, 172). The green world is therefore also the position where philosophy meets its outside in order to keep redefining the place where concepts are produced. This is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze, when he claims for philosophy the concepts that "themselves change along with the problems. They have spheres of influence where (...) they operate in relation to 'dramas' and by means of a certain 'cruelty'. They must have a coherence among themselves, but that coherence must not come from themselves" (1994: xx). Deleuze elsewhere describes Anglo-American literature as particularly apt in staging this drama and cruelty for philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Cavell's American green world reads therefore in many ways as a Deleuzian philosophical dream come true. As a result, there is something constitutively metonymic about the assemblages of philosophy and literature in Cavell, and in Deleuze, and, consequently, something of skepticism to do with metaphor, in the position where metaphor is fundamental to the ideation of the law and to the reason of (Platonic, Cartesian, continental...) philosophy.

This is why Cavell's Hawks should ultimately be tested against the figural logic of the American Revolution, as definitive to the political and the philosophical project of America. I am referring to the figural logic implicit to the Jeffersonian, and the Emersonian, agenda of freedom of movement and freedom as movement, also to the imaginary of physiocracy that this agenda found operative. Both Jefferson and Emerson were rural, agrarian thinkers; Jefferson's writings register a marked investment in the Epicureans, especially in Lucretius and the green world of *De rerum natura*.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, freedom of movement in Jefferson's thought and politics entails the Epicurean atomism with its investment into the rationale of physics and the logic of metonymy, at a remove however from the overvaluation of the void as the guarantor of negativity and, consequently, from metaphor and metaphysics. This is why the negation of the green world, which Cavell situates in Hawks, is important: how could an exemplary Hollywood remarriage comedy allow for the green world in terms of a negative definition and in the register of metaphor? Because such a remarriage comedy would betray America to be a functional experiment in metaphor, rather than an experiment in capillary movement, in Epicurean physics, in metonymy. Put crudely: it would no longer be a Jeffersonian or an Emersonian America.

Since *His Girl Friday* does engage metonymy, and more radically than other remarriage comedies, the problem is truly structural, but not to Hawks so much

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<sup>18</sup> See Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 36-76.

<sup>19</sup> „The atoms of Lucretius had left their traces on the Declaration of Independence“, writes Stephen Greenblatt and concludes his book on Lucretius with a quote from Jefferson identifying himself as „an Epicurean“ (2012: 263).

as to Cavell's reasoning. What emerges in Hawks is not the proposition that the green world is **not** (as Cavell would have it), but, instead, that the Cavellian understanding of the green world is not enough if the reason of America is to hold out. In other words, the Cavellian green world, which admits a precedence of **not**, fails to enact the true extent of the argument on which America is based, and, with it, the America that is philosophical precisely to the extent to which it cannot but be political.

Hawks further promotes this position by the narrative mobilization of sexuality, which – unlike that of the play – is now dominating the inside of the narrative and of the criminal courts building, in the form of the sexual liaison persisting against all Oedipal odds between Walter Burns and Hildy Johnson. While the play typecasts Walter and Hildy in an Oedipal father-son configuration, in which Walter as the father-figure serves to maneuver intrusive sexuality out of the story, the film readmits sexuality into the criminal courts building, now as the mobilizing force, which brings about a reconstitution of gender.

As Hildy is becoming a woman for the film, she introduces into the story the anti-Oedipal structures reminiscent of Deleuze's masochism.<sup>20</sup> She is the Deleuzian oral mother to Walter: she is both sufficiently promiscuous to wreck the play's paternalism (hence her affair with Bruce to begin with), and supremely disciplining intellectually when it comes to exposing Walter's claims to authority as the pranks of a trickster. In the early scenes she establishes herself, playfully but explicitly, as Walter's mother figure, while Russell's tall and imposing frame sets her off almost too visibly against the typical Hollywood's petites.<sup>21</sup> Not to mention the fact that the frantic buzz of dialogue, flooding the film, underscores orality and the zones of resonance which, according to Deleuze, is formative to the fantasy of masochism. It is in this conversational buzz that Hawks' Walter

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze (1989) critiques Freudian positions on masochism, arguing that the woman of the masochist fantasy is not a disposable fill-in for the father figure as the figure of the law, but the position where fatherhood is obliterated. The dominatrix, that is, combines cruelty (of Oedipal fatherhood) and the chthonic structures of promiscuity, until the two start resonating in the masochist fantasy as an effect of her orality and her voice (which is also how the intercourse is suspended and, with it, the threat of incest).

<sup>21</sup> "Mama doesn't dream about you anymore, Walter", says Hildy about herself. In his cinema books Deleuze (1997a: 166) takes note of this particular configuration in Hawks, but fails to situate it within masochism – when he says that in Hawks "the woman can also assume the function of the man in the relationship of seduction, and the man that of the woman". Cavell (1994: 132) in turn invokes, repeatedly, the woman's voice as occasioning "that philosophical self-torment whose shape is skepticism, in which the philosopher (...) wants and wants not to become intelligible, expressive, exposed". If Cavell thus assumes the structures of Deleuzian masochism, now for (American) philosophy, it is as symptomatic that he fails to relate them to his interest in the remarriage comedy, except in terms of negation. (He relates the woman's voice and the philosophical self-torment to the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman, which he defines as the negation of the remarriage comedy – a structure of thought similar in fact to how Freud assumes analytic control over the masochist fantasy.)

undergoes an all but incestuous and all but penetrative regeneration: a kind of rebirth that Deleuze identifies as parthenogenesis. Finally, Deleuze too identifies the green world as structural to his logic: he observes that the oral mother is organized around a chthonic fantasy, as the focal figure in an agrarian collective where paternalist laws are cancelled in favor of contracts.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, *Hawks* is explicit about Hildy coming from a rural community (to then disarm the best of the metropolitan minds): in a vain attempt to debase her, Walter addresses her as „a doll-faced hick“.<sup>23</sup>

As Hildy is becoming woman for the film, other instances of womanhood, of the play, gravitate towards her so that a massive reconstitution of sexuality and gender is effected. Consequently, while the play abounds with small-scale, dismissive references to prostitutes, cleaning women, pin-up girls... the film is radically cleansed of this scattered womanhood. Even Mollie Molloy, the golden-hearted prostitute hysterically affected with the case of Earl Williams, is somewhat streamlined in *Hawks* and killed off in the process. It is at this point that the story admits a peculiar type of intelligence, even rationality, to

<sup>22</sup> Deleuze (1989: 95-96) calls it “agrarian communism” and attaches to masochism a peculiar affinity with revolutionary configurations, thanks mainly to its marked anti-Oedipal drift and the annihilation of fatherhood. This in turn is evocative of a difficult place in Marx: the passage in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon” where Marx excludes the peasants from political self-representation, as collectives based in metonymy (1960: 198-199). Marx compares peasants to a sack of potatoes, an image implying that peasant collectives are constituted around metonymic relations. Its derogatory angle suggests that Marx critiques precisely the metonymic character of these collectives and metonymy as the apparatus of political reasoning. This points to a flaw in Marx’s thinking of revolution, because most successful revolutions in the twentieth century, based in Marxism, took place in the political green worlds: the predominantly agrarian societies like Russia, Yugoslavia, China, Cuba, Vietnam... Insofar as Marx’s flaw concerns his elision of the peasantry, Marx seems to have failed to take into account, fully, the lesson of the American Revolution, specifically its *raison*, impressed by Jefferson’s appreciation of agriculture. Ironically, Marx’s doctoral dissertation was an elaborate account of Epicurean physics – precisely the match for Jefferson’s political logic. It is almost as if Marx repressed his philosophical beginnings when he later embarked on his critique of the political economy of capitalism, a repression whose impact would turn out to be truly Oedipal. (Therein perhaps lies the weakness of Arendt’s perspective on the American Revolution: Arendt emphasizes the impact of the Roman thought on the Founding Fathers, but fails to appreciate its Epicurean inflection, favoring instead the preeminence of the Roman law.)

<sup>23</sup> Cavell (1981: 168) points out that the title of *Hawks’* film alludes “to a popular radio serial of the period, ‘Our Gal Sunday.’ The daily narrative lead-in to each episode of the serial spoke of ‘a story about a girl from a small mining town in the West (...) which asks the question whether she can find happiness with a rich an titled Englishman.’ This is how the crude paternalism of the title – *His Girl Friday* – is undone along with the paternalism of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to which it also alludes, with its man Friday, the suggestion being that America is truly a new world for a new wo/man, where the (British) colonial logic has been dismantled in the event of the revolution. As Cavell (1981: 168) rightly remarks, the implication here is „that the pair are survivors“.

be enacted from within Hildy, which is not there in the play: the Hildy of the play is markedly less astute, analytical and transformative than the Hildy of the film. The reconstitution is narrative, sexual, political and intellectual; Hawks seems to suggest that reconstitution cannot but be narrative, sexual, political *and* intellectual if it is worthy of its name. By extension, the same applies to the constitution (of America).

It is therefore logical that the reconstitution should affect the layout of Hawks' politics. Earl Williams of the play is an anarchist who wants to shed the label of socialism and communism, so that the play in fact undertakes to analyze the heterogeneity of the left in America, making leftism the most unpardonable sin of/in America, yet the sin forever protected by a kind of faltering reprieve. The film omits this political structure in favor of an Earl Williams who is decidedly traumatized or hysterical or insane or stupid: he represents humanity whose rationality – or whose rationale – is forever threatened. (Ford's Muley of *The Grapes of Wrath* again comes to mind.)<sup>24</sup> Yet, rather than proposing that Hawks thus addresses the issue of universalism, instead of that of communism and anarchism, what transpires in Hawks is universalism as the logic behind communism and anarchism alike. This in turn reveals the underlying rationale of universalism to be bare life that, curiously, is not to be defended by (continental) philosophy or the law, but by an interventionist thought traversing that of psychoanalysis, the thought that Hildy engages when she, against her better reason, comes up with a plausible narrative about "production for use". (This kind of critique first surfaces when Walter the trickster offers to buy a life insurance policy from the meek Bruce Baldwin.) In this way Hildy forges a structural liaison between the left thought and psychoanalysis, and foregrounds knowledge or rather rationality that traverses both; it is the knowledge that takes place metonymically to the idea of the law and the state, with the suggestion that this is the condition of America, if America is to persist. This also implies that America makes sense as the scene and the thought of universalism, or rather that America makes no sense except as a scene of universalism. It is in this sense that the American courtroom and the spaces adjacent to it are the extensions of the green world, and vice versa, implying that crisis is not to be contained in/for America – that crisis is not to be contained if America is to become – that America as such is critical.

## 5.

Hildy is metonymic to this America; in Hawks, the reason of America depends on Hildy. More precisely, the reason of America depends on that which is metonymic to Hildy's reason, because the story that she thinks up in

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<sup>24</sup> For Hawks, claiming "I am sane", as Earl Williams does repeatedly, is an indication of crisis: needing to claim sanity is already an indication that sanity is in crisis. Courts therefore cannot ensure it; they merely aspire to contain this crisis, as its most spectacular theaters.



her conversation with Earl Williams emerges in spite and against the reason she wants to adopt as hers. Her tragedy – and her comedy – is that she does not want to think and reason this way; her “better reason” is invested in shedding this transformative thought, this intelligence, which is how this thought is revealed to be part of her constitution. This is how Hildy’s intelligence responds in fact to Jacques Lacan’s famous comment on desire, which takes over the pathways of metonymy (1966: 528): in Hildy, *intelligence* is metonymic. With another issue at stake then: if, according to Lacan, desire is metonymy where symptom is metaphor, where is one to detect symptoms in America? Because, in Hawks, they appear not to be structural to its constitution or, more to the point, to its Declaration of Independence.

While it is true that this intelligence is not concerned with the maintenance of the self, it maintains the world and is relational to it. This is how this metonymic rationality is both revolutionary and constitutional, strictly speaking – and therefore American. Interestingly, it corresponds to the agenda that Cavell associates with women in his autobiographical writings, when he explains his Oedipal script: while father could be destroying both his self and the world, mother could harm his ego, but would keep the world. In Cavell’s words:

If asked whether the moods of men or of women are more likely to control my own, I would at once answer that I was more attuned to the moods of women. But while I have been disappointed and interested and perplexed and saddened and made happy and been frightened, even maddened, by the moods of women, I do not recall this particular sense of devastation through them – a sense that not I, or that within me, was broken, but the world. The very problem is that the world remains as it is, but pointlessly (Cavell 2010: 21).

This position bears relation to Cavell’s Emerson. To Cavell, Emerson is crucial in the position where he fleshes out the meaning of the constitution for America: constitution to Emerson signifies that body and body politic partake of the same assemblage. (In part at least, this is Emerson’s political *and* philosophical debt to Jefferson’s physiocracy.) Cavell (1988: 11) emphasizes that Emerson “speaks of ‘my constitution,’ meaning for him simultaneously the condition of his body, his personal health (a figure for the body and system of his prose), and more particularly his writing (or amending) of the nation’s constitution. The idea of his constitution accordingly encodes and transfigures Plato’s picture of justice in the state...”. Yet even though this proposition entails that the constitution fails if founded in metaphor and not in metonymy, Cavell assumes control of its figural movement by adopting for it, and for Emerson, the metaphor-driven semiosis of Plato and Freud: he acknowledges that “nothing in Emerson is more constant than his scorn of the idea that any given state of what he calls the self is the last”, yet feels compelled “to register Emerson’s sense – and Freud’s, not to mention Plato’s – that *each* state of the self is, so to speak, final: each state constitutes a world” (1988: 3, emphasis S. C.).

Cavell adopts Nietzsche in a similar fashion. He foregrounds Nietzsche in his book on the constitution of Emersonian perfectionism as the one who, in

"Schopenhauer as Educator" ("*Schopenhauer als Erzieher*"), quotes from Emerson that "a new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits" (1950: 284).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche builds on Emerson's description of a revolutionary culture in order to argue that the revolutionary culture, which transforms the world, is an alternative to the subjectivity that is responsive to the politics of homogenization. Yet Nietzsche implies that the Emersonian agenda is not universalist, insofar as not all can open up to revolutionary becoming; some respond to it by developing structures of the self comparable to those that Freud will later attribute to masochism. This is critical here, because Hawks' comedy, which Cavell finds exemplary, evokes Deleuze's critique of the Freudian model; it is where Deleuze is critical of the Freudian model that his masochism registers an affinity with the revolutionary thought (not least where law in Deleuzian masochism gives way to the preeminence of contract). With his sympathy for Deleuzian structures, Hawks seems to override Nietzsche's restrictions on becoming, as if to suggest that the crisis implicit to America (as well as education implicit in this crisis) is also how to think universalism. This is how Hawks is educational to Cavell too: because he outlines the position where Cavell needs to sidestep his Nietzsche as one final Oedipal obstacle to his understanding of Emerson and of America.

As it turns out, Cavell's philosophical comedy – or melodrama – reciprocates Hildy's. Like Hildy, he arrives at America against his better reason. His better reason coincides with that which remains continental about his mind: with that in his philosophy which remains judiciously Platonic and Freudian, even in his Nietzsche. Finally, this is where Cavell comes closest to Jacques Derrida's encounter with America, when Derrida, in his 1976 "Declarations of Independence", rejects Jefferson in favor of Nietzsche, and refuses to address the American Declaration of Independence except in the form of an excuse.<sup>26</sup> With Cavell now as a corrective perhaps to this position in Derrida, and with Hawks' cinema as a corrective to both Derrida and Cavell.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> In Nietzsche: "*Ein neuer Grad der Kultur würde augenblicklich das ganze System menschlicher Bestrebungen einer Umwälzung unterwerfen*" (Nietzsche 1988: 426, emphasis F. N.). See Cavell 1988: 10.

<sup>26</sup> See Derrida 1986: 7-15. It is equally symptomatic that Derrida registers little philosophical interest in film (except in the form of an excuse?).

<sup>27</sup> An earlier version of this essay, in Slovene, was published in *Stanley Cavell: Refleksija filma* [ed. Ivana Novak], Ljubljana: Slovenska kinoteka, 2015. The research for this essay was supported by funding from the Croatian Science Foundation.

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### **Strašna istina: o metonimijskoj racionalnosti kod Hawksa i Cavella**

U knjizi o hollywoodskim komedijama ponovnoga braka filmska naracija poslužila je Stanleyju Cavellu kao ishodište za analizu političkog i filozofskog projekta Amerike. Ista platforma poslužila je Cavellu da obrazloži strukturni afinitet filmske naracije i psihoanalize, posebno kad je riječ o ženi u hollywoodskom filmu kao figuri kritike i krize. U ovome radu analiziram upravo ženu kako je Cavell prikazuje u toj knjizi, koja dominira takozvanim „zelenim svijetom“ hollywoodskih komedija ponovnoga braka, to jest bukoličkim spacijem neodvojivim od Emersonove vizije Amerike. Fokus međutim stavljam na komediju u kojoj naoko nema takvoga zelenog svijeta, a to je *Njegova djevojka* Petko Howarda Hawksa, uz argument da Hawksova žena na isti način mobilizira velegradske sudnice i njima pridružene prostore, pa tako emersonski zeleni svijet nije izlučen iz Hawksa, kako tvrdi Cavell, nego metonimizira prostorima koje Amerika pridružuje racionalnosti. Najzad, razlažem kako taj kompleks korespondira s filozofskom fascinacijom Gillesa Deleuzea ženom, filmom i Amerikom, pri čemu obje pozicije, i Cavellova i Deleuzeova, podliježu kritičkoj rekonfiguraciji.

*Ključne riječi:* Stanley Cavell, Howard Hawks, američki film, filozofija filma, metonimija

