

THE "I" OF THE CAMERA

William Rothman



Essays in Film Criticism,
History, and Aesthetics

SECOND EDITION

CAMBRIDGE

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THE “I” OF THE CAMERA

Originally published in 1988, *The “I” of the Camera* has become a classic in the literature of film. Offering convincing alternatives to the doctrinaire approaches that have gained most prominence in academic film study, William Rothman challenges readers to think about film in adventurous ways that are more open to movies and our experience of them. In a series of eloquent essays examining particular films, filmmakers, genres, and movements, he reflects on such matters as film violence, eroticism, and the “American-ness” of American film. Rothman argues compellingly that movies have inherited the philosophical perspective of American transcendentalism. This second edition contains all of the essays that made the book a benchmark of film criticism. It also includes fourteen essays, written subsequent to the book’s original publication, as well as a new foreword. The new chapters further broaden the scope of the volume, fleshing out its vision of film history and illuminating the author’s critical method and the philosophical perspective that informs it.

William Rothman is Professor of Motion Pictures and Director of the Graduate Program in Film Study at the University of Miami. He has taught at Harvard University, New York University, and for three years served as Director of the International Honors Program on Film, Television and Social Change in Asia. He is the author of numerous books and essays on aspects of film.

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WILLIAM ROTHMAN

University of Miami



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To Kitty

Contents

<i>Foreword to the Second Edition</i>	page ix
<i>Preface to the First Edition</i>	xix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxvii
<i>Notes on the Essays</i>	xxix
1 Hollywood Reconsidered: Reflections on the Classical American Cinema	I
2 D. W. Griffith and the Birth of the Movies	II
3 <i>Judith of Bethulia</i>	17
4 True Heart Griffith	29
5 The Ending of <i>City Lights</i>	44
6 <i>The Goddess</i> : Reflections on Melodrama East and West	55
7 <i>Red Dust</i> : The Erotic Screen Image	67
8 Virtue and Villainy in the Face of the Camera	74
9 Pathos and Transfiguration in the Face of the Camera: A Reading of <i>Stella Dallas</i>	87
10 Viewing the World in Black and White: Race and the Melodrama of the Unknown Woman	96
11 Howard Hawks and <i>Bringing Up Baby</i>	110
12 The Filmmaker in the Film: Octave and the Rules of Renoir's Game	122
13 <i>Stagecoach</i> and the Quest for Selfhood	139
14 To Have and Have Not Adapted a Film from a Novel	158
	ix

15	Hollywood and the Rise of Suburbia	167
16	Nobody's Perfect: Billy Wilder and the Postwar American Cinema	177
17	<i>The River</i>	206
18	<i>Vertigo</i> : The Unknown Woman in Hitchcock	221
19	<i>North by Northwest</i> : Hitchcock's Monument to the Hitchcock Film	241
20	The Villain in Hitchcock: "Does He Look Like a 'Wrong One' to You?"	254
21	Thoughts on Hitchcock's Authorship	263
22	Eternal Vérités: Cinema-Vérité and Classical Cinema	281
23	Visconti's <i>Death in Venice</i>	298
24	Alfred Guzzetti's <i>Family Portrait Sitzings</i>	304
25	The Taste for Beauty: Eric Rohmer's Writings on Film	321
26	<i>Tale of Winter</i> : Philosophical Thought in the Films of Eric Rohmer	325
27	The "New Latin American Cinema"	340
28	Violence and Film	348
29	What Is American about American Film Study?	358
	<i>Index</i>	381

Foreword to the Second Edition

When Beatrice Rehl, my friend and editor at Cambridge University Press, told me that Cambridge considers *The “I” of the Camera* to be one of its most successful books on film and invited me to prepare a new edition, I leapt at the opportunity. I was delighted that Cambridge – which can boast of more worthwhile film books than perhaps any other publisher – considers *The “I” of the Camera* to be a milestone in the history of film study and also a work that remains vital and relevant to shaping the future of the field.

This second edition of *The “I” of the Camera* contains all fifteen of the essays – with newly made and greatly improved frame enlargements – that were included in the volume when it was originally published in 1988. I have also added no fewer than fourteen essays – enough new material to have made a separate volume of its own. All the additional essays were written subsequent to the book’s original publication. They range from critical studies of particular films (“*The Goddess*: Reflections on Melodrama East and West,” “*Stagecoach* and the Quest for Selfhood,” “Visconti’s *Death in Venice*”), filmmakers (“Nobody’s Perfect: Billy Wilder and the Postwar American Cinema”; “The Villain in Hitchcock” and “Thoughts on Hitchcock’s Authorship”; “Philosophical Thought in the Films of Eric Rohmer” and the foreword to the American edition of Rohmer’s *The Taste for Beauty*) and movements or genres (“Eternal Vérités: Cinéma-Vérité and Classical Cinema,” “The ‘New Latin American Cinema,’” “Viewing the World in Black and White: Race and the Melodrama of the Unknown Woman”) to more general reflections (“Hollywood and the Rise of Suburbia,” “Violence and Film,” “What Is American about American Film Study?”).

What I wrote in my original preface articulates my reason, as well, for putting together this expanded collection of essays:

By publishing all of these essays under one cover, I hope to make them readily available and also more approachable, for although their prose is untechnical and

as clear as I know how to make it, their way of thinking about film, which is also a way of viewing film, a way of viewing film as thinking, will be unfamiliar to many readers. My hope is that reading the essays together will help impart familiarity with their way of thinking. But another aim in putting these essays together is to make their way of thinking *less* familiar – more provocative, more critical, more demanding. This is writing that calls upon the reader to think about movies, which means, in part, thinking about the hold movies have over us. This in turn means, in part, thinking about why we resist thinking about movies, why such resistance is, as it were, natural. (This thought, too, it may be natural to resist.)

When I wrote these words fifteen years ago, I was registering my conviction that *The “I” of the Camera* was capable of challenging readers to think about film in more adventurous ways, ways more open and responsive to what movies themselves have to say, and more open and responsive to our experience of them. I was also registering my expectation that my book would meet with resistance within the field of film study. It did.

In 1988, academic film study was in the grip of the doctrine that its legitimacy could be established by only the “higher authority,” the field called “theory.” The reign of theoretical systematizing over film study, which has now more or less definitively come to an end, was at its most repressive. Students were taught that, to think seriously about film, they first had to break their attachments to the films they loved. It was an unquestioned doctrine within the field that movies were pernicious ideological representations to be resisted and decoded, not treated with the respect that is due to works of art capable of instructing us how to think about them. It was another dogma that the human figures projected on the movie screen were mere “personas,” discursive ideological constructs, not people. Yet another was that the world projected on the screen was itself an ideological construct, not real; and, indeed, that so-called reality was such a construct, too.

The “I” of the Camera presented – and still presents – an alternative to these skeptical views. That is the basis of both the book’s historical significance and its continuing relevance to the field of film study. Aspiring to an Emersonian philosophical perspective, these essays, individually and collectively, urge us to speak about film in our own human voices, in words accountable to our own experience but unsanctioned by any “higher authority.” They also stake out a critical method or discipline, a practice of close reading underwritten by the philosophical principle that we cannot understand a film’s worth, or its meaning, by applying a theory that dictates to us what we are to say, but only by acknowledging the film’s understanding of itself. No wonder the book met with resistance from a field that was rigidly intolerant to all alternatives to the theoretical frameworks that dictated its agenda!

When I was a Harvard undergraduate in the early 1960s, so-called analytical philosophy was the prevailing school of thought in American academic philosophy (as, on the whole, it still is). But analytical philosophy was long past the heroic era of Gottlob Frege or the young Ludwig Wittgenstein or even the Vienna School of the 1920s, with its grand ambition of grounding mathematics and even science – indeed, all human knowledge – in logic, hence in philosophy. When I made my decision to major in philosophy, logical positivism had long since failed, and analytical philosophy had drastically lowered its sights. It still came with the territory for philosophy professors and their students to assume an air of arrogant superiority to each other, as well as to those benighted souls who lacked professional training in philosophical analysis. But academic philosophy in America had come to view itself as a technical discipline, and a minor one at that, reduced to conceptual “mopping up,” like the Emil Jannings character, the once-proud doorman, in F. W. Murnau’s *The Last Laugh*.

Viewed from within the Harvard Philosophy Department in the early 1960s, in short, philosophy had a most unexciting future. Philosophy also had no relevant past except for the cautionary tale of the failure of its once-heroic dream to provide the foundation for all knowledge. Although it was the beauty of mathematical logic that first drew me to major in philosophy, the downbeat mood within the Harvard Philosophy Department perversely appealed to me. (Years later, I learned that the favorite film of the professor who first inspired me to enter philosophy was *Gilda*. He loved to dream about Rita Hayworth, but what he loved most about her was her unattainability.) I was a child of the existentialist 1950s, and in an absurd, meaningless universe, philosophy, that most absurd and meaningless of all absurd and meaningless endeavors, seemed somehow sublime to me.

My attitude toward philosophy changed when Stanley Cavell arrived at Harvard during my junior year and I began working closely with him. I embraced the revolution in philosophy, effected from *within* the analytical tradition, signaled by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, as Cavell taught me to read that seminal work, and by J. L. Austin, Cavell’s own professor of philosophy, in his investigations of ordinary language. As I made clear in my Honors Thesis, written under Cavell’s supervision, Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* meant to me, among other things, that philosophy and science were different enterprises, to be assessed by different criteria. Nor was philosophy simply to be equated with constructing arguments, presenting and defending theses, or erecting theoretical systems. An exemplary philosophical activity is one that aspires to achieve a perspective – at one level, a perspective of self-reflection – that enables a certain kind of understanding to be reached.

During my senior year at Harvard College, Cavell invited me to enroll in a graduate seminar in aesthetics he was offering that focused on the aesthetics of film. (In *The World Viewed*, he describes this seminar and the role that what he takes to be its failure played in his decision to write his brilliant and beautiful little book about film.) To me, this seminar was anything but a failure. It inspired me to stay on at Harvard to work with Cavell as a doctoral student. Ultimately, I wrote a dissertation that presents an analysis of the concept of expression – to this day, I rely on its ideas – that uses film as its primary example of an artistic medium and uses Hitchcock's *Notorious* as its primary example of a film.

Before Cavell's arrival at Harvard, I was already thinking about film. He helped me to understand that I was doing philosophy – and *why* it was philosophy – when I thought about film the way I was thinking about it. To understand this was to understand something about philosophy, something about film, and something about the potential fruitfulness – indeed, the necessity – of their marriage. It was also to understand something about myself. For the first time, I knew that I was not drawn to philosophy, as I liked to imagine, because it was perfectly meaningless to me. In reality, philosophy meant the world to me. Thinking philosophically about film was – and is – my true vocation.

I can pinpoint the moment this understanding crystallized. Christmas week 1972. Snow on the streets of Manhattan. I was standing in front of a bank of elevators in the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (ironically, the location of one of the darkest hours in American film history; it was at a meeting at the Waldorf that Hollywood formulated its plans for the blacklist). The annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association was in full swing. The job interviews – my reason for being there – were on the 31st floor. An elevator door opened, but before I got to it, it closed. Another door opened. Again, it closed before I got to it. This happened a third time, and a fourth. Finally, it penetrated my ivory dome that I must not have wanted to let the interviewers on the 31st floor force me to pigeonhole my work in terms of the conventional categories of academic philosophy. So I made tracks, went to a movie, and, within a week, had sent out 200 letters to colleges with film programs. The next fall, I started teaching film in the Cinema Studies Department at New York University and returned to Harvard three years later to teach at the newly built Carpenter Center, not quite knowing whether I was coming or going, but certain that I was charting my own path of discovery and self-discovery.

Philosophy's concerns have never been separable from the concerns of ordinary human beings living on Earth. Hence the concerns of philosophy have also found expression, historically, in arts such as literature, painting,

and theater, as in the deep affinity between philosophical skepticism, as it figures centrally in the writings of Descartes, and their exact contemporary, Shakespeare's tragedies and late romances. In the 1930s and 1940s, the concerns of philosophy and Hollywood movies similarly converged. In the so-called classical Hollywood cinema, characters are forever engaging in philosophical dialogues that sustain serious conversations about such matters as what constitutes a conversation, or a marriage worth having, or a community that keeps faith with the ideas on which America was founded. These movies are also forever meditating on the conditions of their own medium.

Yet as the fledgling field of film study turned to European systems of thought in an effort to secure its legitimacy as an intellectual discipline, that unreflective condescension toward film already almost universal among American intellectuals became more firmly entrenched than ever. By 1988, it had become an unassailable doctrine of academic film study in America that popular movies could not possibly exemplify serious ways of thinking, but only ways of *not* thinking; they could be instruments only of "dominant ideology," which we need no help from the films themselves in order to understand, that is, decode. The field assumed that it could know with certainty, on the basis of some theory or other, that Hollywood movies, and Hollywood itself, could be only a machine, an apparatus, whose effects on viewers had to be analyzed objectively, where "objectivity" begins – and ends – with disengagement from one's ordinary experience as a viewer. But what if film is, as it were, inherently subversive – subversive, for example, of the ideology that holds that subjectivity and objectivity are absolutely separable, as if there were not always a medium between them? (In the history of Western philosophy, this ideology can be traced back to Cartesian dualism. It underlies the Saussurian linguistics, based on the opposition between "signifier" and "signified," that, in the heyday of the stultifying influence of semiology on film study, left so many film students bewitched, bothered, and bewildered.) Then an approach to the study of film that begins by denying a priori the possibility that movies are self-conscious would have the inevitable consequence of subverting their subversiveness, denying what is genuinely thought provoking – historically and ontologically – about film.

As *The "I" of the Camera* attests, during the 1970s and the 1980s, a turbulent period for the field of film study, I was never tempted to turn to semiology or Althusserian Marxism or Lacanian psychoanalysis to make my work more "scientific." As I said, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (and, I might add, the writings of Nietzsche, the later Heidegger, the Americans Emerson and Thoreau) meant to me that philosophy and science were different enterprises to be assessed by different criteria. Nor

was I tempted to turn to the new theoretical frameworks that promised – or the field imagined that they promised – to make film study more rigorous by bringing it into alignment with *systems* of thought. Rather, the more I studied the films I cared most about, the more I felt confirmed in my view that they were thinking seriously – thinking philosophically, as I put it in *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze*, my first book – about matters that I was thinking about, too. What *constitutes* a movie's thoughtfulness or self-awareness, however, is not easy to say. Finding a way to say it, nonetheless, was a central goal of my Hitchcock book. It is an abiding goal of all the essays in *The "I" of the Camera*, old and new. Hence the aptness of the book's title.

The reign of theoretical systematizing over film study is over, as I have said. Yet it remains the case that the theoretical writings that are presented to film students as exemplary all apply theoretical systems *to* films. The essays in *The "I" of the Camera* do not proceed this way. It is a feature of many of these essays, indeed, that at a certain point what I think of as the emotional temperature of the prose rises, and the writing climaxes and concludes, on philosophical principle, not with a recapitulation of the essay's main claims and arguments, but with a charged description of a philosophically meaningful moment of a film, as I experience it.

In some of the original essays in *The "I" of the Camera*, a note of anger may occasionally be heard – an expression of my growing sense of alienation from a field that was losing sight of what to me was most thought provoking about movies. When I sat down fifteen years ago to write a preface to the volume, I had every intention of rebutting, point by point, the theoretical positions that were, by my lights, leading the field astray. In the preface I actually composed, however, anger is absent, as it is absent from the essays I composed especially for the book ("D. W. Griffith and the Birth of the Movies," "True Heart Griffith," "The Ending of *City Lights*," "*The River*"). Those essays, and the preface as well, are among my favorite pieces in *The "I" of the Camera*. They now seem to me the best instances I had produced, up to 1988, of the kind of philosophical writing about film that I love and believe in. I am also aware that they are among the pieces in the book that readers within the field of film study have found most difficult to recognize as examples of film theory at all.

In part because of the resistance *The "I" of the Camera* has encountered, most readers today remain as unfamiliar as ever with the way of thinking philosophically about film that my writing champions. Nonetheless, I hope and expect that the book will no longer meet with the degree, or kind, of resistance that it originally encountered. The reign of theoretical systematizing over film study has ended, as I keep saying (hoping that I'm not

whistling in the dark). The publication, in altered circumstances, of this second edition promises to give my book a second chance, or, to be more accurate, to give the field a second chance to respond to these essays, to address their ideas, methods, and critical claims, and to assess the potential usefulness, to the serious study of film, of the philosophical perspective they aspire to achieve.

Preface to the First Edition

In 1982, *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze* was published, the culmination of a project that had occupied me for ten years.¹ During that period, I had published other essays on films and filmmakers. These had appeared in widely scattered journals, and at the time I submitted the Hitchcock manuscript I resolved to collect them in one volume, along with a number of papers presented at conferences but never published. *The “I” of the Camera* is the product of that resolution, although half its essays were written in the intervening five years, in part with the aim of making the volume less a collection and more a real book.

There are differences of style and emphasis between the earlier and later essays, but they are unified by a consistent reliance on the close reading of sequences to back up the claims made about the film, a consistent *practice* of close reading, and a consistent commitment to reflecting on what that practice reveals about film. Taken together, these essays survey film history from early Griffith almost to the present day. From this survey, a picture of the history of film emerges, at least in outline – a picture that acknowledges the centrality of films that reflect philosophically on the mysterious powers and limits of their medium.

Through extended readings of five characteristic films, *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze* attempted to arrive at an understanding of Hitchcock’s authorship and its place in the history of film. At the same time, the book was an investigation of the *conditions* of film authorship, a critique (in the Kantian sense) of film as a medium of authorship. However incessantly the death of the author may be proclaimed, the fact is that there are film authors. But what is it to be an author in the medium of film? What is authorship, what is a medium, what is film?

¹ William Rothman, *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

In its reflections on authorship, *The "I" of the Camera* is a companion piece to *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze*. It contains essays on two Hitchcock films ("Vertigo: The Unknown Woman in Hitchcock" and "North by Northwest: Hitchcock's Monument to the Hitchcock Film") that complement and extend the readings in the Hitchcock book. It also contains essays that attempt to sketch perspicuous picture of the work of a number of other exemplary film authors, most notably D. W. Griffith ("D. W. Griffith and the Birth of the Movies," "*Judith of Bethulia*," and "True heart Griffith"), Howard Hawks ("Howard Hawks and *Bringing Up Baby*" and "To Have and Have Not Adapted a Film from a Novel"), Charles Chaplin ("The Ending of *City Lights*") and Jean Renoir ("The Filmmaker in the Film: Octave and the Rules of Renoir's Game" and "*The River*").

In negotiating the treacherous conceptual waters surrounding authorship, both books draw continually on the analysis of the concept of expression worked out in "Three Essays in Aesthetics," my doctoral dissertation in philosophy.² To say that Hitchcock expresses himself in his films is to say that he is revealed by them and also that he declares himself in them. Beyond this, through his acts of making films, he fulfills himself, becomes more fully who he is, creates himself. It is possible to know Hitchcock through his films because he is the creation of the films as surely as he is their creator. But this does not mean that the Hitchcock made knowable in these films is a fiction of the films' texts, that the real Alfred Hitchcock remains unknowable. The Hitchcock the films make knowable is the human being of flesh and blood. (This is part of what Hitchcock's famous cameo appearances declare.)

That we may know Hitchcock through his films may seem impossible, but it is no more impossible than that human beings are capable of expressing themselves in any other medium, are capable of expressing themselves at all. It is a fact that human beings are capable of revealing and declaring and creating themselves. Yet this fact is also a mystery. *The "I" of the Camera* takes this mystery to be, historically, one of the central themes of film. Hitchcock's films, and the other films I write about, develop this theme by creating intimate, mysterious relationships between the camera and the camera's "subjects," the human beings who dwell within the world of the film (they are also the stars who present themselves to the camera and are revealed by it), and equally intimate and mysterious relationships between the camera and the author, the "I" the camera represents. (The camera also represents the viewer. Does it, then, always serve two masters?)

² William Rothman, "Three Essays in Aesthetics" (unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 1973).

Authorship is only one of the central concerns of *The "I" of the Camera*. Two essays ("Virtue and Villainy in the Face of the Camera" and "Pathos and Transfiguration in the Face of the Camera: A Reading of *Stella Dallas*") study the ways in which theatrical melodrama is transformed by the role of the camera and what that transformation reveals about film and its traumatic break with theater. "*Red Dust: The Erotic Screen Image*" reflects on the erotic dimension of film's awesome power. "Alfred Guzzetti's *Family Portrait Sitzings*" explores the camera's role in cinéma-vérité and the relationship between "documentary" and "fiction." "Hollywood Reconsidered: Reflections on the Classical American Cinema," which opens this volume with an overview of the history of film, addresses the question (among others), What is American about American film?

By publishing all of these essays under one cover, I hope to make them readily available and also more approachable, for although their prose is untechnical and as clear as I know how to make it, their way of thinking about film, which is also a way of viewing film, a way of viewing film as thinking, will be unfamiliar to many readers. My hope is that reading the essays together will help impart familiarity with their way of thinking. But another aim in putting these essays together is to make their way of thinking *less* familiar – more provocative, more critical, more demanding. This is writing that calls upon the reader to think about movies, which means, in part, thinking about the hold movies have over us, This in turn means, in part, thinking about why we resist thinking about movies, why such resistance is, as it were, natural. (This thought, too, it may be natural to resist.)

Most of what I understand about resistance to thinking about movies I learned the old-fashioned way, in the classroom. But it was also in the classroom that I learned that this resistance may be overcome, or, even better, put to use.

All of the pages that follow bear the mark of almost twenty years of lecturing about film, beginning at Harvard when I was a graduate student in philosophy, then continuing at the University of California at Berkeley and Wellesley College. I was Assistant Professor in Cinema Studies at New York University before I returned to Harvard, where I taught film history, criticism, and theory from 1976 to 1984, the period in which most of these essays were written. My practice in the classroom is an essential source of this writing, and it is important that I characterize it.

In a typical classroom session, I spend at least half the time going through one or more sequences with an analyzer projector or video player that allows me to stop the film at any time, fixing the image and keeping it on the screen. Taking the passage line by line, gesture by gesture, expression

by expression, shot by shot, I speak about what is on the screen (and what is significantly absent) at each moment, what it reveals, what motivates it, and how it affects the viewer's experience. I speak about what every viewer sees and also about what I have come to see that other viewers may not see (Hitchcock films, especially, are crisscrossed with private jokes and other "secrets" that are nonetheless in plain view). In short, I perform a reading of the sequence, moment by moment, and I invite others in the room to interject at any time with a remark or a question that adds to or revises or challenges my reading or proposes an alternative reading.

Usually the sequence is from a film I have viewed with the class the night before, have read about in the critical literature, and have previously known (viewed with an audience and also studied, moment by moment, on an editing table). Increasingly, over the years, it is a film I have also previously taught. I enter the classroom already knowing much of what I am going to say. I am already prepared with a reading, but I am also always prepared to revise that reading by testing it in class. In the classroom, I am also always thinking – thinking out loud in front of the class and in front of a film that is holding all of us in its spell even as I speak. I am making discoveries – and inviting others to make discoveries, and they *are* making discoveries – here and now in the face of the power of film. (And the reading I have already prepared is itself woven from discoveries originally made, or at least made to be tested, in the classroom.) The deepest of these discoveries are about the mysterious hold film has over viewers. They are about what viewers ordinarily pass over in silence, and about that silence.

What goes on in the darkness of a movie theater, like what goes on behind the closed doors of a classroom, is open to all who are present, yet is at the same time intimate and private. Ordinarily, even when a film ends and the lights go on and we resume our ordinary lives and our ordinary conversations, we do not break the silence of our communion in the face of the film. Films speak to us in an intimate language of indirectness and silence. To speak seriously about a film, we must speak about that silence, its motivations and depths; we must speak about that to which the silence gives voice; we must give voice to that silence; we must let that silence speak for itself. This is an important part of what I learned – and learned to achieve (at least when the stars were with me) – while thinking out loud in front of a class.

In the classroom, we are all engaged in a common enterprise. I am the lecturer, but I am also a student being initiated, initiating myself, in thinking about film. Over the years, the thinking that goes on in the classroom has fed innumerable conversations outside the classroom. These conversations have deepened the sense of a common enterprise and in turn fed the thinking

in the classroom. And it is from this thinking and talking and listening in and out of school that the writing in this book emerged.

In a sense, this writing attempts to recapture the magic of those hours in class and those conversations out of school. It is animated by a wish that underlies all writing, perhaps, and is certainly a wish (*the wish?*) that underlies film: the wish to keep the past before us, however inadequate we may be to bring it back to life. Yet in another sense those classroom sessions and conversations, however magical, were only rehearsals for this writing. Indeed, what made them magical was never separable from the fact of my writing, from its promise that I was committed to thinking things through, to working toward formulations that, however subject to revision, however provisional, I would unprovisionally be prepared to call my own, to make available, to publish.

My authority in the classroom has always borrowed on this promise, as has my participation in the conversations that have sustained my thinking, conversations inspired by the shared vision of a community of writers, understood in the widest sense of men and women dedicated to making their mark. Such a promise can be kept, such a debt made good, only by writing.

Writing must establish its own authority, but writing with authority about film poses particular problems, problems that are at once literary and philosophical. Thinking out loud in front of a classroom, one can trust to the film itself to make everyone present mindful of what a film *is*. The written word cannot in this way join writer and reader in the face of the film. Writing can only invoke (call upon the reader to remember) or evoke (call upon the reader to imagine) the power of film and the particularity of an individual moment on film. In attempting this, the writer's primary tool is description, although frame enlargements provide a useful supplement.

In class, there are occasions when I stop the film in order to speak and other occasions when I stop the film in order to remain silent, allowing the moment to resonate in everyone's thoughts. (Often I do not know before I push the button whether I am going to speak or remain silent.) In any truly artful "sequence reading" performed in the classroom, one speaks only when the silence itself calls for giving voice to it. When the silence speaks in its own voice, the art is in listening. Every such masterful sequence reading is a study in the limits of what can be said. It is also a study in the limits of what goes without saying. What the *possibility* of such mastery reveals is that the limits of language and the limits of film coincide. That is, there is a boundary between them, and it is possible for a sequence reading to discover this boundary, even survey part of it.

When one performs a sequence reading in the classroom, there is a clear distinction between speaking and being silent, a distinction drawn automatically, as it were, every time one opens one's mouth. In writing about a sequence, however, even when the words are supplemented by frame enlargements, it is necessary to describe what is on the screen at a particular moment in order to make a remark about it at all or even in order to let it pass without remark. In writing, description is a form of speech, but it is also a form of silence. In order for writing to survey the boundary between speech and silence, that boundary – like the power of film and the particularity of the moment of film – must be invoked or evoked by the writing itself, by its voices and silences.

The sequence readings in this book set this challenge for themselves: to describe every individual moment in all its dramatic power and its psychological depth while also conveying the power and depth of the succession of moments out of which the sequence – and ultimately the whole film – is composed.

The challenge is also to make every individual remark – every philosophical remark occasioned by a particular moment – rigorously accountable both to the film and to my own experience while also making these remarks succeed each other with inexorable logic. The goal is a piece of writing that sustains each of its interweaving lines of thought until it comes to an end, perhaps by reaching a conclusion. That it is possible for a sequence reading to sustain thinking that is at once spontaneous and strictly logical is a significant and inherently unpredictable fact about writing, about thinking, and about film. To the degree that I have achieved such writing in *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze* and in the present essays, I have made the sequence-reading form my own, one that enables me to express myself, to say what I have to say about the films I write about. And what I have to say about these films is that they have something to say and that they say it.

A deconstructionist, in rejecting the possibility of such an achievement, might well embrace the sequence reading as the ideal medium for demonstrating that film – like writing, like speech, like thought itself – can never be coherent, intact, whole, can never take full possession of its cacophony of silences and voices. My readings present an alternative to this skeptical vision (although I relish as much as any deconstructionist the opportunities for free association, epigrams, jokes, paradoxes, digressions, parenthetical remarks, and so on, afforded by the sequence-reading form).

When I read a sequence, I put my own words to the thoughts of the camera's subjects and to the author's thoughts. I give voice to these thoughts, although all I have to go on are the views framed by the camera, views from

which the author is absent and which present the camera's subjects only, as it were, from the outside. My assertions are claims to have achieved – and claims that the film has achieved – something that a skeptic would take to be impossible, and I make such claims in order to assert what I find most astonishing, revolutionary, transfiguring, about the films I study. At one level, this is their extreme self-consciousness, the depth of their thoughts about the “I” of the camera. As I read them, these films are *thinking*; they are thinking about thinking, and they are thinking about film, meditating on the powers and limits of their medium.

Film, a medium limited to surfaces, to the outer, the visible, emerges in these films' meditations as a medium of mysterious depths, of the inner, the invisible. “The human body is the best picture of the human soul,” Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*, expressing his wonder – wonder is always his starting point – that we have so much as the *idea* that other minds are inaccessible to us, separated from us by an unbridgeable barrier.³ Wittgenstein's ambition is nothing less than to overcome skepticism by an acknowledgment of the everyday, effecting a fundamental transformation of the central tradition of Western thought. Film participates in this enterprise by demonstrating that the “barrier” of the movie screen – like the boundary between invisible and visible, inner and outer, subjective and objective, female and male, imaginary and real, silence and speech – is not really a barrier at all, however natural it may be to envision it as one, and by wondering what this “barrier” then is.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 178.

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Stanley Cavell and I worked together extremely closely during the years I was teaching film at Harvard. We had innumerable conversations about film and related matters; we avidly read each other’s writing. Whenever we could, we attended each other’s classes, and we jointly taught a course on film comedy. Long before my return to Harvard, he had been my doctoral advisor, and I thought of myself – I still think of myself – as his student. But one thing one learns by being a student of Stanley Cavell is that a student is not a disciple. We have separate visions; we see eye-to-eye, but from different slants. That he has learned from me as I have learned from him, that he is as interested in my writing as I am in his, that a teacher is also a student, are also things he taught me, somehow having a faith in education so deep as to enable him to find a way to ram such ideas through my thick skull. This book owes an immeasurable debt to Stanley Cavell for his teaching, his writing, and the example he sets by the civilized way he lives his life.

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Notes on the Essays

Chapter 1. “Hollywood Reconsidered: Reflections on the Classical American Cinema” was presented at the Symposium on Film and Intercultural Communication at the 1985 Hawaii International Film Festival. I wish to register my appreciation to Wimal Dissanayake and Paul Clark for inviting me to participate in that exceptionally rewarding dialogue between Asian and American filmmakers and critics. “Hollywood Reconsidered” was published in the *East-West Film Journal*, 1(1): 36–47 (December 1986).

Chapter 2. “D. W. Griffith and the Birth of the Movies” appeared in *Humanities* (the journal of the National Endowment for the Humanities), 6(4): 17–20 (August, 1985).

Chapter 3. “*Judith of Bethulia*” is a revised version of an unpublished paper initially written in 1976.

Chapter 4. I wrote “True Heart Griffith” in 1987 to balance the otherwise skewed picture of Griffith that would have emerged from this book had my remarks on *Judith of Bethulia* and *The Birth of a Nation* been left to stand on their own.

Chapter 5. “The Ending of *City Lights*” was written in 1986 for inclusion in the first edition.

Chapter 6. “*The Goddess*: Reflections on Melodrama East and West” was presented at the Symposium of the Hawaii International Film Festival, 1989, and at the China Institute, New York, in 1990. It was published in Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Asian Film Melodrama* (New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Chapter 7. “*Red Dust*: The Erotic Screen Image” is a version of a paper presented at the convention of the Society for Cinema Studies, 1976.

Chapter 8. “Virtue and Villainy in the Face of the Camera” was presented at a 1982 Symposium on Film and Melodrama at the Whitney Humanities

Center, Yale University. Thanks to Professor Norton Batkin, who organized the event. The symposium was a challenging exchange of views.

Chapter 9. "Pathos and Transfiguration in the Face of the Camera: A Reading of *Stella Dallas*," conceived as a companion piece to "Virtue and Villainy in the Face of the Camera," was presented at the 1983 convention of the Society for Cinema Studies and published in *Raritan Review*, 3(3): 116–35 (Winter 1984).

Chapter 10. "Viewing the World in Black and White: Race and the Melodrama of the Unknown Woman" was presented at the 23rd Annual Conference on Literature and Film, Florida State University, 1998.

Chapter 11. "Howard Hawks and *Bringing Up Baby*" was presented at the Film and University Conference held in 1975 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Chapter 12. "The Filmmaker in the Film: Octave and the Rules of Renoir's Game" was written for a collection of essays edited by Ellen P. Wiese, who made a number of suggestions that led to many changes and improvements in the piece. The collection was published as a special issue of *The Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 7(3): 225–36 (Summer 1982).

Chapter 13. "*Stagecoach* and the Quest for Selfhood" was published in Barry Grant, ed., *John Ford's Stagecoach* (New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Chapter 14. "To Have and Have Not Adapted a Film from a Novel" appeared in Gerald Perry and Roger Shatzkin, eds., *The Modern American Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1978), pp. 70–80. I am grateful to Gerald Peary for his constructive criticism of a draft of the essay.

Chapter 15. "Hollywood and the Rise of Suburbia" was presented at the Symposium of the Hawaii International Film Festival, 1987, and was published in the *East–West Film Journal*, 3(2): 96–105 (June 1989).

Chapter 16. A version of "Nobody's Perfect: Billy Wilder and the Postwar American Cinema" was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, 2002, and published in *Film International*, 1(1): 36–47 (Winter 2003).

Chapter 17. "*The River*," was written as I was about to depart for my second visit to India. As a study of the cinema of Jean Renoir, it complements "The Filmmaker in the Film: Octave and the Rules of Renoir's Game." In its reflections on the ambiguous relationship between fiction and documentary

in the medium of film, it is a companion piece to “Alfred Guzzetti’s *Family Portrait Sitzings*.”

Chapter 18. “*Vertigo*: The Unknown Woman in Hitchcock” was published in Joseph H. Smith and Willima Kerrigan, eds., *Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis, Cinema*, Vol. 10 of Forum for Psychiatry and the Humanities Series (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 64–81.

Chapter 19. “*North by Northwest*: Hitchcock’s Monument to the Hitchcock Film” was read at the 1980 session of the English Institute and published in *The North Dakota Quarterly*, 51(3): 11–24 (Summer 1983).

Chapter 20. “The Villain in Hitchcock” was presented at the Annual Meetings of the Society for Cinema Studies, 2002, and published in Murray Pomerance, ed., *BAD: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen* (New York: SUNY Press, 2003).

Chapter 21. “Thoughts on Hitchcock’s Authorship” was written for the Hitchcock Centenary Symposium at New York University, 1999, and was published in Richard Allen and S. Ishii Gonzales, eds., *Hitchcock: Centenary Essays* (New York and London: British Film Institute, 1999).

Chapter 22. “Eternal Vérités: Cinema-Vérité and Classical Cinema” was presented at the Beyond Document Symposium, Carpenter Center, Harvard University, 1993. It was published in Charles Warren, ed., *Beyond Document* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991).

Chapter 23. “*Visconti’s Death in Venice*” was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, 1990.

Chapter 24. “Alfred Guzzetti’s *Family Portrait Sitzings*” appeared in *The Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 2(1): 96–113 (February 1977).

Chapter 25. “The Taste for Beauty: Eric Rohmer’s Writings on Film” was published as the Foreword to the American edition of Eric Rohmer, *The Taste for Beauty* (New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989.)

Chapter 26. “*Tale of Winter*: Philosophical Thought in the Films of Eric Rohmer” was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, 1999, and published in *Filmhäftet*, (Summer 2001).

Chapter 27. “The ‘New Latin American Cinema’” was presented at the Intercultural Communication Conference, University of Miami, 1995, and published in *Film and Philosophy* (Winter 1997).

Chapter 28. “Violence and Film” was presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Film and Video Association, 1999. It was published in David Slocum, ed., *Violence in American Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

Chapter 29. “What Is American about American Film Study?” was presented at the Symposium of the Hawaii International Film Festival, 1991, and published in Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Asian Film Melodrama* (New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

THE “I” OF THE CAMERA

CHAPTER I

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.

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 its 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*,