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The Word Viewed: Conversation on Film

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Abstract

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This thesis examines a feature of virtually every narrative film—the conversation. Defined as sustained dialogue between two or more people, the conversation is often essential to conveying narrative information—at times becoming a narrative event in itself—and yet it might also be considered fundamentally uncinematic, i.e., boring or visually unexceptional. Some of the broad guiding questions of the thesis are: What makes conversation fit for filmic representation? How does the camera capture conversation?

Through close readings of exemplary films, I offer not a history of the conversation on film but an examination of some of its permutations and possibilities. I focus on conversations in a few significant American films between heterosexual couples in the service of romantic (re-)kindling or reconciliation. To that end, I draw on Stanley Cavell's conception of conversation in his genre of remarriage comedy in order to argue for a definition of conversation that means both talk and more than talk: an intellectual, emotional, and sexual compatibility that *is* the couple's relationship itself.

All three chapters test the idea that a marriage or a romantic relationship may be understood as a conversation. The first chapter examines what I call the “visual conversation” of F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) in order to draw and test the boundaries of remarriage comedy. Chapter Two looks at Richard Linklater's *Before Sunset* (2004), which depicts almost nothing but conversation in real time, in order to consider how the camera captures “continuous conversation.” Finally, Chapter Three reads closely the fragmented romantic narrative in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), in which the conversations between its central couple are complicated by Allen's status as both director and comedian/star and his direct address to the audience.

Overall, the thesis offers a three-fold conception of conversation: the talk (and not-talk) that represents a couple's relationship within a narrative film; the discussions of films that occur in film criticism; and the ways in which films may be in conversation with each other, through reference or homage.

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The Word Viewed: Conversation on Film

By Shannon Rose Tarbell

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Conversation is an art in which a man has all mankind for his competitors, for it is that which all are practising every day while they live.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Marriage is one long conversation, chequered by disputes.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Introduction:
Forms of Conversation/Conversational Form

We will begin with a recurring line about marriage in *Two for the Road* (Stanley Donen, 1967). Shortly after they've met, Joanna (Audrey Hepburn) and Mark (Albert Finney) see an older couple sitting in dull silence, and Mark asks, somewhat contemptuously, "What kind of people just sit like that without a word to say to each other?" Joanna replies, "Married people." The exchange plays on the ambiguity of the silence—is it a comfortable, content silence built on familiarity, or is it an unhappy, hostile, or bored state? What does talk have to do with marriage?

This is a question that *Two for the Road* itself explores, as the narrative interweaves scenes from four different time periods—all comprising road trips across Europe—in Joanna and Mark's relationship. In what constitutes the present day, the couple spends most of the time arguing, considering the prospect of divorce, while also reminiscing about these earlier car trips. Therefore, the film constitutes the couple's conversation about their marriage. That is, it portrays conversations from various points in the couple's courtship and marriage within a narrative structure that is itself a conversation about this past together—a conversation that eventually leads to reconciliation rather than divorce.

These themes—marriage, divorce, talking and silence, memory, conversation as both a topic and structure for narrative film—are all integral to this study of conversation in narrative cinema. My approach is illustrative, rather than exhaustive. Through close readings of exemplary films, I offer not a history of the conversation on film, but an examination of some of its permutations and possibilities, specifically within American narrative films about ruptures within heterosexual romantic relationships. In this

introduction, I will outline some of the ways of understanding cinematic conversation, before summarizing the chapters to follow.

When defined as an exchange of dialogue between two or more people, the conversation seems to appear in virtually every narrative film, sometimes taking prominence in the narrative (e.g., *The Conversation* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1974], *My Dinner with André* [Louis Malle, 1981]), but more often than not an unremarkable necessity of plot and character development. Scenes of talk are rarely memorable the way that more “cinematic” spectacles of sex and violence are.¹

I use the term “conversation” to refer to scenes of sustained dialogue between two people. But I also use the term, in acknowledgment of Stanley Cavell’s use of the word, to mean more than just talk. Cavell’s work, especially *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, is a major theoretical underpinning of this thesis. I use this book as a touchstone in my readings not to argue that the films I focus on *are* remarriage comedies, but rather to broaden the application of what might seem a limited or idiosyncratic genre. *Pursuits of Happiness* has a lot to offer, not just in terms of understanding Hollywood romantic comedies, but also in terms of reading films and performing criticism. For Cavell, conversation is not just an important component of reconciliation for the couples in the films he studies, but also a way of describing the kind of criticism he hopes to do—criticism which he considers “a natural extension of conversation.”² The broader aim of his project is to open a dialogue about films that we

¹ Though viewers often take great pleasure in repeating famous lines of dialogue, the

² Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 7. This is also evident in his titling the introductory chapter of *Pursuits of Happiness* “Words for a Conversation.”

share as common cultural artifacts. His genre will give us a language with which to discuss the films I focus on in this thesis.

The central remarriage comedies discussed in *Pursuits of Happiness* are major achievements of Hollywood romantic comedy: *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), *His Girl Friday* (Hawks, 1940), *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941), and *Adam's Rib* (Cukor, 1948). These films, in various ways, depict a pair, neither very old nor very young, whose marriage (or romance) is threatened by some outside force (usually not adultery, although there are sometimes hints toward the possibility) and who have to find their way back together again. Part of this necessitates the acknowledgment of a shared past together, which is a stage almost like childhood.³ Another part of it requires a kind of death and rebirth of one of the couple. Finally, the reconciliation usually comes about by moving the story to an almost mythical or mystical realm of changed perspective and possibility; in Shakespearean romance, from which remarriage comedy partially derives, this is called the “green world,” but more often than not it is called “Connecticut” in the remarriage comedies.

The films, among the best talkies of the period, are also marked by witty conversation between the couple. Cavell places special emphasis on the pair's

³ This is resonant with Frank Krutnik's claim that “the ‘screwball’ romantic comedies of the 1930s . . . validat[e] love as a kind of totalizing intimacy which receives its most valuable expression in the form of *play*.” See Frank Krutnik, “The Faint Aroma of Performing Seals: The ‘Nervous’ Romance and the Comedy of the Sexes,” in *The Velvet Light Trap* 26 (Fall 1990), 57. It is important to note that while most of Cavell's remarriage comedies are also typically identified elsewhere as “screwball” comedies (*The Philadelphia Story* being the major exception), the categories do not perfectly overlap.

conversation, their talking together, which is their “essential way of being together, a pair for whom . . . being together is more important than whatever it is they do together.”⁴

Cavell also borrows, from Milton, the phrase “meet and happy conversation” to describe the ideal mode of this conversation. Cavell is also interested in the coincidence of Milton’s composing this tract at about the same time as “Descartes was meditating his doubt and its overcoming.”⁵ The connection for Cavell between romance and philosophical skepticism posits the “meet and happy conversation” in marriage as a way of overcoming skeptical doubt. Through this talk, the couple of remarriage comedy creates a private realm within the public world, “isolated within society, not backed by it.”⁶

However, Cavell’s definition of “conversation” in these comedies goes beyond just talk, consisting of a multi-faceted kind of compatibility. The remarriage comedies

recapture the full weight of the concept of conversation, demonstrating why *our* word conversation means what it does, what talk means. In those films talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life, and I would like to say that in these films the central pair are learning to speak the same language.⁷

For the couples in remarriage comedy, then, their marriage *is* their conversation, a constant give-and-take. This definition is similar to, but rather more complex than, other concepts of the relationships in romantic comedy. For instance, Steve Neale emphasizes a “learning process . . . in which the members of the couple come to know themselves as they come to know one another, and in which, in doing so, they come to develop and

⁴ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 146.

⁵ Cavell, “Two Cheers for Romance,” in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 159.

⁶ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 123.

⁷ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 87–88.

acknowledge compatibility and mutual love.”⁸ It is not that Neale’s way of describing the couple’s dynamic is incompatible with Cavell’s, but rather that framing this “compatibility and mutual love” specifically as a *conversation* opens up the broader connotations of the word.

Part of the reason that conversation proves a useful term for Milton, and for Cavell, is that it carries so many connotations, one of which is the sexual. Indeed, one of the common interpretations of the talk of remarriage comedies is that it signifies the couple’s sexual compatibility. Cavell’s definition, however, sees the talk of the remarriage comedies something more than just a way of signifying sexual compatibility during the era of the Production Code, when sex, explicit or otherwise, couldn’t be shown at all. The relationship between conversation and sex is important to consider, though, not only because of the sexual connotation that the word conversation carries, but also because the kiss and the sex scene are interesting narrative counterpoints to scenes of conversation on film.

Talk actually forms an important part of the trajectory of the increasing explicitness in the depiction of sex on film that Linda Williams traces in her book *Screening Sex*. After the demise of the Production Code in the 1950s and 1960s, the film industry began to grow out of what Williams calls its “long adolescence” by incorporating sex acts beyond the kiss. The visual trajectory was matched by an aural one:

Music . . . is often the most prevalent accompaniment to sex acts in Hollywood films, as well as a way to cover over what might appear to

⁸ Steve Neale, “The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today,” in *Screen* 33:3 (Autumn 1992), 293.

some as the tasteless grunts and moans of sex. But before movies got to that point, they used the aural register of talk, talk, and more talk.⁹

In films such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Mike Nichols, 1966) and *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (Paul Mazursky, 1969), talking *about* sex was a way of making the transition between alluding to or eliding the sex act and showing it.

However, some critics saw this ability to make sex explicit through talk as destructive of romantic comedy. Writing in 1978, Brian Henderson finds the film *Semi-Tough* (Michael Ritchie, 1977) indicative of a larger trend in the genre, “when the concept of romantic comedy itself seems vaguely problematic, extinct, or transformed.”¹⁰ According to Henderson, these changes are due partly to the lack of censorship, and he focuses particularly on one line of dialogue from the film:

The first reason that *Semi-Tough* says “How come we never fucked?” is that it can say it. In the thirties such language and such linguistic reference were prohibited—you could not say “Why haven’t we ever made love?” either. That you can say something does not mean that you must do so. But has any realm of art invented for itself a system of censorship not imposed upon it? On this ground alone, it may be that romantic comedy is not an art that can flourish in this period.¹¹

Socio-political factors contribute to the impossibility of romantic comedy as well, some of which Henderson points to (the rise of the divorce rate and single parenting, the impact of the feminist and gay rights movements, and women’s increasing presence in the workplace). Henderson, somewhat oddly, stops short of positing a clear connection between these changes and the tendency of the couples in films like *Semi-Tough* to focus

⁹ Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2008), 75.

¹⁰ Brian Henderson, “Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?” in *Film Quarterly* 31:4 (Summer 1978), 14. Krutnik and Neale, in their articles written in the early 1990s, both note the irony that, soon after Henderson’s article appeared, a revival of the romantic comedy occurred during the mid-1980s.

¹¹ Henderson, 22.

on a narcissistic self-fulfillment, rather than the “willing[ness] to meet on a common ground and to engage all their faculties and capacities in sexual dialectic,” like the couples in classic romantic comedy.¹² Though it is not the focus of this thesis, it is important to consider how socio-political factors like the ones mentioned above affect the conversations of couples on film—both in terms of what they (can) say to one another, and in terms of their ability to meet as equals on the sexual playing field.

Of course, conversation is generally a much more prevalent aspect of romance narratives than sex, even in the post-Code, “anything goes” environment. Virtually all narrative films contain talk, but not all contain depictions of sex. Furthermore, the conversation as narrative event is unlike the kiss or the sex act because there is no continuum of explicitness on which to place them. Unlike sex acts (or acts of violence), which are almost always simulated for narrative films, there is no such thing as a simulated conversation; i.e., a filmed scene of two people talking is always *authentically*, or indexically, a scene of two people talking.

There are, however, different ways of filming conversations, which might make them more or less “explicit.” Consider the film *Vivre sa vie* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962), which, as V.F. Perkins points out, offers “a string of suggestions as to how one *might* film a conversation.”¹³ Nearly all of the film’s twelve tableaux contain scenes of two people talking, all filmed and edited in various ways. In the opening scene, a conversation between Nana (Anna Karina) and her estranged husband Paul (André Labarthe) is filmed with their backs facing the camera, while later scenes give us more access to the actors,

¹² Henderson, 19. What Henderson terms the “common ground” of the “sexual dialectic” is something like what Cavell (via Milton) means by “meet and happy conversation.”

¹³ Quoted in David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 282.

using long takes and panning or tracking shots, or conventional shot/reverse shot structure, etc.

In the readings that follow, I will pay close attention to the editing and form of the conversations. Because talk might seem in some sense uncinematic—i.e., not particularly visually compelling—it is important to consider what makes it a fit subject for film. Cavell leads us in this direction, but often stops short of formal analysis, focusing more on plot. Therefore, my aim in Chapter One, along with more thorough summarizing of remarriage comedy, is to show how his definition of conversation can be seen in the form of *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (F.W. Murnau, 1927), and not just its plot.

The visual aspects of the conversation in *Sunrise* are more obvious because it is silent. But in the sound films that I'll go on to read, the form is just as important. Whereas *Sunrise* contains no audible talk, *Before Sunset* (Richard Linklater, 2004), the subject of Chapter Two, is almost nothing but talk; the film is essentially one uninterrupted 80-minute conversation between a couple who, like the couple in *Sunrise* and the remarriage comedies, have reconciliatory work to do. *Before Sunset* is a sequel to Linklater's earlier film *Before Sunrise* (1995), which also captures the couple's conversation, yet is stylistically very different.

In Chapter Three, I turn to a film with a more complicated narrative structure. Like *Two for the Road*, *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977) tells the story of a couple's relationship through disordered reminiscences, many of which feature long sequences of talk. But, unlike *Two for the Road*, *Annie Hall* is told solely from the man's perspective. As both the film's author and main character, Allen's dominance over the narrative complicates the portrayal of mutual meet and happy conversation between the couple, as

does his background in comedy. Of all the films I deal with, *Annie Hall* is the most comedic.¹⁴ This may align it more with Cavell's remarriage comedies, except that in *Annie Hall*, the couple separates at the end, in a failed attempt at remarriage.

It is necessary to note here that I will use the term "remarriage" not (always) literally to signify marriage, but rather something more like (re)coupling. Cavell uses the term remarriage to refer to married couples who literally return to one another after a divorce or separation (*The Awful Truth*, *Adam's Rib*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Philadelphia Story*) as well as to couples whose *initial* coupling, at the end of the film, somehow constitutes a refinding of one another, or an acknowledgment of a shared past, however recent (*It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*). While *Sunrise* functions in the former fashion, *Before Sunset* does so in the latter; *Annie Hall* ends with an ultimate failure of reconciliation.

Though grouping these films together may seem idiosyncratic or random, they do share certain features, other than their broad focus on reconciliation, which also connects them to the classical-era remarriage comedies. The latter are among the most famous and beloved films of American cinema, and, though made in very different filmmaking traditions and historical contexts, *Sunrise* and *Annie Hall* both have similar status as major American films that anyone who cares about film cannot fail to know. *Before Sunset* has a slightly lower profile, though its screenplay was nominated for an Academy

¹⁴ It is also one of the quintessential "nervous" romances—a term Frank Krutnik takes straight from *Annie Hall*'s tagline—which means that the film "pulls between a nostalgic yearning for the lost possibility of romance and a more cynical awareness of the difficulty of maintaining an overriding faith in The Couple in the face of the divisions which beset modern life." See Krutnik, 62.

Award, and its characters have relatively strong cultural presence, appearing in three films total.

Furthermore, unlike Cavell's remarriage comedies, which focus on the woman's education,¹⁵ the films I read share a particular focus on a male protagonist and his need to change or undergo some kind of trial. In *Sunrise*, it is the Man's affair that threatens the marriage, and it is his reaction in close-up on which we focus in the pivotal remarriage scene in the church. In *Before Sunset*, the dynamic is rather more equal, but Jesse's status as an outsider in Paris is harped upon, which puts Celine slightly more in control. The climax of the film revolves around his request to hear her sing. As star, narrator, and director of *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen is dominant in the film, though by the end the time with Annie seems to have changed him.

The ordering of the chapters deliberately avoids placing the films on a chronological timeline, since I wish to reinforce that I am not offering a history of the conversation on film, but rather an exploration of some of its iterations. Secondly, I want to suggest the ways that films can be in conversation with each other across different points in history.¹⁶ In Chapter Two, we will see that *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* are

¹⁵ *Bringing Up Baby* and *The Lady Eve* are exceptions to this.

¹⁶ There is something important to consider about historical context, though: the fact that "marriage" or the prospect of it is compulsory during the Production Code, while later it is not. Indeed, of the films I focus on, *Sunrise* is the only one that features a threat to a *married* couple. Of course, it is also important to remember that, in several of the central remarriage comedies (*It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Lady Eve*), the couple is not actually married for most of the film, nor have they ever been. So though the definition of conversation coming from Milton is specifically about marriage, it can extend to—and I use the term to refer to—romances outside of marriage, i.e., romantic relationships in general. Furthermore, as Cavell makes clear in later writing, marriage often serves as an allegory for friendship or human relationships in general: see *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Harvard University Press, 2004), 15.

in conversation with one another, since the emotional stakes of the sequel depend upon familiarity with the earlier film. Nine years separates the films' release dates as well as the events of the story world. Furthermore, as we will see, there are structural similarities between the two films, despite their very different narrative styles, which place them in conversation.¹⁷

In the introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell considers the status of source material for his central films, which in his reading range from the films' inheritances of themes from Shakespeare—the “green world,” for instance—and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, to the Broadway plays on which some of them were actually based (*His Girl Friday*, *The Philadelphia Story*). But *His Girl Friday* also makes reference to one of the other remarriage comedies, *The Awful Truth*, through its use of Cary Grant and Ralph Bellamy in nearly identical roles and its use of a “rooster story.”¹⁸

In *The Awful Truth*, this “rooster story” is Dan Leeson's (Ralph Bellamy) tale from his home on the range in Oklahoma, about “a little red rooster and a little brown hen, and they fight all the time, too, but every once in awhile they make up again and they're right friendly.” Dan relates this piece of folk wisdom after witnessing Lucy's (Irene Dunne) and Jerry's (Cary Grant) sparring (“Are you sure you don't like that guy?” Dan asks Lucy), thus getting at another important aspect of conversation. Though it is

¹⁷ Two films being in conversation might also be thought of along the same lines as the reference or the homage. Interestingly, the endings of both *Annie Hall* and *Before Sunrise* (and the opening of *Before Sunset*, which mirrors the end of *Before Sunrise*) recall the end of *L'eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962), as we see the spaces of the film now devoid of the lovers' presence. On the connection between *Annie Hall* and *L'eclisse*, see Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, (Oxford/Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 159.

¹⁸ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 25–26.

frequently defined in Milton's terms as "meet and happy," it also consists of the great verbal sparring of the 1930s talkies.

More than the idea that the conversation must always be happy, then, is that the couple's conversations have to be unique to the two of *them*; they fulfill a role for each other that no one else can:

They simply *appreciate* one another more than either of them appreciates anyone else, and they would rather be appreciated by one another more than by anyone else. They just are at home with one another, whether or not they can live together under the same roof, that is, find a roof they can live together under.¹⁹

In discussions of romantic comedy, this is commonly known as the couple's being "made for each other." All of the films I focus on here will have ways of showing how the couples are particularly suited to one another, through scenes that compare and contrast their rapport with others.

While romantic narratives conventionally move toward the creation of a couple—whether through marriage or remarriage—my focus emphasizes conversation as more a means than an end. It *is* a couple's marriage or relationship. Both conversations—meaning talk—and romantic relationships are improvisatory. So they may contain awkward pauses, stops and starts, ambiguities . . . And both build to something that is not quite a conclusion. What makes these fit subjects for film, especially films that are not themselves improvised?

In *The World Viewed*, Cavell argues for the inherent improvisatory nature of what appears on film. Even when the actors' lines are written and their movements blocked,

¹⁹ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 167.

film captures the subtleties of movement and cadence that “could all go one way or another”:

The ontological fact that actions move within a dark and shifting circle of intention and consequence, that their limits are our own, that the individual significance of an act (like that of a word) arises in its being this one rather than every other that might have been said or done here and now, that their fate (like the fate of words) is to be taken out of our control—this is the natural vision of film.²⁰

We will have to consider what makes words and images work together, what significance they carry, and how this relates to *our* conversation, as critics, about film. There is an important connection between the two:

I am regarding the necessity of this risk in conversing about film as revelatory of the conversation within film—at any rate, within the kind of film under attention here—that words that on one viewing pass, and are meant to pass, without notice, as unnoticeably trivial, on another resonate and declare their implication in a network of significance. These film words thus declare their mimesis of ordinary words, words in daily conversation.²¹

The “network of significance” comprising “these film words” is partly what I will be working to investigate throughout this thesis. This is one reason that, in the chapters that follow, all quotations of the film dialogue are my own transcriptions, even when published versions of the screenplay exist. Film dialogue frequently departs from what appears in the published screenplay, and I wish to acknowledge what is actually heard—“ums,” “ahs,” and other “fillers,” even when difficult to capture—in conjunction with what is seen—camera framing, cutting, and movement. Furthermore, the kind of film viewing that this detailed transcribing requires—pausing, rewinding, rewatching—

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 153.

²¹ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 11–12.

depends upon a kind of attentive interactivity that is not too far from certain ways of understanding conversation.

Chapter One:
Visual Conversation in *Sunrise*

F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* opens with these words on a title card:

This song
of the Man and his Wife
is of no place
and every place;
you might hear it anywhere
at any time.

This chapter records considerations stemming from my experience of hearing the song of *Sunrise* in Stanley Cavell's definition of remarriage comedy, and specifically in his definition of conversation. This might seem an odd or incongruous pairing on a number of counts; *Sunrise* is not strictly a comedy, nor is it a talkie like the exemplars of Cavell's genre. Though Cavell and others have found remarriage elements in films outside the confines of 1930s and 1940s comedy, these approaches are often cursory or lacking; in particular, they seem to ignore formal elements of the films. Reading *Sunrise* through remarriage comedy, however, will illuminate the genre in terms of film form as well as plot. Furthermore, rather than arguing that *Sunrise* be admitted to the genre, exactly, I wish to stress that its particular resonances with the genre open new ways to consider the depiction of conversation, especially in silent film.

Sunrise is the story of a Man (George O'Brien) and Wife (Janet Gaynor), whose marriage is threatened by a Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston). The Woman wants the Man to come back with her to the city, and urges him to get his Wife out of the picture by pushing her out of a rowboat. The Man prepares to carry out this plan, but at the last moment is unable to do it. Just after this aborted attempt to drown her, the Wife

flees to the city with the husband in pursuit, and it is there, as spectators at a wedding, that they finally reconcile. After a day of fun in the city, in which they have their photograph taken, play games, and dance together, they return by boat to the country, where a sudden storm (almost) carries out the Woman from the City's plan; the Man returns to shore, thinking his Wife has drowned. However, in the end she is saved, and the Woman from the City returns to where she belongs. The last shot is a kiss between the Man and Wife that dissolves into what Lucy Fischer has termed a stylized "Art Deco" sunrise.²²

Already some elements of remarriage comedy have become clear: the threat to the marriage; the movement between city and country; the return to childhood in the form of playing games and having fun together; and the wife's death and rebirth, creating her anew. (Although, as we will see, the Man also undergoes something like rebirth in the course of the reconciliation.) Even the dissolve of the kiss into the image of the sunrise recalls the usual remarriage ending, which characteristically abstracts or conceals the final embrace.

On the other hand, there are several ways in which *Sunrise* departs from the remarriage genre, other than its lack of speech. First, there is the fact that *Sunrise* is not strictly a comedy (though most, if not all, of the scenes in the city are comic); and, though produced in Hollywood, it is not decidedly American.²³ *Sunrise* also deals with marital estrangement through the threat of murder rather than through divorce, which makes the

²² Lucy Fischer, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 53.

²³ Graham Petrie, Lotte H. Eisner, and William K. Everson (all quoted in Fischer, 12–14) note the ambiguity of nationality in *Sunrise*; Eisner stresses the Germanic aspects, though the film itself does not specify one way or the other—as the opening titles tell us, it is “no place and every place.”

threat to the marriage more serious, even to the point that the melodrama might threaten to take over. Overall, adultery plays a more immediate role than it does in the remarriage comedies, and there is the complicating presence of a child, whereas the woman of the remarriage comedies is never shown to be a mother.

However, just as no one feature makes a film a remarriage comedy, even, as Cavell says, the feature of remarriage itself, no one feature can exclude it. So it's worth noting here the blackness of the comedy in *His Girl Friday*, in which the reconciliation takes place against the background of the impending and corrupt execution; and the attempted murder that opens *Adam's Rib*, which Adam (Spencer Tracy) and Amanda (Katharine Hepburn) take to court and which Adam later acts out toward Amanda with a licorice gun. There is the adulterous edge to *It Happened One Night*, in which Ellie (Claudette Colbert) is technically married to someone else while she spends the night with Peter (Clark Gable). *The Awful Truth* also gets under way with its pair each caught in compromising, possibly adulterous, circumstances. And in *The Awful Truth* a dog essentially fulfills the role of a child, over whom the couple argues for custody. Finally, Cavell has found remarriage strains in European films, notably Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) and Eric Rohmer's *Conte d'hiver* (1992),²⁴ so while the genre

²⁴ *Conte d'hiver*, like *Sunrise*, reverses the conversational aspect so seemingly important to remarriage comedy. Though Cavell seems to stress the importance of conversation as actual talk, *Conte d'hiver* is one late example where this is not the case. The woman, Félicie (Charlotte Véry), knows two men in the city where she lives who wish to marry her, and whose company and conversation she enjoys, but she is haunted by memories of a seaside vacation with a third man, Charles (Frédéric van den Driessche), lost to her when she mistakenly gave him an incorrect address. Though she has no way of getting in touch with him, she considers him the love of her life. What we see of Félicie's relationships with these men, however, is that she mostly talks with the two with whom she is not in love, and doesn't want to marry; the vacation sequence with Charles, on the other hand, is told in a virtually silent montage of their daily activities.

is profoundly American in its philosophy, as one might gather from the title *Pursuits of Happiness*, it is not technically exclusive to American film.

Where “silent” sequences are used in the central remarriage comedies, it is to the opposite effect—as in the prologue to *The Philadelphia Story*, where the divorce between Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn) and C.K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) is summarized in a short scene with no dialogue. He packs the car; she breaks one of his golf clubs over her knee; he pushes her to the ground. Because the film begins this way, we might think of the eventual reconciliation between Tracy and Dexter as taking the form of their acquiring the words with which to talk to each other again. In the central remarriage comedies, silent sequences seem to stand for the opposite of conversation.

Still, the lack of synchronized speech in *Sunrise* is conspicuous, and it leads to the question of whether remarriage comedy is even possible in the silent era. This is taken up explicitly, though briefly, in *Pursuits of Happiness*, as Cavell says that “an earlier film may present itself for consideration (even one from the silent era, if a critic can show that even the fact of sound should not be regarded as essential to the genre).”²⁵

Charles Musser provides an important argument for earlier placement of the genre in his essay “Divorce, DeMille, and the Comedy of Remarriage.” But though he frames his article as a “conversation” with Cavell’s work, picking up on Cavell’s stress on that word, he has nothing to say about the conversation *within* the comedies—that is, he doesn’t consider how the DeMille films might compensate for their lack of speech.

Musser acknowledges that he and Cavell might be “operating somewhat at cross-purposes,” calling his side of the conversation “a historian’s response to a philosopher’s

²⁵ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 27.

engagement with a group of films.”²⁶ Musser not only places the start of the genre earlier than 1934, with a cycle of DeMille comedies—*Old Wives for New* (1918), *Don’t Change Your Husband* (1919), and *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920)—but he also takes issue with Cavell’s whole conception of genre, insisting that the way Cavell limits the genre is “arbitrary, even unnatural.”²⁷

Musser seeks to provide “a more thorough historical investigation” to explain the genre’s appearance.²⁸ However, though he argues for the genre’s origin in the silent era, he rather curiously makes no mention of the *silence* of the DeMille pictures. This might be because he doesn’t see remarriage comedy as an exclusively filmic genre, but rather sees the genre as originating in Hollywood, moving to theater, and then feeding back into Hollywood via adaptations of Broadway plays.²⁹ Musser argues that earlier films should be included in the remarriage genre, but he doesn’t acknowledge how their silence might affect that inclusion. Instead, he is mainly interested in “the genre’s social and cultural underpinnings, particularly the marked shift in how Americans experienced the institution of marriage and the place of divorce.”³⁰

It rather seems like Musser is forming another genre entirely, overlapping with and adjacent to the genre of remarriage comedy, which would more aptly be called divorce comedy. One of his main points is that the DeMille comedies signal a new attitude towards divorce—these films usher in a view of divorce as, not a symptom of

²⁶ Charles Musser, “Divorce, DeMille and the Comedy of Remarriage,” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York/London: Routledge, 1995), 284.

²⁷ Musser, 284.

²⁸ Musser, 284.

²⁹ Musser, 285.

³⁰ Musser, 287.

“social degeneration,” but rather a means to personal fulfillment (a pursuit of happiness, we might say?).³¹ This is not all that far from Cavell’s view of remarriage, which he also sometimes calls the “comedy of equality,” but what is different is Musser’s historical, rather than philosophical, approach. For instance, Musser says that when the couple of *Don’t Change Your Husband* comes back together,

the final scene tells us that both husband and wife have learned much. . . . They are wiser, an ideal example of companionate marriage. As Cavell might say, they have learned to carry on a conversation about what it means to be married, specifically married to each other.³²

Musser acknowledges the importance of conversation here, but he provides no details about *how* the final scene tells us that the couple have learned and changed. More importantly, he doesn’t tell us how the conversation is signaled between the couple. If we consider *Sunrise* an early precursor to Cavellian remarriage comedy, its status as a “silent film” needs to be investigated, since talk seems so crucial to the remarriage genre. Given that Cavell constantly returns to the idea of conversation in the comedies, this factor cannot be ignored.

Sunrise is not about divorce, but it contains elements of Cavellian remarriage comedy more deeply resonant than just the threat of divorce. Indeed, as Cavell makes clear in his readings of *It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby*, divorce, much less the couple’s being married to begin with, is not a requirement for the genre. Musser’s argument unfortunately somewhat misses the heart of the remarriage comedy—it is much more than just a couple “learning something,” which is the plot point he continually emphasizes. The stress Cavell places on (the woman’s) education, and the couple’s

³¹ Musser, 290.

³² Musser, 296.

change in perspective, is not to be dismissed, but there are several plot points that *Sunrise* contains—a past together, called something like childhood, death and rebirth, and a kind of privacy in the midst of public life—that don't enter into Musser's discussion of the DeMille comedies. Though he argues for silent precursors of remarriage comedy, Musser's perspective is actually profoundly at odds with Cavell's; this is revealed by his claim that "Genres are not constructed based on a film's attitude towards its subject."³³ It seems odd, then, for Musser to attempt to argue within the genre if he disagrees with the way it has been defined.

An attempt to place the remarriage genre earlier, within the silent era, must take the fact of silence into account. It must also acknowledge the way that Cavell defines genre. This is complicated and in fact, Cavell warns against searching for the individual "features" of the genre. Instead, his approach is to think of genre as if it is an artistic medium:

The idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of those conditions.³⁴

³³ Musser, 309.

³⁴ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 28. In a later essay (on television, in fact), Cavell clarifies his concept of genre somewhat (or at least states it more simply). For Cavell, there are two main ways of thinking about genre: genre-as-cycle—which is how Westerns, gangster films, horror movies, screwball comedies, etc., are classified—and genre-as-medium. The genre of remarriage comedy is the latter type. See Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 64.

The genre remains open to new members as long as there is something new to contribute. If a proposed addition to the genre lacks a feature, it must compensate for it in some way; but that compensation should illuminate the genre as a whole.³⁵

Since *Sunrise* lacks speech, how does it compensate for it? Before going further, we should first account for what I have been referring to as *Sunrise*'s "silence," since it technically is not silent at all. It has music (at times the music even mimics the sound of a voice, as when the Man calls for the Wife and we hear a French horn³⁶); it has sound effects (such as the squeals of the pig, the applause of the audience, the claps of thunder); it even has the sound of human voices (notably, when the traffic jam interrupts the post-wedding kiss). But these human voices do not include the voices of the main characters, and they are somehow the opposite of conversation—a cacophony of voices rather than an exchange.

It is tempting to look to the intertitles to provide some semblance of dialogue or conversation. In fact, the use of intertitles is limited in *Sunrise* (perhaps part of its status as a transition film between silent and sound cinema). Though speech is portrayed through titles in the film—often quite strikingly, as when the letters of the Woman from the City's speech waver and drip down the screen when she suggests drowning the Wife—it is particularly limited between the Man and Wife. When they speak through intertitles, there is no exchange between them—no conversation. The film uses intertitles sporadically, to convey important lines of dialogue, but never to register a sustained exchange between the Man and Wife. At times this works to withhold narrative information, but at other times it simply registers a lack of communication.

³⁵ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 28–29.

³⁶ Cf. Fischer, 31

For instance, early in the film the Man invites the Wife on “a trip across the water” (little does she realize at this point the ulterior motives of this invitation). An establishing shot places us inside the house; we see the Wife outside, framed through the doorway, as the Man, inside, approaches from the right. As she comes inside to meet him, she pauses in the doorway and the Man reaches out a hand towards her. There are no intertitles to tell us what the Man is saying; a close-up on the Wife’s face, however, reveals a gradual dawning of excitement and happiness. Returning to the establishing set-up, the two are now standing closer together.

The film cuts to a shot of the maid sitting on a bed, holding the couple’s baby. The Wife bursts happily into the room, picking up the baby and twirling around. She then speaks, through an intertitle, to the maid about what the Man has said. When speaking *to* the Man, in other scenes, we don’t see the Wife’s words through intertitles, but rather through her expressive acting, as when she tells the Man in a later scene that he needs a shave before they can get their picture taken. When the Man speaks to her through titles (for instance, pleading “Don’t be afraid of me!” after the murder attempt), she doesn’t answer. So though intertitles are a way for speech to be portrayed in silent film, in *Sunrise* we never get a sense that the couple is actually conversing through them—even *after* they’re reconciled.

We are going to have to look elsewhere for the couple’s conversation. Early in *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell defines conversation this way:

The conversation of what I call the genre of remarriage is, judging from the films I take to define it, of a sort that leads to acknowledgment; to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis of death and revival, the achievement of a new

perspective on existence; a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce.³⁷

Just how uncannily this fits *Sunrise* will become clear through a close look a specific scene—the emotional and technical crux of the film. This is the scene of reconciliation between the Man and the Wife in the city.

How the couple gets to the city deserves some explanation. The couple has gone out on the “trip across the water.” On the point of pushing her overboard, the Man suddenly stops and covers his face with crossed arms. As he rows to shore, the Wife covers her eyes with her hands. She runs out of the boat into the woods, and hops aboard a streetcar, just then arriving with the kind of uncanny timing only the movies can provide. The Man has been in pursuit; but she refuses to meet his gaze as he says, through intertitles, “Don’t be afraid of me.” The streetcar arrives in the city. The Wife jumps off and runs through traffic, almost getting hit, but the Man guides her out of harm’s way. He leads her through the busy streets, taking her to a café where he brings her a plate of food; she almost accepts it but breaks down crying, burying her face in her arm. On the street again, the Man buys her flowers and continues to try to comfort her. Looking up, they both suddenly catch sight of a wedding party entering a church.

The Man and Wife follow them, almost as if they are in a trance, and witness the wedding from the pews. The Man sits forward anxiously, to hear the words of the ceremony, while the Wife sits back dreamily. The Man is visibly moved by these words, which are given in intertitles. Close-ups on his face register tears in his eyes, and images of the groom at the altar dissolve into images of the Man, emphatically saying the vows.

³⁷ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 19.

The Wife, herself moved by the Man's transformation (he now appears chastened, exhausted, as if reborn) accepts him back with a kiss as the church bells ring.

The Man and his Wife walk out of the church, into the midst of a crowd. Some in the crowd appear to be waiting to meet the bride and groom who are "really" being married; others pass by the scene as if nothing special were happening—as if to confirm that marriage is just another daily activity taking place in just another city building. As the couple walks away from the church, from us, cars pass in front of and behind them in a complexly formatted shot. The background then fades into a pastoral scene, a scene that looks a lot like the earlier flashback of their happy past together. As they kiss, the scene dissolves back to the city, and they find themselves in the midst of a traffic jam, where the cars are as comically insistent as they were magically distant, yet close, before. Distilled in this composite shot is the creation of a private conversation, in the midst of public life, between its pair. Through the image of the city dissolving into the country (and back again), it shows a new, shared perspective of past and future that only they can see.

This scene very obviously draws out the remarriage theme—in fact, this is more literally a "remarriage" scene than most of the central remarriage comedies contain. Beyond that, however, the scene is key in establishing the couple's conversation as defined by Cavell. Though we don't hear any actual words pass between the Man and the Wife, we are nevertheless left with the sense of "acknowledgment," through their finally meeting one another's gaze; of the "reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness," as the Wife accepts the Man back, which indeed is shown "to require the metamorphosis of death and revival," as the Man looks reborn; of "the achievement of a new perspective on

existence,” furthermore “a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce,” which occurs as the city dissolves into the country.

This scene of the city dissolving into the country³⁸ allows us to see how *Sunrise* can, despite its lack of speech, adhere so closely to the definition of conversation quoted above. This scene is key in understanding how *Sunrise* creates a private, shared language between its pair without dialogue. It reveals the public/private element of remarriage comedy that Cavell finds variously embodied in the realms of city/country, day/night, newspaper/film, reality/dreaming, and perception/imagination. Part of the “lesson learned” by these couples (to appropriate a phrase of Musser’s) is balancing the demands of public and private worlds. Marriage granted publicly is not enough to sustain it—private acknowledgment is required as well. In *Sunrise*, this happens through the Man and the Wife meeting one another’s gaze, and through the montage of city and country.

Adam’s Rib is perhaps the most explicit of the remarriage comedies in working out the demands of public and private life, since its narrative neatly alternates between work and home, day and evening, and the conflict for Adam is Amanda’s challenging

³⁸ A similar device is used in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958): after Judy’s transformation, she and Scottie kiss, and her hotel room dissolves into an image of the stable at San Juan Bautista, where Scottie had last kissed Madeleine—a change in scenery that only Scottie seems to notice. So whereas *Sunrise* creates with this change of background and transformative kiss a shared privacy, a new beginning colored by the past, a remarriage, in *Vertigo* we see a private (what Cavell might call “death-dealing”) privacy, where the past is traumatic. This confirms a leading idea of his from *The World Viewed*: “nothing is a ‘possibility of a medium’ unless its use gives it significance. And ‘the’ significance of a possibility is as worth looking for as ‘the’ meaning of a word.” See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 133.

him in public.³⁹ But all of the couples in remarriage comedies (re)define marriage between themselves, apart from society, which can no longer ratify it for them:

So the principal pair in this structure will normally draw the conclusion on their own, isolated within society, not backed by it. The comedy of equality is a comedy of privacy, evoking equal laughter at the fact that they are, and are not, alone.⁴⁰

The public/private boundary is complicated in *Sunrise*, because it is inverted relative to Cavell's remarriage comedies. The closest thing in *Sunrise* to the public discourse of society, like the ubiquitous newspapers of remarriage comedy, are the women in the country who gossip about the Man and the Wife. If the country is the realm of public discourse for the couple, then it is the city that is something like a dream world. Whereas in remarriage comedy the action moves from the city to the country in order to resolve itself, in *Sunrise* this journey moves in the opposite direction.

But already this makes the country and the city seem more separate in *Sunrise* than they really are. In fact the film is *about* the blurriness between the two, as Fischer has pointed out: "*Sunrise* is a text marked by fluid boundaries—junctions that trace the subtle connection between entities rather than their clear demarcation. It is this complex mode of 'border crossing' . . . that makes the film so poignant, resonant, fascinating, and modern."⁴¹ This "border crossing" is seen not only in the film's montage effects, dissolving from the city to the country and back again, but also in the fact that the climactic storm occurs in both the city and the country. The country is set up from the

³⁹ *Adam's Rib* has further significance for our discussion of *Sunrise* because the country house (in Connecticut, of course) is introduced through a *silent* home movie, thus "claiming the continuity of Hollywood sound comedy . . . with the fact and the tradition of silent film, especially melodrama." See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 207.

⁴⁰ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 123.

⁴¹ Fischer, 8.

beginning as a common vacation destination for city dwellers, thus avoiding the mysteriousness associated with the “green world” of the remarriage comedies (the forest full of leopards in *Bringing Up Baby*, the Lady Eve’s difficulty in finding her way to “Conneckticut,” etc.). It is not merely the “city of confusion and divorce.” The city is also a place where the opportunity for transformative vision is possible—and yet, where it is woven into the fabric of everyday errands.

There is also the distinguishing factor that both the threat to the marriage—namely, the Woman from the City—and the scene of the marriage’s reconciliation come from the city. The Man and the Wife therefore have to create the image of both the city and the country anew, in a private vision of their remarriage. This is the meaning of the dissolve of background during the kiss. They make a shared, private pastoral scene within the city. It resembles the scene of their “childlike” past together, which is called forth as the women in the country gossip about them. In fact, the country that we see in the beginning of the film, when the Man meets with the Woman from the City, has a dark, “citized” aspect,⁴² demonstrated by the scenes of the city projected on the sky, and the canted angles and shadows of the *mise-en-scène*.

The Man and Wife’s visit to the city recuperates the brighter tableau of their past and expels the darkness associated with the Woman from the City, and it does this by presenting two scenes of the city and the country dissolving into one another. Early in the film, when meeting for a tryst in the country, the Woman from the City urges the Man to come back with her to the city, and the sky opens up on a moving vision of brightly lit

⁴² Cf. Fischer on the “sense of menace” in the country, 37.

city streets as they gaze from the ground.⁴³ Then we fully enter this space, as the camera spins through more traffic and lights and we see a montage of churning, champagne-soaked musicians and dancing, and we hear car horns and jazzy music, even as the score from the earlier scene continues to play. As we come back to the Man and the Woman in the country, we see her caught in a paroxysm of wild dancing, standing before the Man who remains on the ground, reaching up to grab her in an embrace.

This scene mirrors the later one with the Wife, making a bookend that, despite some formal similarities with the later scene, also reveals why it fails to constitute conversation between the Man and the Woman from the City. Though in both scenes the couples share a private vision of distant space, only do the Man and Wife enter their shared vision of past and future together, as equals.

But the creation of privacy in remarriage comedy goes beyond space—it also means creating a private *language*. Cavell says, “In those films talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life, and I would like to say that in these films the central pair are learning to speak the same language.”⁴⁴ A prominent example is Peter (Clark Gable) hanging and naming the blanket-screen (“Behold the Walls of Jericho”) as Ellie (Claudette Colbert) looks on in *It Happened One Night*. Peter’s naming the blanket-screen “the Walls of Jericho” creates a meaning that only he and Ellie understand, as evidenced by this later interaction between Peter and his editor:

Peter: I need the thousand bucks and I need it quick. I’m in a jam.
Editor: What’s the thousand bucks for?

⁴³ Mary Ann Doane calls this watching “the film of the city projected against the sky,” quoted in Fischer, 40.

⁴⁴ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 88.

Peter: To tear down the Walls of Jericho.

Editor: *What?*

Peter: Oh, never mind.

That this language can include *actions* undecipherable to anyone else is confirmed by the leopard-hunting and bone-chasing in *Bringing Up Baby*, which is baffling to everyone around the couple. This point is particularly pertinent to *Sunrise*. It is silent—so its actions are its language. The scenes beginning with the cancelled murder attempt, leading up to the “remarriage” in the city, are marked by the couple’s averting each other’s gaze—especially the Wife averting the Man’s gaze. They both put their hands over their faces, and the Wife keeps her head down. When they see the bride and groom entering the church, they look at each other—and their conversation begins again. According to Fischer, in these scenes “their entire relationship is dramatized through a discourse of returned and averted gazes.”⁴⁵ Their conversation continues—privately—as they walk into the city street.

The public words of the wedding ceremony effect a private reconciliation. Walking away from the church, the projected pastoral world presents a shared vision of privacy—their isolation within society. This vision, simultaneously their past and their future, takes on a function similar to the “Walls of Jericho” in *It Happened One Night*, or the leopard-hunting in *Bringing Up Baby*; that is, something that no one outside of the couple can see or understand. Unlike the scene of dissolve during the Man’s tryst with the Woman from the City, this scene is shared mutually, representing both familiar past and new future, where the scene with the Woman from the City is too disproportionately

⁴⁵ Fischer, 30.

associated with her in order to effect conversation. In other words, the Man and Wife's vision in the city constitutes something like their "meet and happy conversation."

Therefore, shall we name *Sunrise* a remarriage comedy, thereby setting the genre's beginning earlier, in 1927? In fact, despite *Sunrise*'s many resonances with remarriage comedy, there are reasons to stop short of revising the confines of the genre, which will be the focus of what follows.

We will begin by considering a scene from *Woman of the Year* (George Stevens, 1942), starring the same couple from *Adam's Rib*, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. Hepburn is Tess Harding, a political columnist, and Tracy is Sam Craig, a sports writer. We have seen them meet and marry and try to adjust to married life. They have struggled to balance Tess's worldliness and ambition with Sam's more down-to-earth sensibilities and desires for a home and children. In short, they haven't yet learned to speak the same language, which means they have failed to acknowledge one another (and one another's desires).⁴⁶ After an escalating series of arguments, Sam ends up leaving their apartment and moving into his own place. Soon after, Tess, without Sam, visits the country home of her aunt, a prominent feminist and Tess's mentor/mother figure, who is about to be married to Tess's widowed father.

Standing at the back of the room, Tess tearfully witnesses the wedding ceremony. Her own wedding to Sam, seen earlier in the film, was a hectic affair squeezed in between other appointments. Now, the somber words of the priest seem to affect Tess for

⁴⁶ The idea that they don't speak the same language is quite literally evoked early in the film, before the marriage, as Sam shows up at Tess's apartment for what he assumes is a date. Instead, he finds himself in the midst of a crowded party somewhat resembling a meeting of the United Nations, unable to communicate with anyone, least of all multilingual Tess.

the first time, as tears run down her cheeks. The similarities between this scene and the wedding scene in *Sunrise* are striking, particularly the use of close-ups on the faces of George O'Brien and Katharine Hepburn. Though, to be sure, the *Woman of the Year* sequence does not do all of the reconciliatory work that the scene from *Sunrise* does, since only one of the couple is present at the wedding. In *Woman of the Year* the wedding's transformative effect upon Tess is carried over into the next sequence, as she returns home to Sam, determined to make herself a better wife. Instead of the cars in *Sunrise* zooming into the couple's shared dream, in *Woman of the Year* the wedding scene is followed by a shot of Tess in her car zooming back to the city and to Sam. There, after a comic (and virtually silent) scene in which Tess battles the (in)conveniences of the modern kitchen, trying to make Sam breakfast, the movie ends with Sam telling her he doesn't want her to be Mrs. Sam Craig anymore than he wants her to be just Tess Harding. This compromise—"Tess Harding Craig"—between her domestic and professional personas shows the melding of public and private that the remarriage genre seems to depend upon. Their full reconciliation requires a *conversation*—Tess's desperate attempts to please Sam are not enough.

Here we have a film from the same period as the central remarriage comedies, starring two of the genre's main leads, ending with a reaffirmation of marriage and a reconciliation that will recast the marriage, in words of *The Awful Truth*, as "the same again, only a little different." Indeed, though *Woman of the Year* seems like it would fit perfectly into Cavell's genre, he mentions it in *Pursuits of Happiness* only briefly, saying

that he has not included it because he does “not find it the equal” of the ones he takes as “definitive.”⁴⁷

We can only speculate as to why Cavell doesn’t find it the equal of the others. It is statements like this that often earn him the criticism of basing his genre too idiosyncratically, around his personal favorites. As Musser asks, “Is the comedy of remarriage really a genre, or Cavell’s quite private canon of beloved films?”⁴⁸ No one has yet argued for *Woman of the Year*’s full membership in the genre, but Stuart Klawans has looked closely at *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), another film that seems to get puzzlingly short shrift in *Pursuits of Happiness*. However, Klawans’s conclusion, in which he comes to an understanding of why Cavell left *The Palm Beach Story* out of the genre, might deter us from such projects. Klawans is one writer who doesn’t resist the limits of the genre, ultimately deciding that the ending of *The Palm Beach Story* presents a cynical view of marriage that is not in keeping with Cavellian remarriage comedy, despite its deployment of the relevant plot elements. Ultimately, for Klawans, *The Palm Beach Story* is a “comedy of disillusionment,” not a comedy of remarriage.⁴⁹ What both *Woman of the Year* and *The Palm Beach Story* show is that not even the literal themes of marital reconciliation, not to mention their stars and historical placement, persuade Cavell to include these films among his central examples. Therefore, with a film like *Sunrise*, which, as I’ve argued, both resonates with and diverges from the genre of remarriage

⁴⁷ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 59.

⁴⁸ Musser, 283.

⁴⁹ Stuart Klawans, “Habitual Remarriage: The Ends of Happiness in *The Palm Beach Story*,” in *Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*, eds. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 162.

comedy in many ways, the best we can do is call it “adjacent” to the genre, or perhaps some kind of precursor.

Musser repeatedly criticizes Cavell’s definition of the genre as “arbitrary.” While the genre may be limited, it is not exactly arbitrary, since Cavell is clear about what the meaning of the genre is. It is, however, highly *specific*. Rather than the beginning of a list to which we may constantly add films, what the genre of remarriage comedy offers are new ways to think about film, which resonates with Cavell’s broader critical and theoretical aims. Indeed, Cavell’s engagement with the genre in his later writing, finding its strains in other films, becomes a way not of arguing for their inclusion in the genre, exactly, but rather as a way of illuminating his thinking about film.

An essay of Cavell’s on *North by Northwest* (1959), written just about simultaneously with the publication of *Pursuits of Happiness*, is pertinent here. In fact, my use of the word “adjacent” to describe *Sunrise* in relation to remarriage comedy is directly informed by Cavell, who in *Pursuits of Happiness* alludes to his work on *North by Northwest* by saying that the essay, then forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*, “locates [*North by Northwest*] at the same time within the development of Hitchcock’s oeuvre and adjacent to the structure of the genre of remarriage.”⁵⁰ In the article itself, Cavell’s work on the genre of remarriage comedy clearly informs his reading of *North by Northwest*, prompting him to say that it “derives from the genre of remarriage,” which means “that its subject is the legitimizing of marriage.”⁵¹ Thus, in this essay, Cavell’s invoking of his own writing on the genre, and his reading of remarriage aspects in Hitchcock’s film,

⁵⁰ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 33.

⁵¹ Stanley Cavell, “*North by Northwest*,” in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 42.

serve to enhance his exploration of the film's subject—and not to argue that *North by Northwest* is part of the genre.

The *North by Northwest* example is analogous to the present reading of *Sunrise* because both are films outside of the strict generic and historical bounds of *Pursuits of Happiness* that nevertheless resonate with the genre of remarriage comedy in many ways. For instance, *North by Northwest* stars Cary Grant, who appears in four of the seven central remarriage comedies, which means he appears in as many of the central films as does the mythical “green world” called Connecticut. Clearly, Grant is important to the genre, as is signaled by the very first page of *Pursuits of Happiness*, which shows a film still of Cary Grant in *The Awful Truth* along with a caption which says, “This man, in words of Emerson's, carries the holiday in his eye; he is fit to stand the gaze of millions.” However, despite this and other strains of remarriage comedy running through *North by Northwest*, some of which, like the ones in *Sunrise*, are displaced or reversed, ultimately its generic and authorial categorizations overpower its strict inclusion in Cavell's genre. The genre of remarriage comedy, then, becomes something more (useful) than just a category to keep adding titles to.

North by Northwest reverses remarriage comedy's insistence on the flesh-and-blood presence of the actress, through her symbolic death and rebirth, by focusing these trials instead on Grant. Cavell will end up saying that *North by Northwest* therefore “investigat[es] the point that the comedies of remarriage are least certain about, namely, what it is about the man that fits him to educate and hence rescue the woman, that is, to be chosen by the woman to educate her and thereby achieve happiness for them both.”⁵²

⁵² Cavell, “*North by Northwest*,” 57.

Sunrise might be seen as making a similar reversal. But, as I noted earlier, I see it more significantly investigating two other aspects of remarriage comedy: the blurry boundaries between the public and private, and the transformative effect of conversation, along with the idea that conversation means more than just talk.

Furthermore, recognizing the manifestation of remarriage elements in a silent film, like *Sunrise*, gives us a new way of seeing the genre. Specifically, it highlights those aspects of the genre that reveal themselves in the form of the film. Thus we are able to understand the genre in terms of form, not just plot. This is something that is too often neglected in discussions of remarriage comedy—in Musser’s, true, but even in *Pursuits of Happiness* itself. In discussing the remarriage genre, it sometimes seems too easy to remain on the level of *content*. After all, the definitive elements of remarriage comedy seem to be mainly concerns of plot and narrative—including the effort to get the central pair back together after the threat of divorce, or to have the two who have found each other to acknowledge that they are meant for one another, the denouement in the “green world” of Connecticut, the lack of children, the idea of a shared past, the death and rebirth.

There are fleeting instances where Cavell considers film form—and this is where his writing is strongest. In a piece collected in the recent book *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, Andrew Klevan makes the point that while Cavell’s approach to film is often defined or characterized by his broad ideas, or recurrent, general topics (e.g., skepticism, moral perfectionism), Cavell’s film writing is often most memorable when he dwells on

specific *moments* of films.⁵³ I would add that these memorable moments are where *formal* considerations really assert themselves in Cavell; it is in attention to the details of these moments that we can discover, in words of Cavell's, "what becomes of things on film." For instance, in Cavell's reading of *It Happened One Night* in *Pursuits of Happiness*, he considers the camera's shift from soft to hard focus when Claudette Colbert reveals her desire for Clark Gable,⁵⁴ and he has another essay on the film from a few years later in which he closely reads one shot, of the two of them walking together down the road.⁵⁵ We also see this kind of attention in his comparison of the ending sequences of *North by Northwest* and *Bringing Up Baby*, which supports his argument that *North by Northwest* derives from remarriage comedy.

If we are to consider the genre of remarriage comedy a filmic genre, rather than a literary one, then we have to be able to see it in the form of the film itself. Because *Sunrise* doesn't offer us speech, it emphasizes the formal possibilities of the genre perhaps more clearly than the talkies do. The discourse of the film occurs not in dialogue but in camera movement, close-ups, and special effects, thus investigating how the genre of remarriage comedy is particularly fit for film.

Secondly, this discussion of *Sunrise* gives us, perhaps, a new way of considering how conversation is depicted without speech in silent film. Since the earliest days of cinema, superimpositions and composite images have been used to show inner thoughts and dreams, and to be sure, *Sunrise* uses those kinds of effects, particularly in its early

⁵³ Andrew Klevan, "Notes on Stanley Cavell and Philosophical Film Criticism," in *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, eds. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 49.

⁵⁴ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 97–99.

⁵⁵ Cavell, "A Capra Moment," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 135–143.

scenes. However, it seems that these special effects are less commonly used to show *shared* private thought.⁵⁶ Perhaps it is obvious that in *Sunrise* the image of the country in the midst of the city is the couple's shared, private vision—but reading this through Cavell's genre of remarriage comedy allows us to characterize it specifically as conversation; to see it as the overcoming of skeptical thought that is important to Cavell's approach to film, and that is the ultimate (though often implicit) function of marriage in the remarriage comedies. In *Sunrise*, the remarriage element is portrayed literally, through the events of the plot, but also through its *mise-en-scène* and the technical capabilities of the camera. This is the significance that allows us to consider Cavell's genre of remarriage comedy a truly filmic, rather than merely literary, genre. The film and the genre speak to one another, allowing us to see each in new ways.

In reading *Sunrise* through Cavell's genre of remarriage comedy, we find the genre to have both broader and narrower boundaries than generally supposed. Broader, because even *Sunrise*, a silent film replete with melodrama can convey the mood of remarriage comedy; and narrower, because, despite its resonance with the genre, *Sunrise* is not exactly "a remarriage comedy." However, in finding and exploring these "adjacent" films, like *North by Northwest* and *Sunrise*, new facets of the genre are illuminated. In *Sunrise*, the "conversation" of remarriage comedy is expressed in purely

⁵⁶ Indeed, in some cases the device is used *precisely* to show a disconnect between two people's thoughts. For instance, the unhappiness of the central marriage in *La souriante Madame Beudet* (Germaine Dulac, 1922) is shown largely through superimpositions and other images representing private thought. Furthermore, the Beudets' differing ideas about the opera (he thinks of a happy chorus; she imagines the woman's resistance to an overbearing suitor) is contrasted with their neighbors' shared thought about the evening (both imagine the clothes they will wear)—yet even their neighbors' similar thoughts are conveyed in separate shots, as opposed to a shared, single point-of-view like we see in *Sunrise*.

visual terms, allowing us to see a formal aspect in the genre that has been largely ignored, not only by other writers but also by Cavell himself.

However, this doesn't mean that film form is completely divorced from his conception of the genre, since in his first book on film, *The World Viewed*, he defines critical description as something that "must allow the medium of film as such and the events of a given film at each moment to be understood in terms of one another."⁵⁷ It is this kind of description I have tried to give of *Sunrise* in explaining how and why its images constitute visual conversation.

⁵⁷ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, xiv.

Chapter Two:
Continuous Conversation in *Before Sunset*

We now move from the “visual conversation” of *Sunrise* to a very different kind of filmed conversation in a very different kind of film: Richard Linklater’s *Before Sunset*. In the previous chapter, I argued that we see conversation in the images of *Sunrise*, because it contains no talk; in this chapter, we will see that *Before Sunset*, which contains almost nothing but talk, therefore represents another way of thinking about “visual conversation,” since it makes talk visible and continuous.

A study of conversation on film seemingly must include the work of Richard Linklater, since nearly all of his films foreground talk. His early cult hit, *Slacker* (1991), is peopled with conversations more than characters, since we never stay with any one group for more than a few minutes. The credits reveal that many of the characters are “named” by phrases that have come from their conversations (e.g., “Should Have Stayed at Bus Station,” “Wants to Leave Country,” “Having a Breakthrough Day,” and “Questions Happiness.”) Moving restlessly among these conversations over twenty-four hours in Austin, Texas, the film offers a snapshot of “slacker culture” which emphasizes breadth over depth of character.

In *Before Sunrise* (1995), on the other hand, Linklater adapts the conversational form to focus on just two characters, Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Celine (Julie Delpy), who meet on a train and spend one impromptu night together in Vienna. These characters appear in three of Linklater’s films, including a segment of *Waking Life* (2001), and *Before Sunrise*’s sequel, *Before Sunset* (2004). Like *Slacker*, many sequences in *Before Sunrise* unfold in real time, but, since the film depicts roughly twelve hours total, there

are noticeable ellipses in the narrative. Only *Before Sunset* gives us sustained conversation between Jesse and Celine in real time.

The focus of this chapter will be *Before Sunset*. However, because it is a sequel, it is impossible to consider it completely apart from *Before Sunrise*—a fact which *Before Sunset* acknowledges by opening with a scene which explicitly deals with the events of the previous film. Though both *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* are rife with conversation, they are stylistically very different, in ways that are particularly pertinent to the way that conversation is filmed. *Before Sunset* might be closest to something like “pure” cinematic conversation, meaning that it consists of virtually nothing other than filmed talk. Its only nondiegetic music occurs during the opening credits, and there is little narrative “action” other than the couple talking. Filmed in real time, *Before Sunset* is more an 80-minute conversation than a narrative. However, though it is filmed in real time, most of the film’s takes are not particularly long; it actually cuts quite frequently, using a shot-reverse shot pattern throughout. Hence the camerawork is not especially documentary-like, although the temporal continuity does heighten the sense of sustained observation.

Compared to *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* is much more insular, much more focused on the couple. This difference can be attributed to the status of their relationship in each film. In *Before Sunrise*, Jesse and Celine are strangers whose conversation deepens as they get to know each other over the course of the film; their interactions with others both highlight the tenuousness and newness of their encounter and reinforce their growing feelings for each other. Soon after getting off the train in Vienna, they find themselves suddenly tongue-tied and awkward around each other, until they pass two

quirky actors whom they can ask for advice on what to do in the city. This encounter with the actors serves to distract Jesse and Celine from the acknowledged awkwardness while also reinforcing their new bond—they even (unconvincingly) pretend to be on honeymoon. On the other hand, *Before Sunset* finds them meeting each other again for the first time in nine years, and their considerable interest in accounting for the lost time and the missed rendezvous in Vienna accounts for their focus on each other and the film's focus on them.

In the earlier film, Jesse and Celine encounter other people in the city throughout; but in *Before Sunset*, with very few exceptions, they seem to occupy their own little world, which nevertheless draws on the romantic iconography of Paris. There are passersby; there are waiters and ticket-takers, and drivers; but none of these people exists beyond these functions. Hence the film's conversation is distilled. There is nothing to distract us from the conversation between these two people, Jesse and Celine. This distinguishes the film from *Before Sunrise*, as well as *Slacker*. It is also different from the conversation we have seen in Murnau's *Sunrise*. Of course, *Sunrise* is also a film peopled with types—including its protagonists. And it features interactions between the couple and the workers of the city. Indeed, that film's central scene of conversation, the shared, private vision of the past/future pastoral realm, is quickly infringed upon by the flow of traffic in the city. In *Before Sunset*, it's as if the couple never quite leaves this private, shared realm in the midst of the city.

Carolyn Durham has paid attention to the use of space in *Before Sunset* as part of a larger project about Paris onscreen in recent film, arguing that, along with dialogue,

“the film also foregrounds the particular importance of place from the very beginning.”⁵⁸

My own reading investigates the film’s use of space as part of its connection to remarriage comedy. The connection with *Sunrise*, the prominence of conversation, and the specifically reconciliatory cast to the encounter invites a reading of *Before Sunset* in light of remarriage comedy. Like the couples of remarriage comedy, Jesse and Celine talk about what marriage is; and they also have to claim (their desire for) one another.

For Cavell, the spaces of the remarriage comedies are important as realms of possibility. One of the characteristics of the genre is the movement between city and country, the latter of which is comparable to the Shakespearean “green world” of narrative resolution. While in Murnau’s *Sunrise* these aspects are reversed, it still upholds the distinction. Furthermore, in *Sunrise*, the city is depicted as a series of distinct spaces—restaurant, church, barbershop, photography studio, amusement park—each with its own function and purpose in the metropolis. All of the spaces offer some kind of distinct service, and they all have a slightly different way of bringing the couple together. So we might then consider the fact that *Before Sunrise* also features an amusement park, a church, and a series of bars and restaurants. In *Sunrise*, the different spaces of the city are aligned with specific activities—having a picture taken, getting a shave, dancing, eating, and drinking, playing games—while in *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* the city spaces are just settings for the couple to be together in—in a way, they more exactly exemplify the idea from remarriage comedy that nothing the couple does matters, as long as they are together.

⁵⁸ Carolyn Durham, “Sighting/siting/citing the city: the construction of Paris in twenty-first century cinema,” in *Post Script* XXVII (Fall 2007), 72-89.

However, this is not to say that the different spaces have no significance. For instance, there are moments when their conversation and the setting mirror one another. Jesse tells Celine about his son, Henry (“little Hank”), age 4, just before they reach the boat, which will take them to Quai Henri IV;⁵⁹ later, in the car, Celine refers to their past as “water under the bridge,” a cliché that nevertheless resonates with the conversation they had just had on the boat, on the water, drifting underneath the bridges of the Seine. And there is the broader significance of wandering through different spaces, which gives this sense of moving through time but never really getting anywhere... And conversation is similar, or a natural analogue to walking without purpose, in that it builds linearly, or spirally, temporally, but has no clear end or goal.

Before Sunset opens with a series of static shots of locations in Paris, which, on a first viewing, are not immediately recognizable as the spaces that Jesse and Celine will wander through. The locations are shown in reverse order, meaning that the first shot is of the courtyard of Celine’s apartment building, where the film ends, and the narrative begins in the Shakespeare and Co. bookshop, from which Jesse and Celine will proceed. Thus there is a (lopsided) palindromic structure to the film. (The opening shots of this film also mirror the end of *Before Sunrise*, where the camera “revisits” the scenes of the previous evening, now in early morning light, devoid of Jesse and Celine, who are on their respective ways home.)⁶⁰

⁵⁹ This is significant not only as a location, but as a phrase that becomes a stumbling block in their communication, as Jesse struggles to pronounce the French words. Celine is at home in this city, whereas Jesse is adrift, and doesn’t speak the language.

⁶⁰ As I noted in the Introduction, we may see here a conscious reference to the end of *L’eclisse*.

This film's sustained conversation between Jesse and Celine is prefaced by another sort of "conversation"—a Q & A session. After the series of opening shots that ends at the Shakespeare and Co. bookshop, an image of two signs tells us that Jesse Wallace is appearing at 5:30 today for a reading and Q & A in support of his book, titled *This Time*.⁶¹ The following scene finds this Q & A already in progress. As Jesse talks, the camera alternates among shot-reverse shots of the journalists and Jesse, as well as wider establishing views that show a small gathering around the table where Jesse is seated. Jesse is speaking about writing what he knows—rather than “guns, or violence” or “political intrigue,” he has focused on trying to “capture what it’s like to really meet somebody.” As he says these words, we suddenly see images from the earlier film, *Before Sunrise*, the events of which we also understand to be the subject of Jesse’s novel. We continue to see these glimpses of the earlier film as Jesse’s voiceover continues, answering the questions. He describes an idea for his next novel, about a middle-aged man whose memories of a love affair in his youth are called forth by his young daughter’s dancing to a pop song: “He knows that he’s not *remembering* this dance. He’s there. In both moments, simultaneously.” On this line there is a cut from Celine in *Before Sunrise* to Celine in the present day, standing off to the side in the bookshop, as Jesse continues: “And just for an instant, all his life is just folding in on itself”—cut to Celine’s point of view of him—“and it’s obvious to him that time is a lie”—at which point he looks over and catches sight of her.

After finishing the Q & A (“Our author has to be getting to the airport,” the proprietor says), Jesse makes his way over to Celine, and they greet each other,

⁶¹ The punning title, appropriately, seems simultaneously to refer to the past and the present.

awkwardly kissing both cheeks. They decide to get a cup of coffee, and the proprietor of the bookshop reminds Jesse not to be late for his flight and to get the phone number of his driver. Still within the bookshop, we have already heard about this flight twice—setting up the film’s key deadline. Throughout the rest of the film, references to this deadline will pop up in the conversation, usually at the points when the couple moves from one location to another. It becomes a way of making transitions, both in their talk and in the spaces where the talk takes place. It also seems to imply that their conversation will have to come to an end. Whether or not this happens remains unresolved to the conclusion of the film.

The first real break in their conversation occurs as they step onto the boat, and Jesse calls his driver to tell him to pick him up at Quai Henri IV. On the boat, the camera follows Celine as she walks to the stern, while we hear but do not see Jesse speaking on the phone. The second half of the film is remarkable for its use of vehicles—boat and car—as the sites of conversation. These settings, which propel them forward without their having to walk, mirror the sense that things are getting out of hand, or being taken out of their hands, as the conversation grows deeper and more serious.

Durham argues that their embarking on the boat signals a shift in the conversation, and notes that their conversation finally turns to love and romance as they enter the space most associated with tourists, featuring shots that most resemble postcards. As they settle in, Jesse says, “Oh, wow, Notre Dame, check that out,” and a cut shows us their view of the church. Their talk about Notre Dame leads to Jesse’s describing the “building” of his novel, which he now says was a way to try to find Celine. The images of and talk about Notre Dame may lead to this “romantic” talk, but actually

the view of it is brief, and as they continue to talk on the boat, much of the background comprises unremarkable stone walls and other boats. (The view seems to open up, however, when she asks him about marriage.)

The talk on the boat contains a couple of levels of return. They are returning to the traumatic topic of missing each other in Vienna, and they are talking *about* the chances of finding one another again.

Jesse: Oh, God. Why weren't you there in Vienna? [Moving away from her as he says it]

Celine: I told you why . . .

Jesse: No, I know *why* . . . I just wish you would've been. Our lives might have been so much different.

Celine: You think so?

Jesse: I actually do.

The boat ride ends with their beginning the discussion about marriage. (This topic had already been brought up once before, but now they get deeper into it.) Jesse's noble idea of meeting his commitments and dedicating his life to something greater than himself through marriage has devolved to the point that he feels he's "running a small nursery with somebody I used to date." He goes on to say, "I've had sex less than ten times in the last four years" and "I feel like if somebody were to touch me I would dissolve into molecules," just as the boat pulls into Quai Henri IV. Rather than responding directly to this statement, Celine immediately elbows him slightly and says, "Well, we're here" and leads the way off the boat. They continue the conversation about troubles with marriages and relationships as they approach and get into the car, which ultimately spirals into Celine's breakdown and Jesse's revelation of his dreams about Celine. It isn't until they get out of the car in front of her place that she responds directly to his statement. "I want to try something," she says, hugging him tightly. "I want to see if you stay together or if

you dissolve into molecules.” He, clearly taken aback, stiffly puts his arm around her but then prolongs the clinch:

Jesse: How am I doing?

Celine: Still here.

Jesse: Good. I like being here.

When she pulls away she keeps her hands on his shoulders, thus echoing the image (seen in the montage at the beginning of the movie) from *Before Sunrise*, shortly before they part, of Jesse with his hands on *her* shoulders.

Jesse and Celine leave the car and driver and enter the courtyard of Celine’s apartment building. It is separated from the city street by a long path; stone buildings covered in ivy and other greenery surround them. Jesse comments on the beauty of the place, with an awed, “This is incredible. This is where you *live*?” Just as when he commented on Notre Dame on the boat, the camera shows Jesse exclaiming over what he’s looking at before cutting to his/their view of it. Even though many of the spaces in which we’ve seen them have been more pastorally inflected than city-like—the garden path, the boat—the courtyard stands out. The coding of this space as private (it is barred to the car, for one thing) might lead us to ask if they are entering something like the green world of remarriage comedy here—especially because this is where the final step of the reconciliation takes place.

Though a threshold is crossed here, the story still ends on an unresolved note. Yet, actually, this unsettledness strengthens the comparison with the central remarriage comedies. Cavell mentions that they characteristically undercut the conventional final “clinch” shot by offering a concealed or awkward view of an embrace. The conversation between the couple continues, and continues without us, without clear or neat end. Linda

Williams's reading of the kiss as punctuation mark—i.e., a period or an ellipsis—still might not account for these awkward or implied kisses. Though there is one way to read the kiss as a continuation of conversation, its physical counterpart signaled in the double meaning contained within the word (à la Milton's "meet and happy conversation"), there is something about the frustrated nature of these endings that goes along with the idea that conversation never really ends.

So, Jesse and Celine are in the courtyard. They happen upon Celine's cat, which she picks up and affectionately cuddles, and then they encounter her neighbors, who are gathered for a barbecue. As Jesse and Celine stand at the threshold of her building, an older woman comes out, speaking to Celine in (unsubtitled) French, further coding the space—within the city of Paris—as familiar to Celine and unfamiliar to Jesse. As the woman joins the party, leaving Jesse and Celine at the door, she speaks teasingly to the man at the grill, telling him (again in untranslated French) that Jesse isn't staying for the party because he doesn't like his (the griller's) shorts.

The interaction with the couple (played by Julie Delpy's parents) provides a bookend to the way that *Before Sunrise* opens, showing the two films to be in conversation with each other, since the event that initially brings Jesse and Celine together is an argument between an older married couple on a train. As this couple's conversation grows more heated, Celine moves away from them, choosing a seat across the aisle from Jesse. Their first words to each other are about this other couple's argument—Jesse asks Celine if she understands what they are arguing about (the couple speaks in German).

These two visions of older married life function as bookends especially because, once Celine's neighbor walks away, Jesse and Celine are in uncharted territory. Jesse, for the first time shot from a slightly high angle to approximate Celine's view of him as she stands a step or two above him, asks again to hear one of Celine's songs; she demurs, but finally agrees, and he follows her inside. We realize now (having witnessed virtually every moment they've spent together) that this is their first time entering private, domestic space together. Their realization of this fact is surely one of many things happening beneath the surface as the two climb the spiral staircase together.

Though the entire film takes place in real time, there are points at which this time is felt more strongly. (In *Before Sunrise* these moments are more rare, but also more noticeable, since there are more ellipses. The early scene where Jesse and Celine listen to a record in a booth is the most prominent of these. The shot holds for over a minute and is heightened by the awkwardness of the close quarters, the romantic lyrics of the song, and the way that they try to look at each other without being caught looking, etc.) The walk up the spiral staircase to Celine's apartment is a point at which the real time of *Before Sunset* is felt most strongly. (And it is circular—again indicating that they are back where they started—the silent awkwardness, the older couples bringing them together, the importance of music.) One can feel here the story building to its conclusion—as surely Jesse and Celine do. As if this spiral walk is a winding of the tensions expressed in the car into the conclusion of the film. A boundary is being crossed, but we (and they) don't yet know what the outcome of it will be. It also seems to visualize the way that their talk over the last hour or so has spiraled in and around the memories of their night in Vienna, and in and around the ways it has affected their love lives, continually returning to it,

growing deeper and darker as the film progresses. It's also, to this point, the longest stretch in the film in which they are together but not talking, lasting about 40 seconds.

Once inside, Celine offers tea, and Jesse accepts, saying "Merci." "Messy? You think my apartment is messy?" Celine asks. Their return to talk after the walk up the stairs is thus a little bumpy, a little awkward, and reminds us again of the slight language barrier between them. Celine again tries to get out of playing a song ("You're going to laugh at me," she says), before finally offering him a choice of three songs in English: "One's about my cat, one's about my ex-boyfriend—well, ex- ex-boyfriend, and one's about . . . well, it's just a little waltz." Jesse chooses without hesitation: "Play the waltz." Sitting on the edge of her bed, directly across from Jesse on the couch, Celine picks up the guitar and takes a deep breath before beginning to play. The song is obviously about the night in Vienna, and even uses Jesse's name. Furthermore, Celine's performance of the song is coded as conversational by the camera's repeated cuts to Jesse throughout, in a kind of shot-reverse shot, as he reacts to the song's content.

Jesse's had the chance to tell his side of the story of the night in Vienna—to deal with it by fictionalizing it. Through Jesse's book, Celine relives the night as a reader rather than a participant, seeing herself through his eyes, as she puts it. This is what makes her performance of the song necessary: the song is her way of expressing her experience of the night to Jesse. So the song becomes a reciprocal response—which also makes it conversational.

The song also connects the film to classic remarriage comedy, in which music often plays an important role, most significantly in *The Awful Truth*, in which Lucy (Irene Dunne) puts on a performance as Jerry's (Cary Grant) sister. In this case, the performance

of the song is meant to make him look bad in front of his fiancée's uptight, upright family and thus to rescue Lucy and Jerry's marriage before their divorce becomes final. Lucy, who is still in love with Jerry, uses the performance as his sister to make him realize that he is still in love with her, what Cavell calls putting together kinship and desire:

Lucy's routine takes up Jerry's casting her as his sister as if it had been an explanation or excuse for *her* benefit, a statement of the cause of their loss of faith, of their faith in faithfulness, a loss in their sexual conversation. Then her song and dance for him that puts together kinship and desire is her reply to this excuse. I might translate her reply in something like these terms: Very well, I see the point. We do have this problem of having known one another forever, from the first, of being the first to show one another what equality and reciprocity might be. If this means being brother and sister, that cannot, to that extent, be bad. What is necessary now is not to estrange ourselves but to recognize, without denying our natural intimacy, that we are also strangers, separate, different; to keep our incestuousness symbolic, tropic, so that it joins us, not letting it lapse into literality, which will enjoin us. I'll show you that to be your sister, thus understood, will be to be stranger to you than you have yet known me to be. I am changed before your eyes, different so to speak from myself, hence not different.⁶²

Through her performance, then, Lucy becomes different from herself, revealing herself to be the same as ever. Taking up Linda Williams's language, we might say that Lucy's performance "screens" her identity before Jerry. She is both disguised and revealed, made familiar through estrangement.

How, then, does this inform our reading of the performance in *Before Sunset*? Jesse and Celine are much more strangers than Jerry and Lucy, of course—yet they still need to complete the work of claiming (their desire for) one another. Celine's song begins this process, but it takes another song to complete it—significantly, a song in which Celine plays the role of someone else.

⁶² Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 260.

After singing the waltz, Celine returns to the kitchen to finish making the tea. Jesse asks, “Do you just plug that name in for every guy that comes up here?” Celine says, “Yes, of course. What do you think, that I wrote the song about you? Are you nuts?” They laugh and exchange glances. Concealing and revealing their feelings has been a recurring way of interacting for them—they dealt with Jesse’s telling about his dreams in this way; and in *Before Sunrise* there is a memorable scene in which they pretend to call their friends back home. Celine says, “I’m going to call my friend who I’m supposed to have lunch with in eight hours,” putting her hand to her ear, miming a telephone call, and saying “Brrrinngg, brrinngg . . .” waiting for Jesse to pick up. He plays the role of her friend so that she can say things that she wouldn’t directly say to him. (“He kind of kisses like an adolescent . . . It’s so cute,” “As the night went on I began to like him more and more. But I’m afraid he’s scared of me,” etc.) Then Jesse “calls” his friend. This conversation, which estranges them from each other, paradoxically allows the revelation of their “truest” or most intimate thoughts.

In *Before Sunset*, both songs at the film’s end function this way. This final performance is more collaborative, more conversational, in effect taking the place of the constant talk since it begins in the longest stretch of silence in the film—slightly longer than the one during the walk up the staircase, almost a minute long. It is also an answer, in a sense, to Celine’s waltz; Jesse puts the CD on, looking over at Celine as he does so in a way that signals something like a challenge or a dare. The song, a live recording of Nina Simone singing “Just in Time,” begins to play, and Celine speaks about seeing Nina Simone in concert, singing along and imitating Simone on stage. (The lyrics of the song match the significance of the lyrics of Celine’s waltz: “Now you’re here/now I know

where I'm going/No more doubt or fear/I've found my way/For love came just in time/You found me just in time.”)

Celine's last line—“Baby, you are gonna miss that plane”—is said in “Nina Simone's” voice, and both repeats the constant refrain of the film (the deadline of the plane) and inflects it with new meaning. Every other time it has come up, Jesse has denied that he will miss the flight. But now, sitting back on the couch, he says, “I know,” resignedly, with the sense that he's given up, given in, there's nothing he can do—but also aware of the fact that he's been complicit (he invited himself up, and asked for the song, after all). We might think of Cary Grant at the end of *Bringing Up Baby*, muttering “Oh my; oh dear; oh well” as he embraces Katharine Hepburn amid the ruins of his dinosaur, or as Cavell translates the sentiment: “In other words, I am here, the relation is mine, what I make of it is now part of what I make of my life, I embrace it.”⁶³

Yet there is no embrace here. Jesse laughs, fulfilling Celine's prediction (“You're going to laugh at me”) while also lightening his slightly doomed-sounding,⁶⁴ yet hopeful, “I know.” There is a cut back to Celine, in profile, not looking at him, still dancing, then a slow fade out as the music continues. Like the end of *Before Sunrise*, this one is unresolved. But in *Before Sunrise*, though it leaves the ending somewhat open (will they really meet again in six months?) there is also a conventional, melodramatic closure, in the frantic embrace goodbye, the necessary parting of ways. The end of *Before Sunset* is unresolved in a different way. It isn't that it's an awkward or concealed embrace, like in remarriage comedy; they are at *such* a distance from each other, literally across the room.

⁶³ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 132.

⁶⁴ Indeed, the shadow cast over this ending, which never quite lifts, is Jesse's existing marriage and child.

And she's performing, and he's watching. After the complete disclosure of the entire film, our complete access to them and their conversation, there is something both slightly unsatisfying and entirely appropriate about this ending. It restores a kind of privacy for them, yet we somehow know that their conversation continues.

However, there is no reaffirmation of marriage, nor is there a definite promise of marriage. Yet, as the reading of *Annie Hall* in the next chapter will show, there is something hopeful at the end of *Before Sunset* that there is not at the end of *Annie Hall*.

Chapter Three:
Complications of Conversation in *Annie Hall*

Of the films I discuss in this thesis, *Annie Hall* most problematizes the idea of conversation. This is partly because Woody Allen is the film's star, director, co-writer, and narrator, while the authorship of the other films I have discussed is more shared. *Sunrise* was made within the collaborative context of the Hollywood studio system, and even *Before Sunset* reveals collaboration among its director and stars, since the three of them—Linklater, Hawke, and Delpy—co-wrote the script. Of course, Allen frequently stars in (and writes or co-writes) many of his own films. But *Annie Hall* seems particularly significant for Allen, as much of the scholarship and criticism of the film focuses on its autobiographical aspects. While those aspects are not of primary interest here, it is important to consider how Allen's authorial presence and privileged access to the narrative alters or complicates the idea of conversation.⁶⁵

This complication must also have to do with the fact that, in relation to the films discussed in other chapters, *Annie Hall* is the most consistently comedic. The comedic parts of *Sunrise* are neatly contained in the middle of the film, after the remarriage in the city but before the wife's near-death on the trip home. In *Before Sunset*, there is more comedy throughout the film—there are funny lines throughout the couple's conversation, and, as we've seen, in the last shot of Jesse, he's laughing—but the film is not built around comedic scenes and punch lines the way that *Annie Hall* is. The comedy in *Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* seems to bring the couples together, even representing a kind of eroticism—the comedic scenes are like a “second honeymoon” in *Sunrise*, while in

⁶⁵ Frank Krutnik finds *Annie Hall* indicative of “shift [away] from the ‘self-centered’ genre of comedian-comedy,” but my view is that this shift is not as marked as Krutnik seems to indicate. See Krutnik, 62.

Before Sunset we end on a laugh instead of a kiss—but in *Annie Hall* the comedy has a way of distancing the couple.⁶⁶ This is partly because Alvy’s jokes seem just as much addressed to the audience as to Annie.

In the other two films, the couples make each other laugh. But in *Annie Hall*, Alvy tells the jokes and Annie laughs (when she gets them). There is a hierarchy in their relationship that at least one scholar has put in terms of Pygmalion and Galatea.⁶⁷ However, Alvy’s attempts at molding Annie—buying her books more serious than “that cat book,” advising her to take college courses, objecting to her Midwestern expressions (“la-di-da,” “neat”) and her desire to live in Los Angeles, etc.—have something in common with the men of remarriage comedy. In the films where the educational aspect is most present, for instance in *It Happened One Night* and *The Philadelphia Story*, the form this education takes is usually the man’s lecturing the woman, on topics ranging from how to correctly dunk a donut to how to be a compassionate human being.

On the other hand, a few of the remarriage comedies actually have the women educating the men, or at least bringing them to some kind of realization about themselves and their desire. This is most obvious in *Bringing Up Baby*—David (Cary Grant) comes realize that he “never had a better time” than with Susan (Katharine Hepburn). In *Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, the men rather than the women are in need of education. Similarly, at

⁶⁶ Of course, in some cases the substitution of comedy for erotic or sexual content may be accounted for by the particular historical/cultural context of the film. This seems mainly applicable to *Sunrise*, since *Before Sunset* comes at a time when the depiction of sex is not de facto prohibited.

⁶⁷ Christopher J. Knight, “Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*: Galatea’s Triumph Over Pygmalion,” in *Literature/Film Quarterly* 32:3 (2004), 213–221.

the end of *Annie Hall*, Alvy realizes “what a terrific person [Annie] was, and how much fun it was just knowing her.”⁶⁸

However, whereas the couple in *Sunrise* recommit to each other, and the couple in *Before Sunset* seem to overcome the break in their past, reconciling the distance that had come between them, in *Annie Hall* the couple ultimately split. Annie denies Alvy’s attempt at (re)marriage at the end of the film, thus profoundly complicating—indeed, effectively ending—what might be considered their conversation.

Beginning at the end of *Annie Hall*, with the last conversation we see between the couple, we can trace the major themes addressed in this chapter. Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) and Annie Hall (Diane Keaton) meet on the patio of a health food restaurant in Los Angeles, where Annie has been living since their most recent breakup. Unlike many of the other conversations in the film, this scene is filmed in a standard shot/reverse shot structure, holding on the two actors in medium close-up and (for the most part) cutting back-and-forth as each begins to speak. In contrast with this very conventional structure, the talk seems almost improvisatory⁶⁹ and doesn’t follow a logical progression. The conversation begins with this exchange:

Alvy: You look very pretty.

Annie: Oh, no, I just lost a little weight, that’s all.

[Reverse shot of Alvy, who doesn’t say anything.]

Annie: Well. You look nice.

Alvy: So I’ve been thinking about it and I think that we should get married.

⁶⁸ The emphasis placed on the man is key to Krutnik’s conception of the “nervous” romance, as well.

⁶⁹ As I noted in the Introduction, the quotations of the dialogue in what follows are my best attempt at transcribing while watching the movie; but it is particularly difficult in an Allen film to capture on paper all of the usual “fillers” of natural conversation—“ums” and “ahs,” words that are half said under the breath or that trail off, gestures and body language that meet spoken words halfway in a kind of hybrid visual/verbal expression.

Alvy's sudden shift from slightly stilted pleasantries to the suggestion of marriage propels the conversation into an argument about Annie's preferring to live in L.A. rather than New York. Only at the end of a frustrated attempt to say that she's not sure she loves Alvy anymore does Annie ask, "So what are you up to anyway?" Alvy replies that he's been working on a play before returning to his original tack: "So, what are you saying, that you're not coming back to New York with me?" Annie again says no, and then stands to leave, saying "I gotta go," at which point there is a cut to a two-shot of them both (framed by the table's umbrella, on which there is a prominently scripted "Ciao"), and the camera follows them as they leave the table. They continue to argue as they proceed to their cars, and Annie's last words before she slams the door are "Let's just forget it, Alvy . . . Let's just forget the conversation!"

As the final words of a final breakup, Annie's line has particular resonance in the reading of "conversation" as indicating more than just a couple's talk; i.e., in its indication of the relationship itself. But the line also has significance because, in fact, Alvy does not forget this particular conversation. On the contrary, he writes it into the aforementioned play. The exit from the L.A. restaurant had ended with Alvy's smashing into other cars, leading to his arrest, and his friend Rob picks him up from the police station. There is a sudden cut from the two of them sitting in Rob's convertible to a medium close-up of a man with dark hair and glasses speaking to a point off-camera. "You're a thinking person," he is saying. Cut to a reverse shot of an attractive young woman, who resembles Annie, as the conversation continues:

Man: How can you choose this lifestyle?

Woman: What is so incredibly great about New York? It's a dying city.

You read *Death in Venice*.

Man: *You* didn't read *Death in Venice* until I gave it to you!

Woman: Well, you only give me books with the word "death" in the title.

By this time we surely recognize the repetition of part of Alvy and Annie's L.A. conversation, and, as if by way of further explanation, there is at this point a cut to a wide shot of the room, which has the wooden floors and mirrored walls of a rehearsal space, and we see three men, including Alvy, sitting at a table, while the couple (who continue to speak) are distantly visible in the mirror, just off-center in the frame. When we cut back to the couple, it is a medium two-shot, and they are sitting across from each other.

The conversation continues:

Woman: You're like New York. You're an island.

Man: Okay. [He stands.] If that's all that we've been through together means to you, I guess it's better if we just said goodbye. Once and for all. You know, it's funny—after all of the serious talks and passionate moments, that it ends here, in a health food restaurant on Sunset Boulevard. Goodbye, Sally. [He walks out of frame.]

Woman: [She stands.] Wait. [Starts to follow him as he returns to the frame.] I'm gonna go with you. I love you.

We now see that, not only has Alvy written this conversation into his play, but he has also changed its ending. As if to acknowledge this, the film has cut to him in medium close-up a couple of times during the dialogue—once after the phrase "serious talks," and again as the woman says "I love you." When it cuts back to the couple they are kissing passionately, and when the shot returns to Alvy, he looks over, into the camera, and says:

What do you want? It was my first play. You know how you're always trying to get things to come out perfect in art because it's real difficult in life . . . Interestingly, however, I did run into Annie again. It was on the Upper West Side of Manhattan . . .

As Alvy begins this direct address to the camera, we also hear Annie's rendition of "Seems Like Old Times" begin on the soundtrack, and it continues as Alvy talks over the closing montage. When Alvy mentions the Upper West Side of Manhattan, there is a cut

to a long shot of the outside of a movie theater, with two couples standing under the marquee, just barely recognizable as Annie and Alvy, each with a date. Alvy continues the story:

She had moved back to New York, she was living in Soho with some guy, and when I met her she was of all things dragging him in to see *The Sorrow and the Pity*, which I counted as a personal triumph.

The next cut places the camera outside of a restaurant window, looking in at Alvy and Annie laughing and talking: “And, Annie and I, we had lunch sometime after that, and, uh, just uh, kicked around old times . . .” At which point begins a montage of past moments from the film.⁷⁰ At the end of this montage, there is a cut to long shot of the two of them, again through the restaurant window, but this time the camera is inside the restaurant and they are outside, standing on a street corner.

After that it got pretty late, and we both had to go, but it was great seeing Annie again . . . I realized what a terrific person she was, and how much fun it was just knowing her.

At this point, still in long shot, Annie steps away from Alvy, crossing the street, and Alvy stands watching her for a moment before walking in the opposite direction. The camera remains still, and the voiceover and the song continue for another thirty seconds or so before cutting to black.

I have outlined this closing sequence in some detail because it brings up virtually all of the elements of the film which I want to address as pertinent to conversation, including Allen’s presence as both author and actor, different ways of filming conversations (long shot or shot/reverse shot), and the idea of audience, both within the film and in terms of the film’s direct address to its audience. These themes brought out in

⁷⁰ Like the montages in *Before Sunset* and *Conte d’hiver*, this one summarizes the relationship.

the ending will take us back through the film to its beginning, and to the beginning of Alvy and Annie's relationship.

I mentioned that the last conversation, at the L.A. restaurant, stands out because few of the conversations in the film are shot in a strict shot/reverse shot structure. Often, both characters are in the frame, and the camera follows them at close range—for example, when Alvy and Annie argue about her moving in with him, or when they walk along Manhattan's streets and riverbanks. But the shot/reverse shot structure does recall Alvy and Annie's first few conversations. Their first meeting takes place when they play a doubles tennis match with Alvy's friend Rob and his girlfriend Janet. As the two couples meet on the indoor court, the camera stays far back, in long shot, though we can hear the introductions being made. This use of long shot for the initial meeting will reoccur in the end of the film for one of the last meetings, when Alvy and Annie run into each other outside of the movie house. We see a couple of shots of the tennis game, noticing that Annie and Alvy play on opposite teams; so there is a nice shot/reverse shot theme to this initial meeting beyond the formal structure of the following scene.

Restricting the use of shot/reverse shot mainly to the beginning and end of the relationship is a way of suggesting their status through the form of the film. At the fringes of intimacy, they are separated in different frames, but once they're involved, the camera films them without cutting.

As the two of them leave the gym after the tennis match, they are filmed in medium shot/reverse shot. The camera's distance from them and their initial distance from each other heightens the awkwardness of their talk in this scene, an awkwardness that Annie comments on:

Oh, God, what a dumb thing to say, right? I mean, you say “You play well” and then right away I have to say “You play well.” Oh, oh, God, Annie. Well. Oh, well. La-di-da. La-di-da. La, la . . .

The camera’s hold on her as she makes this speech also heightens the awkwardness, as it refuses to cut away, making us feel the duration of the scene, and specifically her desire to draw out the moment. It is also notable that her initial words to him are about the stupidities of small talk before devolving into her characteristic “la-di-da,” which aren’t words at all. The scene draws out the inherent clumsiness in the attempt to move from meeting to talking to carrying on a conversation.⁷¹ We begin to see here what will be made obvious in the following scene, at Annie’s apartment: the ulterior motives that often lurk beneath the surface of conversation.

When they get to her apartment, shot/reverse shot is again used for their conversation on her patio. Again, there is symmetry with the end of the film, since their last conversation also occurs outdoors, on a patio, in a place where Annie lives, or anyway where she is at home. Inside the apartment, the conversation is shot in one long take as the camera follows them, or mostly Annie, since she does most of the talking, around the room. The film cuts as they walk out on the patio, and holds on them in a medium two-shot, framing them both facing the camera, their backs to the view of the city. They toast, and then Annie’s rather awkward opening (“You’re what Grammy Hall would call a real Jew”) motivates a cut to a medium close-up on Alvy’s startled face, and from this point the scene cuts in standard shot/reverse shot.

⁷¹ “Their courtship proceeds in a ballet of fidgets and nods, and a partsong of questions, counter-questions, non-sequiturs and nervous apologies.” See Peter Cowie, *Annie Hall* (London: BFI Publishing, 1996), 33.

Or, not quite standard, since once they begin talking about her photography, subtitles appear onscreen, giving us not what they're saying but something like the underlying meaning of what they're saying.⁷² Annie's "thoughts" are mainly concerns about keeping up with Alvy intellectually ("He probably thinks I'm a yo-yo" and "I'm not smart enough for him. Hang in there") while Alvy's are more sexual ("I wonder what she looks like naked") but also insecure ("I don't know what I'm saying. She senses I'm shallow"). These are concerns that will reoccur, out loud, later in their relationship, as Annie repeatedly accuses Alvy of thinking that she's not smart enough and Alvy repeatedly wants more sex than Annie does. This scene is further exploration and explication of the idea that words often, especially in the beginning of a relationship, have ulterior motives. The conversation may begin as a means to an end—which is often sex—but the idea is that it would develop into something more than that, a way of life which has no real end.

The use of the subtitles is also a kind of "writing over" of the scene that is done less subtly and in a slightly different way at the end of the film. The subtitles scene shows how conversation is both a cover and a revelation of desire, while the rewriting of the breakup scene at the end into the play reveals the specific and common desire to be able to say what one wished or should have said. Or, as Alvy puts it, "how you're always trying to get things to come out perfect in art because it's real difficult in life."

There is more to be said about the rewriting of the conversation at the end. First, it is not only that the content and ending are rewritten, so that "Alvy" gets the last word and "Annie" decides to go with him—but also that even the lines that are kept intact are more

⁷² On the DVD, the first of the subtitles are prefaced by a label that says "[Thinking]," but VHS versions of the film do not have this label.

perfectly rendered. The actors seem to recite them rather than say them, and there aren't any of the hesitations or "fillers" of the original conversation. This could partly be the effect of hearing the words for a second time, but it is also a fact of the way that the actors perform them. Furthermore, the sparseness of the rehearsal space along with the line that attempts to evoke the original setting ("here, in a health food restaurant on Sunset Boulevard") draws attention to the artificiality of the scene and makes the original scene seem all the more "real."

But there is a further falseness in the rewritten scene. The beginning of the line just quoted, about the end of the relationship occurring in a health food restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, begins: "You know, it's funny—after all of the serious talks and passionate moments, that it ends here . . ." Allen's characterization here of his relationship with Annie is embellished in more than one way. In this talk-laden film, we still haven't gotten a sense that the two are capable of "serious talks." The film consistently undercuts the sense that their "conversation" represents anything like meaningful verbal exchange.

So this summary statement of the relationship may prompt us to ask: To what extent is *Annie Hall* a collection of "serious talks and passionate moments"? There are moments of passion in the film, and there is surely a lot of (not always serious) talking. But this ends up being not a very accurate description of the film we have just seen. So if it's not a series of serious talks and passionate moments, then what is it?

As I've mentioned, Allen's presence in the film as both actor and author complicates the couple's conversation. The changes made between the actual breakup conversation and Alvy's rewritten version for the play implicitly acknowledge his hand in

the authorship, both diegetically and extradiegetically, and his direct address to the camera at the end of that scene (“What do you want? It was my first play”) makes this explicit.

The film both ends and begins with direct address to the camera, and therefore the audience. The film opens with Allen’s characteristic white-on-black titles. The title of the film is *Annie Hall*. But she does not appear as the protagonist of the film. The story is told from Alvy’s point of view, and begins, at least, as a biographical sketch of *his* life. The direct address to the audience is even more pronounced than the title cards at the beginning of *Sunrise* are. In the opening shot of the film, Allen speaks directly into the camera, against a plain background. It is not immediately clear that he speaks as a character rather than the film’s author, explicitly acknowledging Allen’s background as a comedian rather than an actor.⁷³ As we will see, this persona complicates the possibility of “meet and happy conversation” between Annie and Alvy.⁷⁴ The opening monologue also shifts rather suddenly in its familiarity—he opens with a joke and some thoughts about getting older, and then says, “Annie and I broke up,”⁷⁵ as if we are already familiar

⁷³ Peter Cowie also notes that this “acutely personal” opening acknowledges the vaudeville/stand-up tradition, as well as the “confessional close-up” often found in Ingmar Bergman’s films. See Cowie, 22–23. Leger Grindon likewise notes its resemblance to stand-up comedy and its intimacy (Grindon, 150).

⁷⁴ It even undercuts Alvy’s interactions with his friend Rob. They address each other as “Max,” which on the one hand signals a mutual intimacy or familiarity, but also thus makes their conversations seem to be addressed either to a third, absent person, or to themselves. They carry on an exchange, but they don’t share each other’s perspectives.

⁷⁵ With this line “Allen punctures our deliberately created illusion that we have been having an intimate chat with the *auteur* . . . Before our eyes Woody Allen has become Alvy Singer.” See Marilyn Fabe, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 181.

with the two of them.⁷⁶ Thus the film might be seen as opening a conversation with the audience.

These moments aren't restricted to the beginning and the end, however; for instance, there is the striking moment in the middle of the film at which Alvy addresses the camera during an argument with Annie. She's telling him about her first experience in analysis, and wonders if it will "change my wife." "Will it change your *wife*?" Alvy asks. "Will it change my *life*," Annie replies. They argue about whether she said "wife" or "life" before Alvy finally turns to the camera and says, "She said, 'Will it change my wife?' You heard that, because you were there, so I'm not crazy." The conversation then continues as before, Annie remaining seemingly unaware of this address to the audience.

Alvy's privileged access to the camera and the film audience complicates the depiction of his and Annie's relationship. Furthermore, it specifically complicates the depiction of their conversations. In fact many of the conversations in the film, even ones between Alvy and other characters, are one-sided in some way. The monologic aspect of the opening never really goes away, even when the direct address ceases and other people enter the frame. The film sets up the question of whether we are to take its talk as conversation or pontification. Early in the film, when Alvy complains about the man in line behind him and Annie at the movies (first to Annie and then to the camera/the audience), he accuses him of pontificating. The film also poses conversation (or pontification) as a way of avoiding sex, as in the scene between Alvy and his first wife

⁷⁶ It's also not clear at exactly what point in the story this monologue occurs. Is it contemporaneous with the monologue at the end, which also occurs just after a breakup? Or is he referring to another of their earlier breakups? Is it perhaps after the final breakup but before the rehearsal of the play? He seems less upset at the end than he does at the beginning, which may indicate that this occurs after an earlier breakup.

Allison (Carol Kane). Alvy is ranting about the JFK assassination, and Allison says, “You’re using this conspiracy theory as an excuse to avoid sex with me.” To which accusation Alvy replies by turning to the camera and saying, “Oh my God, she’s right . . .”

But this problem has also partly to do with the comedian’s prerogative to make jokes. As Peter Cowie notes, Allen’s humor “derives from a facility with words that belongs to the tradition of Groucho Marx” and that “depends on complicity with the audience.”⁷⁷ When every line is a punch line, it diminishes the possibility of conversation.

Many of the narrative elements of the film refer to the idea of what makes a “good audience.” Allen’s direct address to the camera explicitly acknowledges the film’s audience, while his status as comedian, both diegetically and extradiegetically, also makes his performance dependent upon an audience’s reaction. Even Annie commands her own audience—her burgeoning singing career presents her personal development precisely in relation to her comfort in front of an audience. It is to these performances that I would now like to turn.

Annie’s moments onstage as a singer provide her with her own moments of addressing the audience, although they are unlike Alvy’s in that they don’t break with the flow of the narrative. Her two performances indicate her personal growth as well as her progressing relationship with Alvy. Like stand-up comedy, singing is a performance that is one-sided in form but that at the same time relies upon a certain response from the audience. Her first performance (“It Had to be You”) is disastrous largely because it

⁷⁷ Cowie, 18.

occurs among the ambient noise of the club—people talking, chairs moving, a crash of clattering dishes—while she modestly downplays Alvy’s compliment of her (clearly more masterful) second performance (“Seems Like Old Times”) by saying that “it was a good audience.”

At another point, an explicit connection is made between Alvy’s audience as a comedian and his sex life with Annie. At the house in the Hamptons, Alvy disapproves of Annie’s use of marijuana before every time they have sex. He takes the joint away from her, but soon after they begin kissing it’s obvious that she’s “distant.”

Annie: Well . . . I need grass.

Alvy: Well, it ruins it for me if you have grass. Because, you know, I’m like a comedian, so if I get a laugh from a person who’s high, it doesn’t count, you know, ’cause they’re always laughing.

Annie: Were you always funny?

Alvy: Hey, what is this, an interview? We’re supposed to be making love.

Taking this exchange into account, it strikes one that, in many of their moments together, Annie is laughing instead of saying anything. When the camera records their last lunch together at the end, remaining outside the restaurant window looking in, Annie is bent over in laughter. At other points in the film, her response to something Alvy says is to laugh, though at other times they do laugh together, notably in the scene with the escaped lobsters.

So does Alvy see in Annie a good audience? Consider the repetition of the lobster scene with the other woman, who doesn’t laugh and is matter-of-fact and a little confrontational (“What are you making such a big deal about? They’re only lobsters” and “Are you joking, or what?” when he mentions quitting smoking sixteen years ago).

What relationship is there between being a “good audience” and conversation?

The two would seem to be at odds, since conversation is mutual exchange and a

performer/audience dynamic seems more unequal. And yet, because there are moments of performance in remarriage comedies that contribute to “meet and happy conversation,” we might consider what the “audience” can give back to the “performer.”

In the previous chapter, we saw that Jesse and Celine “perform” their own experiences of the night in Vienna to each other—Jesse (to a slightly lesser extent) through his novel, and Celine through her song. The conversation that comprises the entirety of the film, then, culminates in a “conversation” continued through the performance of a song (coded as such through a shot/reverse shot structure). Furthermore, I noted some similarities between the performance dynamic in *Before Sunset* to that in *The Awful Truth*, to which I would like to return as we consider the idea of audience in *Annie Hall*.

In *The Awful Truth*, Jerry Warriner (Cary Grant) is repeatedly in the position of audience to his (soon-to-be-ex-)wife Lucy (Irene Dunne). He takes delight in watching her dance with her new fiancé and is made uncomfortable when she later performs as his “sister” in front of *his* fiancée. And he unexpectedly finds himself an audience member at Lucy’s recital when he bursts into the studio, suspecting a tryst. Jerry creates a scene as he settles in his seat, tipping his chair and a small table, drawing a laugh from Lucy as she finishes her song. Jerry’s moment of slapstick might make Lucy into an audience member even as she performs.

What the audience gives back is laughter, then (“some grand laughs” in words of *The Awful Truth*), which provides a way to think about the performer/audience relationship as an exchange aspiring to conversation. However, *Annie Hall* is exceptional among the films under discussion here, because it ends with the couple’s breakup. As

Marilyn Fabe writes, the film “is less about love than about its loss or impossibility.”⁷⁸

The film questions the idea of relationships throughout, beginning and ending with jokes about what makes us begin relationships or stay in them (“we need the eggs”) and what makes us break them off (“I don’t want to be part of a club that would have someone like me for a member”).

So, since this cynicism about relationships remains at the end, are we to take Alvy’s suggestion of marriage at the end of the film only as a desperate plea to get Annie back? In an earlier conversation which takes place as Annie moves her things into his apartment, Alvy resists her idea of giving up her own apartment:

Alvy: We live together. We sleep together. We eat together. Jeezus. You don’t want it to be like we’re married, do ya?

Annie: How is it any different?”

Alvy: It’s different ’cause you keep your own apartment. Because, you know, it’s there. We don’t have to go to it, we don’t have to deal with it, but it’s like a . . . a . . . a free-floating life raft that we know that we’re not married.

In some ways this exchange reveals them already to be married, but it also reveals Alvy’s resistance to it. By the end of the film, he will be the one pushing to get married.

Interestingly, in both instances he appears to be the more immature of the two. He doesn’t really seem to have changed until he addresses the camera at the end of the film, in his most sincere speech. He acknowledges the effect Annie had on his life—and yet, we see their conversation come to an end. True to the nervous romance, the film ends on a note of ambivalence about the nature of romantic relationships in general.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Fabe, 189–190.

⁷⁹ Krutnik claims that “the happy ending remains a firm structural expectation of the nervous romance,” even though it may be “delayed, problematized, and cast in doubt.” See Krutnik, 70. It would seem, however, that whatever is “happy” at the end of *Annie*

The conversations in *Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* follow the conversations of the remarriage comedies by leading to mutual acknowledgment, a transformation of vision, reconciliation, reaffirmation. *Annie Hall* ends with a change in both characters, but separately. Their conversation does not continue.

Hall still necessitates the breakup of the couple; Alvy and Annie may go on to other relationships, but they are not “made for each other.”

Conclusion:
An Invitation to Further Conversation

In this thesis, my aim has been to provide an opening for a conversation *about* conversation on film. Through close readings of three very different—and yet often resonant—films, I have tried to show a range of ways to consider conversation on film. *Sunrise* proved that conversation can be portrayed visually, while also showing some of the broader applications of Cavell’s genre of remarriage comedy. *Before Sunset* provided an example of how talk can fill a film, and also how films can be in conversation with one another. Finally, *Annie Hall* pointed to some of the ways that conversation may be complicated—how even a film full of talk can nevertheless fail to convey meet and happy conversation between its couple.

Yet there are still many paths to follow on the topic, and I have alluded to some of them in the preceding chapters. Even leaving aside the work that could be done on how conversation is filmed in non-romantic contexts, or among groups of more than two people, there is much that remains. For instance, I have chosen not to focus on other national cinemas, but there is, of course, potential there for the same kinds of reconciliatory conversation. As we saw in Chapter One, themes found in Cavell’s genre of remarriage comedy are present in Bergman and Rohmer films. In the Introduction, I pointed to the ways in which *Vivre sa vie* explores possibilities of filming conversation, and many of Godard’s other early films would reward consideration along these lines, including *A bout de souffle* (1960), *Le mépris* (1963), and *Une femme mariée* (1964).

The role that music and performance play could also lead to further work. In *Sunrise*, the couple performs a “peasant dance” that both cements their renewed desires and commitment that the city has allowed while also setting them apart from the other

city-dwellers; in *Before Sunset*, Celine's song allows her to perform and claim her desire for Jesse, while also reciprocating his telling of their night together in his novel; and Annie Hall's performances indicate her growth as a character. All of these songs are important to the couples' conversations—as are many of the songs in remarriage comedies—and so it could be fruitful to examine the song as conversation more closely.

Stanley Cavell's work has influenced this thesis by providing the most developed theoretical framework through which to understand the reconciliatory conversation on film. I hope that I have conveyed the broad value of his work to film study. Most of the scholarship (of which there is not a great amount) that uses *Pursuits of Happiness* as a major source hews very closely to the same time period—classical Hollywood—or the same genre—romantic and/or screwball comedy. I have tried to show how applications of the ideas in this book may be applied to a wider range of films, even as the genre of remarriage comedy remains limited. That is, the films I've discussed are not comedies of remarriage, although we can understand them using some of the same language and concepts.

In the course of the conversation in *Before Sunset*, Jesse says to Celine, "I guess a memory's never really finished, as long as you're alive." We might say the same thing about conversation. I hope this thesis contributes, then, to a continuing conversation about film, form, and human relationships.

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