Toufic El-Khoury

Marriage and Its Representations in Classical Hollywood Comedy, 1934–1945

Stanley Cavell, the Concept of Skepticism, and Kierkegaard's Legacy

ABSTRACT

This article explores the questions of marriage and divorce as discussed by Stanley Cavell in his study of classical Hollywood comedies, in which he considered a popular subgenre of the American comedy of the thirties and forties that he dubbed the "comedy of remarriage". It focuses on Cavell's analysis of a series of films and the way these comedies belong to a specific American school of thought with a case study of The Awful Truth (Leo McCarey, US 1937). It then seeks to identify traces of Kierkegaard's moral legacy, by way of Wittgenstein's influence on the American thinker, in Cavell's original approach to marriage and divorce in light of his discussion of philosophical skepticism.

KEYWORDS

Classical Hollywood Comedy, Stanley Cavell, Cinema, Skepticism, Cinematic Representations of Marriage, Søren Kierkegaard

BIOGRAPHY

Toufic El-Khoury is Assistant Professor (Maître de conférences) at the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth (USJ, Beirut, Lebanon) and Lecturer at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA, University of Balamand, Lebanon). He is the author of *La Comédie hollywoodienne classique (1929–1945), structure triadique et médiations du désir* («Champs visuels», 2016) and the co-editor, with Alain Brenas, of *La ville méditerranéenne au cinéma* (Orizons, 2015). He is the editor of the Film Studies series «Cinématographies» (Orizons, Paris, France).

MARRIAGE AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS IN COMEDY

Representations of marriage in theater and film, more specifically in comedy, are logically correlated to the mores, habits, and customs of the countries that produce them. We can identify two ways those dramatic representations have

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been the subject of significant transformation and also how the production context has influenced the conventions of comedy.

First, the basic narrative structure of Greek new comedy, or Menandrian comedy (fourth century BCE), the dominant comic model in western theater until the seventeenth century and based in the Greek and Latin traditions, became obsolete when the conception of marriage started to change. The narrative structure of new comedy was summarized by Northrop Frye:

> What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will. In this simple pattern there are several complex elements. In the first place, the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action, the comic discovery, anagnorisis or cognition.[1]

This narrative model remained the comic convention in western theater until the beginning of the seventeenth century (Molière respected it, while parodying it, in most of his popular plays – see, for instance, *L'Ecole des femmes* or the subplot of *L'Avare*). Playwrights in various countries had begun, however, to take liberties with it: Shakespeare in England, Lope de Vega in Spain, and Corneille in France (though less popular for his comedies than Molière, he contributed substantially to the genre[2]) were modifying the comic dynamics of the central conflict. The main change was in the representation of the principal young couple: while in the new comedy model the obstacle the lovers must overcome is externally imposed, in the comedies of the abovementioned authors, the obstacles are a product of the couple's own actions and desires. Conflict takes place within the intricacies of reciprocal affection rather than in the midst of social or generational opposition.

1 Frye 1990, 163. Charles Mauron gives a differently detailed account of this narrative convention in his Psychocritique du genre comique: "The young girl, the object of dispute, is the property of the father who guards her or the Ieno who sells her. The emancipation by marriage is henceforth the story's challenge. The general raits if the new comedy are thus established for many centuries. Its necessary types – rich father (and his avatars), young and penniless lover, cunning servants, young girls and courtesans – will pass under slightly modified forms from antiquity to modern comedy, bringing with them a whole procession of much older grotesque figures: parasite, cook, rural figures, blowhard soldier, etc.", Mauron 1970, 80, my translation.

2 The plays that epitomize those changes are *La Galerie du Palais* (1631) and *La Place Royale* (1633) by Corneille, *The Gardener's Dog* (1618) by Lope de Vega, and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1592), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599), among others, by Shakespeare.

These changes in the representations of marriage in comedy are explained by a shift in western societies whereby marriage was no longer considered simply a family pact and the views of the couple were taken into consideration. Irène Théry has proposed that the idea of a "marriage of love" appeared in literature and was staged in the theater as a reaction against the abuse of paternal power, family alliances, and the Church. The success of works promoting "renewal of the matrimonial relationship" (as in the subsequent novels and essays of Rousseau) especially with female readers is evidence of the centrality of the female identity to demands for a new model of marriage.[3] Freedom became part of understandings of marriage, specifically the freedom of the individuals who might marry to accept or reject the married condition.

The new comic convention, with the obstacles to the happiness of the couple generated by the couple themselves, became more popular as the societies in question underwent transformations that included the emergence of a middle class which formed a significant part of the theatrical audience.[4] In addition, the definition of marriage as a social pact was gradually replaced by the possibility of reconciling social necessity and individual aspiration. Within the context of the contestation of the traditional matrimonial model, "free choice of spouse" became one of the major themes of comedy. In Shakespeare, Corneille, and Lope de Vega we see the comic tension shifting from a conflict between law and desire to a more detailed investigation of the contradictions of desire itself.[5] Thus, these authors opened the way for modern comedy, anticipating the works of Marivaux or Goldoni.[6] For instance, Marivaux's female characters, although in part inspired by comic types inherited from the *Commedia dell'arte*, acquired a strong individual conscience, and the "internalization of conflict, essential for the development of comedy",[7] became one of the most remarkable specificities of his theater.[8]

3 See Théry 2001, 81.

4 See Girard 1990, 54–55.

5 In most cases, the traditional authority figures become *conscience figures* in modern comedy: they comment the heroes' actions instead of opposing them and have only a peripheral impact, and sometimes no impact, on the course of events (Girard 1990, 53), as observed in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Marivaux' *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard*. In American comedy, this is obvious in the use of character actors specialized in sharp wit and ironic commentary, such as Aunt Patsy (Cecil Cunningham) in The Awful Truth, a movie we will discuss later. See Karnick 1994, 133.

6 In the case of Pierre Corneille, we can cite his first comedies, *La Galerie du palais* (1631–1632), *La Place Royale* (1633–1634), and *La Suivante* (1634). Marie-Claude Canova discusses the distance between new comedy and the French theatrical tradition by way of Corneille, who substituted "for the traditional Italian intrigue of blocked love affairs, the dramatic canvas of the love chain inherited of the pastorale, with its conflicted couples and the opposition of faithful or philandering and indifferent lovers", Canova 1993, 70–71: my translation.

7 Martin 1996, 11.

8 See *La Double Inconstance* (1723), *Le Dénouement imprévu* (1724), *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (1730), *Les Serments indiscrets* (1733), and *L'Heureux stratagème* (1734).

An interdisciplinary examination of the relationship between societal legitimacy and organization of marital status, on one hand, and comic traditions, on the other, in a specific community, society, or country would surely be fruitful. The way a society conceives marriage conditions the way it laughs about it. When we look at classical cinema in the United States, Italy, and Egypt, we observe that certain comic traditions related to adultery, divorce or plotting the death of a spouse are more similar for American and Egyptian cinema than for the two western societies. For example, one convention absent from American and Egyptian comedies, though very popular in Italian comedies, is the killing of a spouse, especially the woman. Whereas Catholic Italian society forbids or highly stigmatizes divorce, such is less the case in Protestant and Muslim societies. "Divorce Italian style" (an ironic metaphor for a husband plotting to kill his wife popularized by the title of a Pietro Germi comedy with Marcello Mastroianni[9]) could therefore flourish in Italy but be completely inconsistent with other audiences' comic habits.[10] Comedy conventions will vary depending on society's laws and moral norms.

While this particular question deserves its own expanded study, which would involve a comparative examination of comedy in relation to judicial, sociocultural, or theological topics, here we concentrate on a core study of the representation of marriage in American classical comedy. We will focus on Stanley Cavell's analysis of a specific comic corpus and on the way these comedies discussing marriage belong to a specifically American school of thought. We will then seek to identify traces of Kierkegaard's philosophical legacy, by way of Wittgenstein's influence on Cavell, in this American thinker's definition of marriage.

STANLEY CAVELL, SKEPTICISM, AND REMARRIAGE: *THE AWFUL TRUTH* (1937)

Of the seven movies discussed in Cavell's famous essay on American comedy, *Pursuits of Happiness: Hollywood and the Comedy of Remarriage*, only two treat marriage directly, showing the internal functioning of a married couple with a minimum of external interferences: The Awful Truth (Leo McCarey, US 1937) and Adam's Rib (George Cukor, US 1948). And of those two movies only The Awful Truth has its narrative focused solely on the marriage question – Adam's Rib centers on two lawyers, happily married, who find themselves on opposing sides in a trial of a philandering husband and a jealous and murderous wife, with

9 Some of the comedies centered on this particular comic plot: Il Vedovo (Dino Risi, IT 1959), Divorce Italian Style (Divorzio all'italiana, Pietro Germi, IT 1961).

10 In France, historically a Roman Catholic country but marked by definitive secular traditions since the beginning of the twentieth century, the "divorce by murder" comic convention appears occasionally in cinema, as with La Poison (Sasha Guitry, FR 1951), about an elderly rural couple trying to murder each other.

their marriage affected by the twists of the legal procedure. The Awful Truth is therefore of special interest in the present case: it is a thorough examination of what marriage is and launches discussion of what marriage is thought to be or can become.

The story is simple: Jerry (Cary Grant) and Lucy (Irene Dunne) Warriner, a rich and happy couple, decide to divorce immediately after each suspects the other of adultery – even if that adultery is never confirmed or refuted, with neither of the protagonists making much effort to prove the spouse wrong. After a short battle to gain custody of the dog, Mr. Smith (a comic substitute for children), Lucy Warriner is courted by the handsome but naïve Southern oil tycoon Dan Leeson, played by Ralph Bellamy – Bellamy plays another "whipping boy" character for Grant in His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks, US 1940), another "comedy of remarriage" discussed by Cavell. After Jerry has done everything to undermine that relationship and Lucy is ready to come back to him, a series of misunderstandings again alienates the couple. Jerry then courts a rich heiress, but Lucy succeeds in sabotaging the engagement – leading to her reuniting, in a "screwball" way, with Jerry. The final scene, in a movie filled with quips, misunderstandings, and farcical situations, is subtly and surprisingly cerebral.

In this final scene, Jerry and Lucy Warriner find themselves in their old country house, in separate rooms, trying but unable to sleep. A door with a defective lock separates them but continually opens by itself, leading first to a dry verbal confrontation and then to a more intense and intimate conversation. Each of the protagonists has obvious difficulty in dealing with his or her "opponent's" intimacy and space. This problem of intimacy is persistent: sleeping in contingent rooms, they have a problem with going through the common doorway that no one would have used if the door had not had a defective lock. In addition, the initial confusions are never clarified, unlike, usually, those in comic theater: the two weeks that Jerry Warriner spent in Florida remain a mystery, as does the "night" Lucy and her piano teacher, Duvalle, spent in a hotel room as a result the breakdown of the car. McCarey is less interested in the resolutions of farcical misunderstandings than in confronting the characters with their demons and, one might say, the hellish nature of conversation or the lack of conversation: the movie's twists are not parenthetical to the couple's harmony but rather a critical reevaluation of what legitimizes such a harmony. Moreover, the final sequence, punctuated by the failures of the defective lock that open the door and force them into conversation, introduces a dialogue built on strange and amusing syllogisms, or rather anti-syllogisms, where the logical terms defining a love relation seem to be leading to illogical compromises.

Cavell constructs his analysis of remarriage comedy around the issue of skepticism. According to Hall's summary,

> Philosophical skepticism is a reservation or doubt about the legitimacy of a whole segment of knowledge claims. … Philosophical skepticism involves a doubt about the legitimacy of any knowledge claim whatsoever. … [This doubt] concerns the legitimacy of this segment of claims, or the legitimacy of every claim, to knowledge.[11]

Hence, in Cavell's mind the protagonists of remarriage comedy are confronted not only with the quips and pros of marriage, but also with their own understanding of the nature of the conjugal bond in which they are involved. In other words, the couple is tested: how can two beings communicate and exist in each other's space while different and at the same time equal?[12] On that issue we can turn to the final conversation between the soon-to-be-reunited ex-married couple, discussed by Cavell, which goes as follows:

> JERRY: In a half an hour, we'll no longer be Mr. and Mrs. Funny, isn't it?
> LUCY: Yes, it's funny that everything's the way it is on account of the way you feel.
> JERRY: Huh?
> LUCY: Well, I mean, if you didn't feel that way you do, things wouldn't be the way they are, would they? I mean, things could be the same if things were different.
> JERRY: But things are the way you made them.
> LUCY: Oh, no. No, things are the way you think I made them. I didn't make them that way at all. Things are just the same as they always were, only you're the same as you were too, so I guess things will never be the same again. […] You're all confused, aren't you?
> JERRY: Aren't you?
> LUCY: No.
> JERRY: Well you should be, because you're wrong about things being different because they're not the same. Things are different except in a different way. You're still the same, only I've been a fool… but I'm not now.
> LUCY: Oh.
> JERRY: So long as I'm different don't you think that… well maybe things could be the same again… only a little different, huh?[13]

In discussing the terms "different" and "same", the protagonists realize that the equation of these terms gives improbable results. The second scene of the movie (the couple's first fight) and the last one (the couple in the middle of their reconciliation) are inverses: the second scene uses a frontal, almost static camera, with a predominance of "American shots" and an almost absence of close-ups; the last one uses a diagonal representation of the couple, multiple shots with significant depth of field, and medium shots that underline the dialectical

11 Hall 1994, 149–150.
12 See Garcia 2012, 177.
13 This scene starts at the 82nd minute and ends at the 85th (last but one) minute of the movie.

complexity of this reunion, suggesting the reconciliation without allowing, yet, a physical intimacy. The conclusion to be drawn from this conversation may be that love between protagonists cannot be reduced to a mathematical logic. It can be likened to a Kierkegaardean "leap" into faith: a movement out of the rational or a paradoxical acceptance of the weakness of one's desires.

In McCarey's movie, as in other famous comedies of the classical Hollywood era, conflict that is initially a public, temporal, and social matter starts to affect the private sphere – as in the example of ADAM'S RIB. The dichotomy between the private and public spheres in which the couple evolves completes an inherent discussion of equivalence and difference in love and in the ethics of marriage.

In its paradox-filled examination of conjugal behavior, THE AWFUL TRUTH offers a synthesis, but also a critical reevaluation, of comic representations of marriage that preceded it. In Shakespearean comedy, marriage comes as a culmination that ends the complicated games of love and the misunderstandings revealing the shortcomings of human desire. Theatrical farce (*Vaudeville* in French) parodies the marital constitution and alters the boundaries that marriage creates between the couple and society – the moral contract is supposed partially to cut off the married couple from the outside world, with the couple essentially asocial: hence, their exposure to all temptations. As a result, the intrusion of the potential lover into the conjugal home, as we see in THE AWFUL TRUTH, leads to an obliteration of the spatial and moral distinction between established order (marriage, bourgeoisie) and the secret or marginal (adultery, life of pleasures), and therefore social rules lose all meaning. The result is a confusion of states (secret and revelation), spaces (private and public), and status (husband and lover).

However, more importantly, the movie shows two protagonists exercising their freedom fully and aware of all the contradictions and complications this exercise implies. Their decisions to break up and reconcile, to leave unclarified their suspicions about possible philandering, and to realize that their separation is an integral part of their conjugal process are at the core of the comic plot. The starting point of Cavell's examination of marriage is that "a legitimate marriage requires that the pair is free to marry, that there is no impediment between them", typical of the way, as we have noted, marriage gradually came to be conceived from the seventeenth century. However, he continues by saying that "this freedom is announced in [the comedies of remarriage] in the concept of divorce",[14] introducing a paradox to today's understanding of what marriage is.

In McCarey's movie, marriage is a mental state that the couple cannot fully experience without a certain sense of withdrawal and the constant trials of a

14 Cavell 1981, 102–103.

vain and indefinite desire. The individuals who make up the couple must try to pull themselves out of this state to understand better their acceptance of it. The movie shows us the conflict and a way to resolve it but without guaranteeing success, thus faithful to the comic spirit. More importantly, it is the lack of a guarantee that the marriage will succeed, its inherent fallibility, that gives the it legitimacy in the minds of the parties involved.

CAVELL AND KIERKEGAARD'S LEGACY

Cavell's approach seems rooted in what he considers a typically American way of discussing marriage and romance. That idea is popular, but it is not always accepted. David Shumway, a cultural and literary historian, criticizes Cavell's approach and locates the American screwball comedies' approach to love and marriage in a more global cultural legacy. He also claims that as the social role of marriage grew smaller, the conjugal state was associated with romance and intimacy. Whereas medieval romances opposed love and the state of marriage, as noted by Denis de Rougemont in his study of Béroul's *Tristan and Iseult*,[15] the seventeenth century introduced the idea of love as an emotion which formed a source of marriage and as no longer "directed by social institutions such as family or religion".[16] The new form of marriage we encountered earlier started to appear in the seventeenth century in a form designated "companionate marriage" in England, but not as a product of romance. According to Shumway, "The choice of spouse was increasingly left in the hands of children themselves and was based mainly on temperamental compatibility with the aim of lasting companionship".[17]Two discourses start to coexist, in essence contradictory and their differences unrecognized. Romance offered "adventure, intense emotion and the possibility of finding the perfect mate", while intimacy promised "deep communication, friendship and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love".[18]

In his study, Shumway points out a first paradox in our modern understanding of what marriage must be. However, the idea of paradox is at the heart of Cavell's discussion of the subject. Moreover, Shumway's assumption, as well as his remarks about the difficulty of establishing the grounds for reciprocity while discussing the unpredictability of human desire, suggests a tension between two discourses that we can find in Kierkegaard's thought about the same institution.

One of the differences between Kierkegaard's esthetical and the ethical stages concerns the subject's choice to free himself from all "profane" mediations – the judgment of an outside gaze. For instance, in "Some Reflections on

15 See de Rougemont 2001, 17.
16 Shumway 2003, 18.
17 Shumway 2003, 17.
18 Shumway 2003, 27.

Marriage in Answer to Objections – By a Married Man", the second section of *Stages on Life's Way*, the narrator-spouse notices that his appreciation of his wife's singing and piano-playing is based not on comparative criteria, but on the subject-wife's specific particularities (because it is she, Montaigne would say):

> Although being a husband for eight years, I do not know yet with certainty how my wife presents herself in the eyes of other's critical view. … It is exactly because my love means everything to me that, to my mind, criticism only leads to nonsense.[19]

Starting from a desire without a precise object or a desire for women in general, in the aesthetical stage, rational love for *one* woman determines the achievement of the ethical stage, in the Kierkegaardean meaning of the concept– represented by the married man, who, in short, takes responsibility for his life and becomes aware of his responsibilities toward others, clearly defining his objects of desire and fully experiencing the challenges of reciprocity.[20]

Influenced by the Danish author and by Gertrude Stein, Cavell reprises Kierkegaard's moral thought, to which he probably had access via his reading of Wittgenstein, as evidenced in an article reprised in his essay *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*. If the relation between Cavell and Wittgenstein centers on the language and the "immediacy of knowledge", the similarities between Cavell and Kierkegaard on ethics, specifically on matrimonial ethics, are more difficult to define. However, Cavell's admiration for Kierkegaard stresses the similarities between their approaches to marriage. In an article exploring this continuity between the two authors, Ronald L. Hall proposes,

> Cavell has adopted, knowingly or not, a Kierkegaardian way of thinking, especially in what he says about skepticism and about marriage. … His thought is informed at critical junctures by a peculiarly Kierkegaardian dialectic. This peculiar dialectic I will call "the dialectic of paradox".[21]

Kierkegaard already had a very specific conception of paradox. In his *Philosophical Fragments*, he stated,

19 Kierkegaard 1988, 106–107. My translation.

20 A scene of The Awful Truth reflects, unintentionally and as parody, the affirmation of the husband in Kierkegaard's text who notes that his wife's voice is "good enough" for him, meaning external criteria and comparison do not condition his judgment of his wife's voice. In the movie, the wife, Lucy Warriner, a trained singer, sings a song with her suitor, Dan Leeson (Ralph Bellamy), who does not realize that Lucy is a talented singer. This detail reappears later for dramatic purposes (his mother reveals to them that Lucy had a music teacher and that he is the direct cause of Lucy's divorce). Nevertheless, the singing scene underlines the fact that Dan Leeson, unable to evaluate Lucy's voice, is not necessarily the appropriate mate for her. He is just able to say that he himself had lessons and is mildly interested in her answers. What starts as an intimate, reciprocal activity – each of them singing, even without talent, just for the other to appreciate – ends in what seems to be, in the case of Dan Leeson, a need for external judgment and appreciation. See Macarthur 2014, 99.

21 Hall 1994, 145.

> One should not think slightingly of the paradoxical; for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity. But the highest pitch of every passion is always to will its own downfall; and so it is also the supreme passion of the Reason to seek a collision, though this collision must in one way or another prove its undoing. The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think.[22]

Hall develops this idea by identifying a dialectic of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, a dialectic he summarizes as follows:

> For the first time, a new unity between opposites is possible; but in this new unity, the oppositions are accentuated, not resolved. … This dialectic of paradox in which something may be said to be necessarily present in some phenomenon, but present as absent, occurs over and over in Kierkegaard's thinking.[23]

Hall gives the example of the dialectical relations in Kierkegaard's writings between resignation (or despair) and faith.[24] Furthermore, Kierkegaard questioned another paradoxical pattern in the matrimonial process. In his *Stages in Life's Way*, he stresses a fundamental difficulty in marriage: love or nascent love (or, one might say, desire) is immediate but marriage is a decision. He does not consider love alone, for it implies a blind and thoughtless adoration Kierkegaard fears and warns against.[25] Emotion is reaffirmed and reevaluated by a rational process, suggesting the construction of reciprocity by experience and an affirmation of reason – even if the process seems to hardly accommodate the immediacy of love. The experience of reciprocity allows the individuals involved to be fully aware of the contradictions of the process on which they have embarked, but it also allows them to be conscious that those contradictions are part of the potential success of the experience and the achievement of conversation between lovers – in that sense, the question of faith comes into the equation. For this reason,

> Love must be welcomed into marriage or into the resolution; willing to marry means that the most immediate of all things must be, at the same time, the freest of resolutions. … Marriage is a resolution that does not ensue directly from the immediacy of love.[26]

22 Kierkegaard 1962, 46.

23 Hall 1994, 146–147.

24 "For Kierkegaard's, faith excludes and at the same time includes both resignation and despair; faith would not be faith apart from both elements, yet faith constantly annuls both", Hall 1994, 147.

25 He asserts that "there is a form of modesty against which the most intense adorations is an offense, a form of infidelity against the loved one; even if this adoration, in the mind of the lover, connects him indissolubly to her, it is a form of infidelity because in this admiration there is a criticism in play", Kierkegaard 1988, 132, my translation.

26 Kierkegaard 1978, 95–96, my translation.

We can identify a similar tension in American remarriage comedy, a tension that is perhaps not sufficiently underlined by Cavell even if it is in accord with his approach to the subject: the non-conformity between the nature (multiform, fluctuant) of desire and the immutable form of marriage. In a way, it is the meeting of an irresistible force with an immovable object – to employ Johnny Mercer's lyrics in "Something's Gotta Give". In defining the conjugal state, Cavell implies that desire for a single person must exist in a constantly renewed institution and that the momentarily dissolved relationship between lovers implicates the possibility of divorce and constitutes at the same time the moral legitimacy of the conjugal bond. It is on this level that the inherent paradox of both philosophers' discussions of marriage is most obvious. Cavell asserts this idea by explicitly drawing comparisons with Kierkegaard in his study of THE AWFUL TRUTH, defining what he calls

> the two most impressive affirmations known to me of the task of human experience, the acceptance of human relatedness, as the acceptance of repetition. Kierkegaard's study called *repetition*, which is a study of the possibility of marriage… As redemption by suffering does not depend on something that has already happened, so redemption by happiness does not depend on something that has yet to happen; both depend on a faith in something that is always happening, day by day.[27]

The paradox on which Cavell and Kierkegaard rely allows them to revise the idea of what marriage is (what its values are, what the norms traditionally associated with it are, how it is conceived in certain socio-cultural and religious contexts), and what marriage should be, or is meant to be, when it is reevaluated inside the intricacies of an intimate bond and the specific experiences of a couple. This focus on reciprocity shifts attention from the institution regarded as part of the public sphere and conventions, and even as part of a metaphysical discourse, to a discussion on marriage that suggests a new kind of discourse where the authority of marriage is determined by its inherent flaws and ambivalence. Cavell summarizes this as follow:

> If what is to succeed Christianity [as Kierkegaard comprehends it, in Cavell's mind] is a redemptive politics or a redemptive psychology, these will require a new burden of faith in the authority of one's everyday experience, one's experience of the everyday… One might take the new burden of one's experience to amount to the claim to be one's own apostle, to forerun oneself, to be capable of deliverances of oneself.[28]

With this idea, Cavell draws definite parallels between Kierkegaard, on one hand, and Emerson and Thoreau, on the other, the American thinkers on whom he relies heavily in his study (and in his work in general), suggesting that the

27 Cavell 1981, 241.
28 Cavell 1981, 240.

burden of faith in daily experiences and in one's intimate perception of complex questioning is at the heart of American transcendentalist thought.

Cavell sees marriage as "the repetition of everydayness".[29] The essence of his view of marriage has the same paradoxical pattern as the ideas of Kierkegaard: Cavell describes marriage with concepts not usually related to it. The notion of the "leap" developed by Kierkegaard is particularly revealing, and also surprising in its evocation of a need for constant renewal inside a state determined by permanence. The threat of divorce consolidates the legitimacy of marriage in Cavell's argumentation, just as the fallibility of marriage, in Kierkegaard's ethical stage, gives it its credibility, and just as the risk of metaphysical doubt consolidates, in the religious stage, the possibility of faith.[30] Marriage for Cavell, like faith for Kierkegaard, is a gamble, for it rests not on a religious certitude or on a sacred and unbreakable bond (the indefectible contract for the first, the rational proof of the existence of God for the second), but on the risks inherent in an individual choice that we accept, and assume, despite everything.[31] Thus, remarriage is the essence of modern marriage: an improbable game and education, defined by action instead of intention, conversation instead of norms. In his study of another comedy, IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT (Frank Capra, US 1934), Cavell describes the adventures of a couple, not a married couple, but still one experiencing all the conflictual interactions, the construction of an intimacy. and the ability to converse normally associated with the development of a conjugal bond. The couple are on the run for various reasons (Ellen Andrews, a rich heiress, is escaping her father to reunite with her playboy husband, and Peter Warne, a worn reporter, is helping her in order to get the exclusive story; they recognize in predictable fashion that they are falling for one another), and we realize very quickly, in Cavell's words, that

> what this pair does together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together, that they know how to spend time together, even that they would rather waste time together than do anything else – except that no time they are together could be wasted.[32]

The comic adventures underline the reciprocity this couple is building and present a particularity of the love process that we can identify as a "spiritual camaraderie", a notion already popular in the 1920s and found in Wilhelm Reich's

29 See Cavell 1981, 241.

30 One of the most famous statements by Kierkegaard interweaves faith and marriage. Talking about his inability to marry his longtime fiancée, he claimed: "If I had faith, I would have married Regine". Did he change his mind about marriage because he was not sure it would succeed? If he had accepted the possibility of failure, marriage would have been possible. Here is the main "awful truth" the movie and Cavell are talking about.

31 See Cavell 1993, 231–232.

32 Cavell 1981, 83.

writings in 1930:[33] what matters most in the shared experience of the protagonists is not what they do together but the fact that the experience is shared. The "spiritual camaraderie" refers to action as well as intention. The experience by itself highlights the affective and moral reciprocity: the fact of being married, or together, is less important than the couple's acknowledgement of an essential feeling, building a consciousness of being a couple. Cavell is less interested in the battle-of-the-sexes comic convention than in the idea of debate: the sexual power relationship, on which comedy built most of its narrative coda, matters less than a moral conversation that articulates how the protagonists will consider living together.

CONCLUSION

Not every American comedy offers the discussion about marriage provided by the comedies selected by Cavell. In HEAVEN CAN WAIT (Ernst Lubitsch, US 1943) for instance, Henry Van Cleeve (Don Ameche), a sympathetic womanizer, arrives in purgatory and confesses that he does not deserve to go to heaven due to his conjugal misdeeds. His marriage to Martha (Gene Tierney) temporarily puts on hold his fun-loving nature and his need to seduce. The movie carefully avoids showing the other women in his life: members of his family talk about them, only their profession (mainly as chorus girls) identifies them, and visual ellipses or external indications suggest their existence, as with the example of the jeweler's bill found by Martha in Henry's coat. During his whole life, and until his arrival in purgatory, Henry has been torn between two "feelings": the esthetical and the ethical, between the Don Juan and the Husband personas, in the Kierkegaardian sense of the words. He is torn between his attraction to all women, to the feminine multitude on one side, and his fidelity to one woman untouched by any critical comparison with the others. Hence, the protagonist is part of a "virtual" triangle, faced with two ideals rather than two persons: one indefinite (a consistent although anonymous feminine multitude) and one a personalized entity (his wife, Martha, representing the whole institution of marriage).

However, for various reasons Cavell's approach does not seem to apply to Lubitsch's movie: he states at the beginning of *Pursuits of Happiness* that the movies he selected for his study were written and directed by seminal American authors (Howard Hawks, Leo McCarey, George Cukor, for example). The fact that the movie is adapted from a Hungarian dramatist's play (*Birthday* by Leslie Bush-Fekete) does not help; it seems to consolidate Cavell's belief that Lubitsch, like other European directors, has a rather "Continental" view of mar-

33 See Reich 1993.

riage, strongly influenced by European comic traditions (mainly farce). Even if this assertion is open to discussion, we must admit that as a corpus Cavell's comedies of remarriage do stand to "modern American culture", as Ronald Hall puts it, "as Shakespearean drama to Elizabethan England, as Tragedy stood to the golden age of the Greeks".[34]Those comedies become the reflection of an era's consideration of the conjugal condition in a specific socio-cultural context, an attempt to make "sense of nonsense".[35]

Cavell's thought, though deeply rooted in his reading of Emerson and Thoreau and the American transcendentalist movement in general,[36] constantly reevaluates Kierkegaard's dialectic of paradox to explore a topic – marriage – located at the core of Cavell's discussion of philosophical skepticism.[37] Moreover, Kierkegaard's example can reveal the importance of some philosophical currents in Continental thought that irrigate American culture, as European theater and literature determined the first aspects of American cinematic genre developments. Also – and this could lead to a thorough examination in another study, on the relation between religion and generic conventions – Kierkegaard's and Cavell's roots in a predominantly Protestant society may provide an additional input to both philosophers' approaches to the moral foundations of marital conventions.

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34 Hall 1994, 154.
35 See Lippitt/Hutto 1998, 263.
36 American transcendentalism was a philosophical movement that started in the first decades of the 19th century, was rooted in European (and specifically German) romanticism, and was influenced by Indian (dharmic) religions. Against objective empiricism and 19th-century skepticism (David Hume), transcendentalist authors like Ralph Emerson (*Essays*, 1841–1844) and David Thoreau (*Walden, or Life in the Woods*, 1854) believed in the inherent goodness of man and its corruption by the modern world's stances and demands and promoted individualism and a more direct contact to nature.
37 I would like to thank Nicole Tambourgi-Hatem for her remarks and suggestions that led me to read again Kierkegaard's Étapes sur le chemin de la vie.

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