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It Happened One Night

A familiar form of narrative opens by laying out a time and place in which a character or characters in whom we are to take an interest are described as carrying on a way of life, and then the plot proper, as it were, begins with an element of change or interruption breaking into this world. An obvious instance is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where the interruption of the ordinary days of this little world is the unheralded appearance in it of a pair of rich and handsome bachelors. Sometimes the narrative opens precisely with the element of change, noted as such, hence implying the ordinary state of affairs that has been interrupted. Austen's *Emma* is an example (Emma's lifelong companion and mother figure has married and left Emma and her father to shift, with their servants, for themselves). *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* begin with interruption; *Othello*'s element of change is delayed slightly, with Iago's information that Othello and Desdemona have eloped.

In just one of the classical remarriage films considered here the interruption is simultaneous with the opening of the narrative, when in *His Girl Friday* the camera follows the woman of the principal pair (played by Rosalind Russell) as she, as we will shortly learn, returns with an announcement to the newspaper world she left in order to get a divorce from the ruler of that world. All our other remarriage comedies open differently, namely with a brief prologue in which an event is depicted (a man leaves a house in silent anger, angered further upon witnessing his putter broken in half; a woman follows her husband to an assignation and shoots him) that is discontinuous with the plot proper but which poses as it were the problem, or the terms of the problem, that the plot is to solve, namely to get a certain kind of pair back together from their self-imposed interruption. The point of the lack of prologue in *His Girl Friday* seems to be that the pair have never had an ordinary life, but only interruptions, the life of

newspaper people. (We will at some point recognize that none of our pairs have had an ordinary life, if that means a way of life they do not question. It is a way of understanding the interruption between them that the world calls a divorce, that their life has, perhaps momentarily, cracked under the strain of their criticism, call it their perfectionism.) A point of *It Happened One Night* is the rapidity with which the pair establish something that feels to them, and us, for all their bickering, or because of it, like an ordinary marriage.

1 A prologue shows Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) escaping her father's control (by diving off his anchored yacht), having refused to take food from him and declared her refusal to accept his annulment of her wedding ceremony, contesting his vow that she and the man she has chosen "will never live under the same roof."

2a The escape of Ellie Andrews proves to be headline news. At a bus station, presumably in Miami, Ellie, to avoid recognition, has asked a woman to go to the sales window to purchase a bus ticket for her.

2b A star reporter, Peter Warne (Clark Gable), in a drunken oration delivered in a phone booth to his editor in New York, with whom he is evidently familiarly at odds, quits his job before the editor can fire him again.

3 When Peter boards the waiting bus, he discovers that the only free seat, in the very back, is filled with stacks of newspapers, to be sold to the passengers. He makes room for himself by throwing the stacks out the window onto the loading platform of the station. As Peter comes forward to collect his suitcase, the bus driver objects to his treatment of the remunerative papers. As Peter is facing him down, successfully, Ellie eases past the two men, and when Peter returns to the seat he has prepared for himself, he finds Ellie comfortably ensconced there. He determines, whatever her judgment, that the back seat, which is his by discovery and argument, has room for two.

4 It is evening when the bus leaves. The next morning we discover the pair still together in the small space of the back seat, but now Ellie is trustingly asleep with her head on Peter's shoulder and his sweater wrapped around her shoulders. She awakens slowly and then suddenly realizes that something has changed during the night. A little later she will say to him, "I hope you don't misunderstand what happened last night." It is quite unclear what she thinks, or thinks he thinks, has happened.

5 As Ellie is leaving the bus at a rest station, she tells the driver that she may be somewhat late returning, so he will have to wait for her. Peter's reporter's suspicions are aroused by this ignorance of the everyday world and assumption of superiority to it, and he is waiting for her when she returns late to discover that the bus has departed on time.

6 He confronts her with her picture on the front page of a newspaper. She offers him money to help her continue her escape to her, as it were, husband. He is contemptuous of her presumption. They take the next bus, leaving that night, and do not sit in adjacent seats. On the bus a loudmouth makes a pass at her and is called off by Peter claiming her as his wife. As the man scrambles away and Peter takes his place beside her, he begins taking charge of her life, budgeting what they can spend, beginning with getting the money back for the expensive chocolates she has just bought from the vendor on the bus. A Frank Capra community of the ordinary forms on the bus, expressed by a group song; Ellie is pleased that Peter joins in. It is raining heavily and the bus is disabled by a mud slide. The passengers will have to spend the night in an auto park (predecessor of the motel).

7 Peter rents a room for them as Mr. and Mrs., assuring her that his only interest in her is in getting her story, exclusive, which will be his means back to the newspaper job he has just lost. As an earnest of his good faith he strings up a blanket between the twin beds, saying something like, "Not as thick as the Walls of Jericho but a lot safer." The effect of the invisible woman inadvertently stirring the blanket as she is undressing in the darkened cabin introduces the register of the erotic into the proceedings. In the darkened cabin, in beds separated by the blanket, they have their first serious exchange of thoughts.

8 Ellie is awakened in the morning by the sound of an airplane passing overhead—her father's private plane, guiding the search for her. After a refreshing shower in what for her are exotically primitive and communal conditions she returns to the cabin to discover Peter preparing a delicious meal for them, including a doughnut, which she has evidently never had before; and he has pressed her rain-soaked clothes.

9 Private detectives sent by her father are checking the guests in the motel. Peter and Ellie put on a show for them, convincing the detectives that they are a solidly unexceptional married pair by the way they shout threateningly at one another over obscure differences. They are extravagantly pleased with their performance.

10 At a rest stop that night, the loudmouth, who has also recognized Ellie's picture in the newspaper, indicates to Peter that he wants to make some money out of keeping quiet about Ellie's whereabouts. Peter frightens the man into running away and keeping his mouth shut by telling him that her disappearance is the work of a vicious gang of criminals. Peter takes Ellie away from the bus trip, since he isn't sure of the permanent effectiveness of his ruse.

11 He carries her (over his shoulder, suitcases in his hands) across a star-filled stream into a pastoral landscape where, as he is making up beds of straw, their attraction to each other is made explicit to us and very nearly becomes explicit between them. Again he provides food for her, foraging for, it turns out, a bunch of carrots.

12 The next morning we encounter them walking down an empty country road. She is limping, and goes over to sit on a fence. Peter claims to be an expert in hitchhiking, a boast that proves to be empty. Now follows one of the most famous moments in the history of American film, as Claudette Colbert walks to the side of the road and, by showing a shapely leg, brings the next car to a violent halt.

13a Peter is sullen as they drive off, and when the driver stops for food, Peter says they aren't hungry, not allowing their pennilessness to be the excuse for Ellie to "gold dig" the stranger for a meal. As they are sitting at an outside table, the driver runs from the restaurant out to his car and takes off with Peter's and Ellie's belongings. Peter runs after the car.

13b As Ellie is waiting by the road, Peter astonishingly turns up alone in the car, and the two continue on their journey. Having the night before refused to eat the carrots, she now finds the bunch in Peter's coat and tentatively munches this food of humility.

14 The third night of their adventure on the road they stop at another auto park three hours from New York, a stop Peter says he finds unnecessary and foolish. Again he strings up the blanket, this time as though it is an old, familiar, but obscure custom of theirs. In their separate beds, she asks him, across the blanket, if he's ever been in love, or wanted to be, and he tells her about an island in the South Pacific, a transcendental scene of innocent sky and water as he describes it, where he has longed to take a woman who would love it as he does, "but they don't make them [women] like that any more." This declaration inspires a climactic declaration from Ellie, who appears on his side of the blanket confessing her love for him and her readiness to join in his vision. He is taken by surprise and rebuffs her.

15 She has cried herself to sleep, but Peter has been thinking, and across the blanket/screen asks for confirmation of her declaration. In response to silence from her side, he looks over the blanket and then, as if in response to seeing her asleep, dashes out of the cabin.

16 In New York he convinces his editor that he has the story he went after, that it has become his story as well as Ellie's, and receives in return the thousand dollars he evidently feels he needs to make his dream come true.

17 At the auto park, the suspicious, disapproving owners have found that the man has made off with the car; they awaken Ellie to the fact of his disappearance, whereupon she calls her father to come to her aid.

18 Driving back from New York, Peter is elated by his success, and expansively sings and waves to strangers as he anticipates telling Ellie of his private resolution of the situation. Almost back, he encounters a police-escorted limousine coming the other way, and sees Ellie inside, between her father and her annulled partner. The air goes out of one of Peter's tires.

19a Peter takes the thousand dollars back to his editor, tells him he was just joking about the story, but the editor has been convinced of its truth by the power of its writing. He puts some money in Peter's coat pocket and says, "When you sober up, come see me."

19b His face away from our view, empty liquor bottles in the foreground, Peter is going through the headlines of successive newspapers, each epitomizing Ellie's progress, the last one, agreeably for our purposes, reading "Ellie Andrews Remarries Today." Peter phones Ellie's father, who, he says, owes him money. The father asks him to come out to his place and Peter, after an initial refusal, says he would like to see for himself what kind of circus they are running.

20a Ellie's father extracts from Ellie a confession that she loves Peter Warne, that he is "marvelous," and that she has no feeling for the inept prig she engaged herself to to get away from home, but that it doesn't matter anymore, since Peter holds her and her father in complete contempt.

20b When Peter shows up, the father, prepared to pay him the thousands in reward he had announced, discovers that what Peter wants is reimbursement for twenty- or thirty-odd dollars and cents he spent on Ellie during their trip. The father writes the check and asks Peter if he loves Ellie. After avoiding the question Peter furiously acknowledges that he does, but also that he is screwy.

20c Peter emerges from the father's study into the central hall of the family mansion to see Ellie in the midst of a gay episode of drinking with her fashionable friends. Peter hurls a contemptuous "That's perfect" at her and leaves.

21 The wedding has begun. As the father accompanies his dazed daughter down the long aisle he tells her that Peter loves her, that her phony husband can be bought off with a pot of gold, and that her car is waiting at the side entrance. In response to the minister's asking if she will have this man to be her husband, Ellie dashes off, her long veil flying, across the grass. Newsreel cameras (ours presumably among them, knowing news when it finds it) turn to follow her, see her jump into her car, and watch the car speed off out of the reach of whoever might wish to stop her. Her father lights a celebratory cigar.

22a The owners, this time benign, of yet another auto park, this fourth night, discuss their peculiar new guests. The husband reassures his wife that the pair are married all right, but expresses his puzzlement that the man asked him to find him a toy trumpet.

22b In a darkened room a trumpet sounds and a blanket comes tumbling down. (From which side of the blanket the sound had come we do not know.)

We are already alerted by the idea of what I am calling a genre that the members of it will emphasize, or discover, different or further features of the genre. I say the members are in argument with the genre, by which I mean that some feature or features of one member will quite inevitably seem at first not to fit with the features of others, hence that each is in argument over what defines the genre. (This is not true of all useful ideas of what constitutes a genre. Argument marks what I call genre-as-medium, which I contrast with the idea I call genre-as-cycle, which used to characterize Hollywood films under the titles of westerns, gangster films, musicals, women's films, screwball comedies, and which still characterize the episodic and serial continuities of character and situation essential to television sitcoms, detective and hospital soap operas, and so on.) In the case of *It Happened One Night*, the earliest member of the genre of remarriage comedy I propose (1934), at least two features are clearly at variance with what we have derived or predicted from the members of the genre we have considered so far, *The Philadelphia Story* and *Adam's Rib*. First, and most obviously, the pair in *It Happened One Night* are not officially married until the final sequence, so this sequence cannot strictly speaking be understood as their remarriage, nor, it should follow, can the film as a whole be called a comedy of remarriage; second, remarriage comedies end in a place Shakespeare calls

the green world, a place of spiritual perspective, a mythical Connecticut, hardly represented by an undistinguished motel.

Such “variances” require, according to the laws of genre-as-medium, compensations, or what amount to additional revelations of the genre. Accordingly, while Peter and Ellie are not married, strictly speaking, until the very end of the film, the film makes clear from the beginning that there is a question about what marriage “strictly speaking” is. The film calls it, as noted, “living under the same roof,” and that, strictly speaking, is something Ellie and Peter have repeatedly been shown to be doing. What is more, under their various roofs what we have seen them doing is behaving as if they are married—Peter declares as much to the loudmouth, and the pair enact marriage in sufficient, tawdry detail to convince hardboiled private detectives that they should not be disturbed in their bickering and undoubted state of matrimonial bliss. We might come to consider such things, in a new age, as revised marriage ceremonies, publicly forming the ties that bind.

Again, while minimal motel rooms lack the accoutrements of Adam and Amanda Bonner’s paid-off house in Connecticut, let alone those of national importance that provide the setting for the Lords of the Main Line outside Philadelphia, those minimal dwellings have that without which no setting would serve the function required by the remarriage process, call it a place to call home, a locale permitting the pair’s recovering of their intimacy, the privacy (of consent, call it) without which there is, in their more perfect union, no marriage. That this happens at night is something that *It Happened One Night* particularly emphasizes.

As I note in *Pursuits of Happiness*, whereas Shakespearean comedy and romance, as characterized by Northrop Frye, emphasize the succession of the seasons of the year, remarriage comedy characteristically organizes itself around the succession of day and night. An exception in Shakespeare is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where the unresolved tensions of the day (not only between generations and between young lovers, but notably between the royal pair of the play’s world, Theseus and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons) are shown to be expressions of strife among the invisible forces inhabiting night. This feature was notable, even perhaps first brought to the fore, in Peter Brook’s great production of the play in the early 1970s; the idea is still active in the expert, gorgeous, and intelligent, yet, I found, somewhat cold, recent film of the play starring Kevin Kline as Bottom, Michelle Pfeiffer as Titania, and Stanley Tucci as Puck. It is curiously registered or prefigured

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in *The Philadelphia Story*, where, among other references to the Shakespeare play, I suggest as an instance the suggestion by the Cary Grant character (the character itself being a combination of Oberon and Theseus, making happen everything that happens) that what Dinah saw out her window the previous night (among other things, her sister Tracy in Mike's arms) was a dream.

Not to lose the line of thought thereby suggested, and yet not to pursue it now, I just call to your attention Nietzsche's proposal, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that the aesthetic access to theater is to treat what is happening in front of your eyes as the staging of a dream. With the birth of cinema in the years after Nietzsche's death, the dream force of drama became as it were automatically available in the powers of film, not always to its benefit. This, further, seems a difference of the medium of film from that of television: if film is a dream machine, television is an information machine.

As in *Adam's Rib*, in *It Happened One Night*, after a prologue, day and night are in careful alternation, in which the events of the day (the time of judgment and criticism and explanation, of taking matters to court, of budgeting money, of giving lectures on such fateful matters as doughnut dunking and piggyback carrying) are exchanged at night for fantasies of union, of a world of perfect justice and of freedom. Marriage seems presented as a state in which a pair can make intact the forever (until death parts them) repeated oscillation from one of these worlds to the other. As in *The Philadelphia Story*, in *His Girl Friday*, as we shall see in due course, the match between night and day is secured in the action's spanning part or all of one night and parts of one or two of the night's adjacent days (perhaps a span of some twelve hours in *His Girl Friday*, and of something over twenty-four hours in *The Philadelphia Story*).

Against these calculations, we shall be alerted to the different dispositions of day and night, light and dark, in the remaining comedies, *The Lady Eve* and *The Awful Truth*, where we should be able to note considerations that compensate for their differences—to show why it is that the latter ends precisely at midnight, and why in the former the crisis of estrangement occurs at night and the reestablishment of intimacy occurs in daylight. There is already the suggestion here that the peculiarity of the hurried reshuffling leading to the remarriage at the conclusion of *The Philadelphia Story*, with its surrealistic, or say dreamlike quality (Dexter and Mike and Liz are all dressed in inappropriate clothes), is associated with its happening at midday, as though its promised intimacy remains, as it were, to be seen.

I have often been asked why it is, or whether it is true, that remarriage comedies are no longer made, given my insistence on their preeminence among comedies in the opening two decades of the Hollywood talkie. I think it is true to say that there are many good films made that have remarriage elements in them (I'm grateful that people, strangers as well as friends, continue to let me know about certain of these films), but the genre can no longer be said to inspire a continuous series of such films, and in any case as a genre does not have the importance it once did in forming the concept of what a Hollywood film is—nothing like a genre-as-medium now plays such a role, but only something like a genre-as-cycle, such as the *Star Wars* series, or other sci-fi technological explorations such as *The Matrix* or *Men in Black*, which have much to recommend them, including philosophical interest, but nothing quite like the development of one soul's examination of another and a consequent contesting of social institutions, matters such as are featured in classical remarriage comedy. Such matters must seem like luxuries in the face of the question whether the human soul and society as such are to survive. (I do not take the case of *The Matrix* to show moral encounters between master and disciple since the master is not changed by the encounter and the disciple is not enabled to live a better life in the world he had known. An understanding of its combination of religiosity with advanced technology requires a separate development of the ideas of perfectionism and of associated green and black worlds.)

By films with remarriage elements in them I have in mind such films as *Moonstruck* (with Nicholas Cage and Cher), which emphasizes the incestuous intimacy underlying marital intimacy and relies on a talent for dialogue that is at once morally severe and intellectually inventive; and *Groundhog Day* (with Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell), which emphasizes the necessity of improvisation and repetition in achieving the mutuality or reality of marriage; and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (with Andie MacDowell and Hugh Grant), which underscores the contempt for conventional marriage that nevertheless fails to still the desire for and the quest for marriage of another kind; and *Say Anything* (with John Cusack and Ione Skye), which elaborates the inevitable feature of classical remarriage comedy in which the pair become incomprehensible to (most of) the rest of the world, which may be taken as the essential moral risk perfectionism runs, since at the same time it fully recognizes the moral demand for making itself intelligible—but first, in the case of our couples, to each other.

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It Happened One Night provides an apt occasion for raising this issue since the relatively recent *Sure Thing* (again with John Cusack), while it cannot quite count as a remake of *It Happened One Night*, contains a number of reasonably explicit references to that earlier exemplar: for example, a young man, who is a writer, accompanies a young woman on a cross-country trek to meet up with her fiancé, who proves not to be worthy of her, a trek which involves an incident of hitchhiking that includes an unscrupulous driver, and in the course of which the man of the central pair lectures the woman on how to drink beer, and in which the woman's father, at a distance, supplies them with money to keep them independent and together (in the form of the woman's discovery that her father has outfitted her with a credit card).

It would be a contribution to understanding why the remarriage genre is no longer what it was, to understand the difference of texture in a comedy that features as its leading man Clark Gable in comparison with one that features John Cusack. (An initial surprise is that one would—I at first was one who did—imagine that the difference between classical and later remarriage comedies must have to do essentially with the fact that there are no longer women capable of or interested in the central roles in classical remarriage comedy. But it turns out that the absence of appropriate men is the more telling fact. Such is my intuition, at any rate.) Cusack's charm and wit are formidable, but they depend upon his conveying an air of actual youth, of innocence untried, to make him a candidate for the young woman's attention. The difference from classical remarriage comedy, with such men as Gable, Cary Grant, James Stewart, and Spencer Tracy, may be put starting with the fact that these men are given authority by their experience, by their having staked their innocence against the need of "taking their place in society," so that their capacity for inventiveness, improvisation, allowing themselves to behave with their marriage partner in ways incomprehensible to the rest of society, are entered upon knowing that they are risking a certain standing in the world that it has been important, costly for them, to establish.

The absence of full-blown remarriage comedies accordingly suggests that men have become unable, or less able, with good spirits, to let their social station, so far as it is established, become jeopardized by acting on unexpected, awkward desires, as if the awkward were as such illicit—less able, we might say, to maintain their sense of identity without its ratification by social role. It thus quite accurately denies the general condition that perfectionism depends upon, the knowledge of oneself as, let's say, transcendental with respect to

one's given subject position as defined by society. (The actor who comes to mind as emerging with the temperament and talent to project a mature risk of adventure is George Clooney, as in *Oh Brother Where Art Thou* and *Ocean's Eleven*, both of which are remarriage adventures, but in which the remarkable adventures are not shared with, but are something like the cost of, the woman. (The former film makes various references to *The Odyssey*, the mother of all remarriage adventures, in which marriage is pictured as its own adventure, containing what the principal pair call its "secret signs.")

My sense—but this would have to be worked out in detailed study—is that a vital difference between classical and recent remarriage comedy has to do with the role, or idea of, or faith in, education, so massive an issue for both the comedies and the melodramas we consider in this book. In the comedies, while the woman is subject to an education from the man (her choice of a man is a function of her choice of one from whom she can receive and respect an education), the man, in recompense, wants to know what this woman knows (a version of knowing what she wants), so that he is chosen as one for whom she is an education. In *It Happened One Night*, as said, this takes the form of the man wanting what he calls "the woman's story." When it becomes *his* story, he finds that there is something essentially more that he wants, something he does not know how to acquire. In the more recent versions, or fragments, of the genre, the young woman may be presented as explicitly better educated in society's eyes than the man (in *Say Anything*, she has won a prize scholarship to Oxford; the young man enables her to accept it by accompanying her on the transatlantic flight, which she mortally fears), but her attraction to him is a function of his knowledge of himself, somehow affording him knowledge of the value of life, that gives him an independence of society as it stands (as in *The Untamed Heart*, with Marisa Tomei and Christian Slater), which has evidently taught her some complexity in her unforced consent to existence within it. Such motifs emphasize the feature of the classical versions that shows the pair to be mysterious to the rest of the world.

I am aware that while I may have, in my little elaboration here of the concepts of night and day, broken some new ground in my discussion of *It Happened One Night*, and indeed of remarriage comedy more generally, I have not rehearsed, or given an indication of, the details of the reading of the film taken up in my chapter on the film in *Pursuits of Happiness*, which ranges over matters from taking the memorable blanket in the film as an image of a film screen, which reveals what it hides (for example, the erotic reality of the

live woman photographed for the film and shielded, as we are shielded from her, by the screen), suggesting that the camera, or rather the entire apparatus of film from the necessities of the camera to the requirements of the projector, is to be understood as a set of Kantian conditions making possible the work of cinema as such; to enumerating foods offered, refused, and accepted, in the film, in which, as I propose, hunger is identified with desire and imagination, or say with fantasy—running the risk of seeming to deny or slight the fact that at the time the film was made, in 1934, still within the time of the Great Depression, people by the millions were going hungry.

As an emblem of so much I cannot go into here, and of matters that I hope you will be moved at some point to pursue further, I shall discuss one image from *It Happened One Night* that I knew I had not accounted for in *Pursuits of Happiness*. It was some years after the publication of that book that I seemed to find the point of the image in question, one whose very unobtrusiveness, or what I called its nothingness, my experience kept insisting was pregnant but whose significance I had been unable to find words for. It's the sort of thing that I should think anyone who thinks about the arts (or anything else) is more or less familiar with; it is an instance of the half exasperating, half glorious, fact that in works one cares about, new aspects continue to dawn, sometimes ones whose significance is so plain that it is hard, after it has dawned, to imagine having missed it.

The image in question follows the couple's second night together, in which they slept in an open field, on separate, chaste mats fashioned by Peter from a stack of hay, after departing from the company on the bus. We encounter them now at the fateful hour of dawn, as they are walking on the empty road on which they will soon famously stop a car to hitch a ride.

I take the mood of the pair, and the few words they exchange that break a silence otherwise broken only by faint sounds of birds, to be suffused by the strength of the mood of the night from which they have awakened. In my chapter on the film I characterize that mood by invoking what I call "the American transcendentalism of Capra's exteriors." In thus aligning Capra's work with the thought of Emerson and of Thoreau, I was trying to locate one of Capra's signature emotions—the experience of an ecstatic possibility as of a better world just adjacent to this one, a possibility this actuality expresses in an all but unnoticeably ordinary setting, hardly marking itself as symbolic in force; a possibility we could (in romance, in an access of the promise of justice) as it were reach out and touch.

My sense of this experience was formed, in retrospect (hence improbably to be reached after just one viewing of the film), in part from the memory of the series of shots of Claudette Colbert—I mean Ellie Andrews—in the pair’s ensuing night in a cabin (their third together), responding to the man’s meditative invocation, in response to her asking whether he has ever been in love, of “those nights when you and the moon and the water all become one and you feel you’re part of something big and marvelous.” The description seemed to me (and I imagined, to Ellie) to be the expression of an old fantasy of the man’s but at the same time of his fresh memory of the previous night the two of them had spent together in the open field. The description, taken in itself, is not much more than newspaper filler. But set to the man’s entranced recitation, and authorized both by the woman’s entranced responsiveness to it and our own memory of their night in the moon-bright field and of their arrival there by fording a stream filled with reflected stars, the words can take on the weight of a passage from *Walden*. The stream is shattered by stars; it is an image of something Thoreau calls “sky water.”

Capra’s transcendental moments derive in part from German Expressionist cinema (as Emerson’s transcendental thought derives in part from classical German philosophy); they display the mood of a character stretched across that character’s setting. But the German settings tend toward the closed and their mood toward the haunted; Capra’s tend toward the expanded and their mood toward a tortured yearning. If one does not find, or will not permit, the mood, the Capra moment is apt, in its intensity and obviousness of sentiment, to produce titters, as from emotion with no visible means of support. (I have noticed this more than once in college audiences, where the film may be screened not in a theater but in a made-over classroom, and in the presence not of strangers, where your response remains your own, but of your classmates, sitting as it were in judgment of the sophistication of your responses.)

Here is the moment I concentrate on: the pair are on the road walking together away from us. The shot lasts about thirty seconds, during which the pair have the following exchange (the woman speaking first):

“What did you say we’re supposed to be doing?”

“Hitchhiking.”

“Oh. Well, you’ve given me a very good example of the hiking. Where does the hitching come in?”

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“Uh, a little early yet. No cars out.”

“If it’s just the same to you I’m going to sit right here and wait ’til they come.”

I have reported my initial, persistent sense of the “nothingness” of this shot (remarking the sparseness of its imagery, the conventionality of its words, the apparent offhandedness of the characters’ manners), and confessed at the same time my sense of the transcendental mood of the night before continued in this early gray morning. But my next response was to feel: Certainly the mood continues. This just means that the powerful, expressionistically enforced mood of the night before persists, for us and for them. How could it not, given that the sequence of the night before had climaxed with an extreme close-up of the pair resisting an embrace; they are, on the road, unreleased. But then again I felt: No. I mean the mood persists not just as in memory but as present, continued by, expressed in, the new setting at dawn. The sparseness, the conventionality, the offhandedness are somehow to be understood with the same expressionist fervor of the moonlit night scene. Of course in the new setting the cosmos will not be concurrent with the words that are said, but rather the words will have to be heard as covering, almost, the attraction of the mood. Even the variance of the pair’s individual manners suggests the covering—the man somewhat depressed, the woman somewhat manic. So I imagine them as moving together but each keeping to himself and herself, filled with thoughts of each other, trying to accommodate to what has passed between them and to their knowledge that they each know what the other is going through, including an unreadiness to become, or a perplexity in discovering the right to become, explicit.

My critical claim is that this understanding is not a guess on my part as to how a couple of other people must be, or ought to be, feeling, based on what I know of their time together; but that it is a reading, a perception, of what I am calling the transcendental mood of this utterly specific shot now before us, a reading of its very nothingness. To substantiate this claim I must provide this reading.

I begin by repeating the title description I suggested in introducing the shot, and dividing it into four segments:

The pair is on the road / walking / together / away from us.

I take up the segments in reverse order.

Away from us. It is my general impression that the motion picture camera held on a human figure squarely from behind has tended to inflect some significance of human privacy and vulnerability, or self-reflection, of the capacity or necessity to keep one's counsel. I hope everyone can recall analogous shots of Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp in a walk away down a road. Beyond noting the Chaplin gesture as providing sublime instances on film to capture human isolation, exposure, and hopefulness, I note that such a shot naturally constitutes the sense of an ending of a film. What is such a shot doing, then, in *It Happened One Night*, at something like the center of the film? This is in effect to begin asking: How does this specific shot inflect the range of associated shots that invoke the sense of privacy, thoughtfulness, vulnerability, and so on?

Together. The pivot of inflection is that while the pair still keep their individual counsels there is union in their moving in concert exactly away from *us*. It is, as I have emphasized, an essential feature of the genre of remarriage comedy that the films defining it close with some indication that the principal pair, in reentering the state of matrimony, are crossing some border that leaves us out, behind, and with no visible secure embrace of their own, nothing to insure the risk that they will find, or rather refind, their happiness. In *The Philadelphia Story* the pair freeze into still photos; in *The Awful Truth* the pair at the close are metamorphosed into figurines on a Swiss clock; in *His Girl Friday* they run away from us down a flight of stairs, the man first; in *The Lady Eve* a door closes in our face; in *Adam's Rib* curtains close; in *It Happened One Night* a blanket falls in a darkened room. Yet the centered walk away down the road we are considering here does also feel as if something is ending, hence as if something is beginning, some psychic border being crossed. It is this undefined openness, as if leaving the past behind them, that constitutes this particular inflection of vulnerability, of thoughtful anticipation.

Here is a place to pause for an instant to see whether the words of this sequence are as unremarkable as we have assumed. What becomes of words on film can prove to be as significant a matter as what becomes of people and things on film. Take the line, "Oh, well you've given me a good example of the hiking. Where does the hitching come in?" I hope you can come to the place—it again may not happen on a given viewing (who says all films are meant for one viewing?)—of wondering whether "hitching" here pertains to getting hitched, and even to what Katharine Hepburn refers to in

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The Philadelphia Story (having to explain to her assembled wedding guests about the successful failure of her wedding plans) in saying “There’s been a hitch in the proceedings.” Not only was this man on this road with the woman supposed to be helping her return to her so-called husband, but generally hitches in hitching are the study both of classical comedy and (reshaped in significance) of remarriage comedy. I find the thought reinforced by the surprisingly touching fact that the woman on the road is limping; she walks with a hitch. So Capra’s shot immediately, ironically, informs us that hitching has already come in, more or less before our eyes, that the tying of the (hitch) knot, the entanglement of lives, is on the way and will not, for some happy reason, come undone. (This sketches the moral of the remarriage structure.)

Walking. What they are doing is walking together on a road, hiking until hitching. This fact began to take on thematic importance for me some time after a colleague inquired whether I had thought about the range of vehicles in the film, suggesting that they form a little system of significance as striking as the system I had found in the various foods consumed in it. Thinking this over (there is a yacht, a bus, a roadster, one or two limousines, a flight of motorcycles, a freight train, a private passenger plane, a helicopter), it seemed to me that the vehicles mostly emblemize or differentiate matters whose disposition in this film we know independently—power, isolation, vacuity, the capacity for community. Whereas the system of foods and their modes of preparation or gathering provides the basis of relationship that serves to establish and measure acceptance and rejection.

Even so, the intuition of significance in the system of vehicles seemed to me right. I have come to understand it in its contrast as a whole with—hence its emphasis upon—the human fact of walking; as I had taken the system of foods as a whole to emphasize the human fact of hunger and of imagination. Being on the road and being hungry are familiar images of the Depression of the early 1930s. Hollywood comedies of the period are often chastised as fairytale distractions from the terrible realities of those years. I do not deny that some were, maybe most. But the best among them were tales that continue the extreme outbursts of hope in human possibility that were also part of the realities of those times; otherwise the persistent popularity and instructiveness of a number of such films would seem to me inexplicable. I have said that hunger in *It Happened One Night* stands for the reality of imagination, the imagination of a better world than we have made. Now

I wish to make explicit a companion representativeness in its idea of walking together. Accordingly let us consider where it is the pair are walking.

On the road. In four of the seven definitive remarriage comedies the denouement of mutual acknowledgment is achieved, as said, by a removal of the pair to a place of perspective that, following Shakespeare's psychic or allegorical geography, I call "the green world." I find that *It Happened One Night* compensates for its lack of this more or less explicitly mythical location by its presentation of perspective acquired on the road, which is the classical and no less mythical location of picaresque quest and adventure. In its interpretation or displacement of the green world as the location of adventurousness, improvisationally achieved romantic remarriage becomes an interpretation of marriage as itself the process of quest and adventure. The virtue in demand becomes less the capacity to manage the repetitions of marriage than to keep up with its varying desires.

There is another declaration of this road as a mythical or psychical locale. After Gable's lecture to the woman about the three modes of thumbing a ride and then his proving to be impotent to stop the first three cars that pass by, the road suddenly produces, as from nowhere, an unending stream of cars rushing past his abashed thumb and disappearing around the bend into nowhere, as if the proper rebuke to this male expansiveness is to publish the man's failure to stop each and every car on earth. This cosmic rebuke, as by the medium of film itself, sets up the succeeding rebuke by the woman, who stops a car by showing some leg, thus proving once for all, as she says happily to the gloomy man, "that the limb is mightier than the thumb," call it the ascendancy of nature over convention.

It was in connecting, more or less consciously, the idea of the road as the equivalent of a spiritual realm of perspective and adventure with the persistence of a transcendental sense of dawning landscape as calling out a moment of openness and beginning, and with the specific cosmic rebuke of male assertiveness, that I turned, for the first time in years, to Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." I remind you of what is to be found there. The thirteenth section opens as follows:

Allons! to that which is endless as it was beginningless,
To undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,
To merge all in the travel they tend to, and the days and nights they tend to,
Again to merge them in the start of superior journeys . . .

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The fifteenth and final section concludes:

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself: will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

The mood is of course different from that of the shot of our pair on the empty dawning road. But if you will take Whitman's closing questions as lines for the invention of a new wedding ceremony, they match as perfectly as any I know the questions and the tasks proposed by the (perfectionist) comedy of remarriage. (By the invention of a wedding ceremony I mean a task of these comedies that they share with Shakespearean theater, as in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*, where I have taken the closing scene of each, one apparently of a suicide, the other apparently of a statue magically coming to life, in effect to constitute an unheard-of wedding.) It follows that I am proposing the shot of this pair on the road walking together away from us as a wedding photo.

Even if you will take it so for this moment, you may not for the next. Not every moment will yield to, or require, the mood of Whitman's ecstasies and exhortations, any more than every moment can tolerate, or use, the sentiments and elations of Frank Capra. But I imagine that these artists themselves composed knowing this, even that they meant to declare it, respectively, of the nature of poetry and of film, to acknowledge their intermittence of effect, our evanescent readiness for them. Or in Emerson's words from "Experience": "Since our office is with moments, let us husband them." Or as Wittgenstein will put a similar thought: "What dawns here lasts only as long as I am occupied with the object in a particular way." We have perhaps most poignantly in film, something we have in any art, the opportunity to find, but always the freedom to miss, the significance of the nothing and the nowhere.

Am I claiming that Capra is as good as Whitman and Emerson? Am I saying that he intended the matters I have invoked to account for my mood with a moment he has provided? These are reasonable questions, deserving reasoned answers. Until then I may put my approach to them this way. Capra shares certain of the ambitions and the specific visions of Whitman and of Emerson, and he knows about working with film roughly what they know

about working with words. If your fixed view is, however, that no film (anyway none produced in the Hollywood sound era) could in principle bear up under any serious comparison with major writing, then our conversation may, if it has begun, be at an end; for I would take the fixed view, or attitude, as representative of a philistine intellectuality fully worthy of the philistine anti-intellectuality from which we more famously suffer.

Well, that discussion of walking was written, for a general audience, in 1985. You can see, from the hauteur of its last sentence, evidence of my sense of embattlement in thinking to bring film into a philosophical classroom, which is what I did two years later when I taught the first version of the course in which this book originated. The particular edge of embattlement was, I should acknowledge, my sense of feeling unappreciated—here was I, bringing what should have been pleasure and instruction to my fellow citizens about objects of common interest, but instead of receiving the news as a gift they seemed to take it as depriving them of something. I had forgotten, it seems, that this is a characteristic fate of philosophy, at least in any somewhat novel form. But here and now, in this book that was born in a classroom, we have the time to explore further this feature of philosophy's reception. The anger it causes is an essential subject foregrounded, early and late, in Plato's *Republic*, a text we come to in not so many chapters. (By the way, to return to the last sentence of my earlier article on the image from *It Happened One Night*, the idea of philistinism is something we will, in Chapter 11, see Nietzsche embattled against; it is an idea he develops in part out of his reading of Emerson on conformity.)