



Stella Dallas

# Not My Type

## Stanley Cavell and the Invention of Genre

The finest genre study I know is *Pursuits of Happiness*, Stanley Cavell's 1981 examination of seven Hollywood comedies— *The Lady Eve* (1941), *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *His Girl Friday* (1940), *Adam's Rib* (1949), and *The Awful Truth* (1937)—that exemplify what he calls the “comedy of remarriage,” where the drive of the plot is “not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*.” Along with his previous book on cinema, *The World Viewed* (whose 50th anniversary this year occasioned the publication of a new collection, *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema*), *Pursuits* is widely and deservedly considered the American philosopher's principal contribution to film studies. For the pleasure Cavell took in its conception, it is a book that he considered himself lucky to have written. For the continued surprise and learning it has afforded me, it is a book that I consider myself lucky to have encountered.

Having said this, it will no doubt seem ridiculously partial of me to claim that the second-best genre study I know is Cavell's *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* from 1996,

which, building on *Pursuits*, offers inventive, perspicacious readings of four of the most popular Hollywood melodramas of the late '30s to late '40s—*Gaslight* (1944), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Now, Voyager* (1942), and *Stella Dallas* (1937)—that, among other things, challenge or overturn the films' conventional (and implicitly condescending) designation as “tearjerkers.” Beyond this, the book also sees Cavell further developing the distinction he first posited in his 1982 essay “The Fact of Television” between two conceptions of genre, which he calls “genre-as-cycle” and “genre-as-medium.” The former denotes our more or less familiar understanding of the term “genre,” encompassing narrative formulae, serialization (sequels, prequels, and the like), and visual iconography—i.e., the fact that one can often “roughly see that a movie is a Western, or a gangster film, or a horror film.” This is the conception that underpins some of the formative works of genre study in cinema, such as Jim Kitses' 1969 classic *Horizons West*.

“Genre-as-medium” suggests an alternative approach (one which Cavell evidently favours), in which “the members of a genre share

the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that...each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions." In this view, there is "nothing one is tempted to call *the* features of a genre which all its members have in common," which implies a notion of genre membership that works from the bottom up as much as top-down—where deviations from a generic template illuminate rather than disqualify. As Cavell puts it, the films in a genre "*are what they are* in view of one another." For example, though the combative relationship and ultimate reconciliation between Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* leads Cavell to classify it as one of his comedies of remarriage, its entirely city-bound narrative lacks a pastoral world of reflection that Cavell identifies in the other examples of this genre. However, Cavell then argues that Hawks' film "compensates" for this with a vision of a "black world" that nonetheless offers its protagonists a comparable kind of "reprieve" provided by the green worlds of the other films, while at the same time revealing a lurking darkness within them (for instance, the persistent threat of lawlessness in *Adam's Rib*).

There are two related things worth stressing about this idea of genre-as-medium. The first is that Cavell's use of the word "medium" is intended to make explicit the double meaning of the term: not only a medium of art (e.g., painting), but also the media employed *within it* (e.g., gouache or watercolour). The second is that, precisely because of this double meaning, any theorization of the former necessarily entails a critical observation of the latter; that is, a medium cannot be defined without an examination of specific works, and "nothing would count as a feature [of a genre] until an act of criticism defined it as such." The relationship between a given film and the genre to which it presumptively "belongs" is thus reciprocal and always open to investigation.

These matters are worth clarifying because, if Cavell's procedures are to persist as a working theory of genre, their viability must be tested by continued, concerted application to new works. This is a challenge that, judging by his 1999 email correspondence with Rex Butler (published at *Senses of Cinema* in 2001), Cavell has continually wrestled with since the publication of *Pursuits of Happiness*. Replying to Butler's question of whether the remarriage comedy as such is still possible in contemporary cinema, Cavell offers a provisional answer: after listing some more recent films that have "a remarriage feel," including *Moonstruck* (1987) and *Groundhog Day* (1993), he reasserts his "inclination" to say that the study of genre must involve critical investigation of individual works, then asks if such an inclination "begs the question whether criticism, or criticizeability [sic], remains essential, and is recognizable, across historical bounds"—that is, if criticism operates differently in the genre-as-medium and genre-as-cycle approaches, is Cavell's preference for the former more or less viable across time periods or filmmaking traditions?

This question is worth answering, and we might attempt to do so by adhering to Cavell's inclination in proposing an individual object to which his methods can be applied. Despite the seeming arbitrariness of the choice, I'd like to select Lucas Belvaux's *Pas son genre* (2014), which, from repeated viewings, I am convinced is an ideal test case for Cavell's theory—after all, it's not every movie that includes

an exegesis (however cursory) of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, a text Cavell considers at some length in his foundational essay "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy." The unlikely occasion for said exegesis is a date between Clément (Loïc Corbery), a Parisian philosophy professor recently (and reluctantly) transferred to the town of Arras, and Jennifer (Émilie Dequenne), a hairdresser native to the area who adores American rom-coms (the kind of movie that *Pas son genre*, its title notwithstanding, was largely regarded as by critics at the time). When Clément tells Jennifer that she's beautiful, she refuses the compliment, asserting that while some may find her charming, attractive, or even sexy, she is not actually beautiful, unlike, for example, Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell. Noting that, in making such claims and asserting her taste, she is speaking in the Kantian "universal voice" (which so often shows up as the singular "we" of the critic), Clément concludes, "You're Kantian, Jennifer!"

What is taking place here, among other things, is the education of a woman by a man—a crucial dynamic that Cavell identifies in both *Pursuits'* comedies of remarriage and the unknown-woman melodramas of *Contesting Tears*. Over the course of their subsequent relationship, Jennifer repeatedly calls Clément "Professor," a designation that, as with the very notion of a woman's education by the man, can sound bad. But the salient point is not that the man tries to educate the woman (which is common enough), but that, in the remarriage comedies, the woman eventually judges the man to be worthy to undertake that task—that is, he proves himself equal to her in wit, conversation, and capacity for improvisation, and thus fit for (re)marriage. The women of the melodramas, on the other hand, aren't so lucky: they finally turn away from marriage, finding the men in their lives unequal and knowing that, with them, nothing like the rapport between the partners of the comedies can be achieved.

By the end of *Pas son genre*, Clément proves himself distinctly unworthy of Jennifer. In refusing to take her seriously, even after she had shown herself willing to challenge her tastes (and his), he negates the possibility of their ever becoming "a real couple," leading her to choose the "unknownness" of the melodrama heroines, who ultimately find solitude more favourable than "a marriage of imitation, silent condescension, and questionlessness." The parallels between Jennifer and the protagonists of those earlier films do not end there. Like Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas*, she is "provincial" and working-class; like Joan Fontaine in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, she sees Clément with another woman before he ever notices her; and like Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*, her singing voice (which she exhibits during weekend karaoke outings with her girlfriends) is an important part of her self-conception. And while she does not undergo an outward metamorphosis as dramatic as that of Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*, she nonetheless does transform over the course of the film, finally judging her former life fit for abandonment.

Still, it would be reductive to therefore conclude that Belvaux's film belongs to the same genre as the films in *Contesting Tears*, for it is not so clear what exactly *Pas son genre* is. This is hardly an accident: the title is pointed enough, and Belvaux's script deliberately obviates the conventional signifiers—such as a familiar roster of supporting characters, or rather character types—that would let us "see" that it is (or isn't) a melodrama. Like the women in the melo-

dramas, Jennifer is a mother, but unlike the men of those films (who are still of some narrative significance, even if, like John Boles in *Stella Dallas* or Louis Jourdan in *Letter*, they are largely absent from the female protagonists' lives), her son's father, whom we learn is still involved in the boy's life, is a never-seen non-entity; her parents are entirely absent, and even her best friends from the local salon are non-factors. Instead, the focus of *Pas son genre* remains squarely on Clément and Jennifer, and their differing conceptions of what exactly their relationship is are the source of the film's tension. The dominant impression is of a film reasserting itself beyond the conventional labels that might be applied to it, and indeed, deliberately using such designations to test and redraw its generic boundaries. In other words, its medium is its medium.

Belvaux's ambitious 2002 *La Trilogie*—comprised of the full-length features *Cavale*, *Un couple épatant*, and *Après la vie*—previously explored these boundaries in a different manner, offering three intersecting stories that share and swap leading and supporting characters while each film adopts its own nominal generic “style” (a thriller, a farce, and a melodrama, respectively). In *The World Viewed*, Cavell identified the kind of genre signifiers that Belvaux deploys in *La Trilogie*—*Cavale*'s car chases and roving handheld camera, *Un couple épatant*'s door-slamming and mistaken identities, *Après la vie*'s marital histrionics—as “automatisms,” and contends that the individual artist's deployment of them serves to define their artistic orientation. “The automatisms of a tradition are given to the traditional artist, prior to any instance he adds to it; the master explores and extends them,” writes Cavell. “The modernist artist has to explore the fact of automatism itself, as if investigating what it is at any time that has provided a given work of art with the power of its art as such.” (Needless to say, the Belvaux of *Pas son genre* and *La Trilogie* falls squarely into the latter camp.)

Adopting Cavell's anticipatory formulation of the genre-as-cycle (tradition) and the genre-as-medium (modernism) is not, of course, to contend that the traditional artists of classic Hollywood cinema never examined “the fact of automatism itself” (the greatness of Hawks' late period, for example, is founded precisely on such explorations), nor that contemporary directors are incapable of producing strong work in identifiable traditions (e.g., James L. Brooks' undervalued 2010 *How Do You Know*). Rather, Cavell's notion of “automatism” points up the fact that our conception of what constitutes a new development or discovery in cinema may itself require reconceptualization. There's no denying that new technological/material bases have allowed for the creation of new genres that adhere to the genre-as-cycle model (such as the desktop movies discussed by Jason Anderson in *Cinema Scope* 78), but what Cavell's genre distinctions suggest is that shifting the notion of what counts as “criticizable” (such as with the genre-as-medium approach) may be just as significant, and perhaps even more so in a contemporary context.

To cite one recent example, upon the release of Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* it was typical for commentators to focus on the film's glut of recycled iconography and pro forma plotting as evidence of an “exhaustion” of traditional forms, a lack of “revelation” or “newness.” From a genre-as-cycle perspective, this judgment stands to reason—but why should we confine ourselves to only this way of reading? What the genre-as-medium approach suggests is

that “newness” is (or should be) as much a matter of critical perspective as of artistic creation; and, further, that the sharpening and refinement of this perspective can yield alternate systems of value with which to investigate all manner of films, new and old. (If this sounds abstract, I would simply invite one to judge the distance between the greatness of Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* and the greatness of Hong Sangsoo's *Yourself and Yours* [2016].) As Cavell puts it, the purpose of this (re)definition would be not only “to free me [from] my confinement in automatisms that I can no longer acknowledge as mine...but [also] to free the object from me, to give new ground for its *autonomy*.”

Cavell's statement above rhymes with the efforts of other thinkers and theorists who sought, in their different ways, to clear new space for critical autonomy—Parker Tyler and Manny Farber, for example, and, in the realm of literary criticism, Northrop Frye, whose landmark *Anatomy of Criticism* Cavell has expressed his indebtedness to. While the films discussed in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears* were canonized as “classics” well before Cavell wrote about them, his achievement was to discover new ways to consider them beyond their usual designations as “screwball comedy” or “woman's film.” In allowing them to converse with each other through weaves of similarity and difference, through relations of compensation and reciprocity, Cavell demonstrated how these Hollywood films could be seen as examining the facts of their own “automatisms.” In doing so, he let them speak to the full range of their cultural inheritance—Emerson and Kant, Ibsen and Shakespeare, philosophical skepticism and psychoanalysis—rather than simply regarding them as objects for theoretical speculation; he allowed them to challenge and contest such criticism, giving them, as it were, a voice in their own creation.

Throughout *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*, this notion of self-creation is intimately identified with Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, whom Cavell sees as a predecessor of the women of both the comedies and the melodramas in her judgment of her husband and his society. This connection is most lucidly treated in *Contesting Tears*' chapter on *Stella Dallas* (titled “Stella's Taste”), in which Cavell contends that Stanwyck's heroine does not sacrifice her place in her upper-crust husband's society for the sake of her daughter (as in the common interpretation of the film), but rather *rejects* that society as not to her taste, thus enacting what he calls “some Emersonian/Thoreauvian image of what Nietzsche will call the pain of individuation.” In a new essay in *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema*, Robert Sinnerbrink takes issue with Cavell's “affirmative reading of [Stella's] self-education as a form of moral perfectionist self-transformation” because it supposedly avoids “the cultural-political question” of Stella's social conditions and “dissolves” her “struggle with the entwined challenges of gender and class.” But this objection misses the point of Cavell's emphasis on Stella's taste, which is that only in her exercise of it can she truly take the measure of her society. What Cavell affirms is that no matter the cost, Stella refuses to deny her own judgment in things, refuses to try and detach her experience from whatever cultural-political questions may arise—for to (attempt to) do so would be to reject Emerson's call for self-reliance, to deny one's own voice and history. It would be to live in a state of unknownness with oneself.



*Pas son genre* offers a similar sense of what is at stake during its climax, in which Jennifer gives a solo karaoke rendition of “I Will Survive” on a night out with her girlfriends. Coming just after Clément’s unthinking denial of her, the performance resounds as a call to her friends, or to anyone who might listen—one that goes unanswered, and which gives her the conviction to break with her former life. Because of Jennifer’s desire to express all and her apparent failure to be recognized by anyone else, her performance is undeniably melodramatic, exemplifying what Cavell in *Contesting Tears* calls “the terror of absolute inexpressiveness, suffocation, which at the same time reveals itself as a terror of absolute expressiveness, unconditioned exposure,” and which he further connects to the woman’s voice in opera. But, for analogous reasons, her performance (not to mention Belvaux’s presentation of it) is essentially modernist—indeed, one could say that the film’s modernist position is itself melodramatic. For those willing to acknowledge that Jennifer’s (and Belvaux’s) chosen “medium” of expression, a karaoke performance, can be taken with as much seriousness as, say, another artist’s use of opera—i.e., that apart from their specific application, one form cannot a priori be elevated above the other—nothing is concealed in her performance; her anguish, as well as Belvaux’s accomplishment, is plain to see. But for those who refuse to accept such a premise, there is simply nothing to see, thus no discussion is possible. Conversation ends before it can begin.

This is a (modernist) crisis of expression, a crisis of voicelessness—for while we may do our best to make ourselves understood (as Jennifer does by attempting to stake out new vistas of understanding with Clément over the course of their relationship), there are no guarantees that our calls will be answered. But if the unknown-woman melodramas have anything to say on the matter, it is that this state of things should by no means lead us to settle for less

than the partnerships of the remarriage comedies, and to thus embrace false society. Like Jennifer, who departs from Arras for good at the end of *Pas son genre* leaving no clear indication of where she has gone, we should realize that solitude may be the preferable option. She may hope that her choice is somewhat better than whim at last, but, like Ibsen’s Nora before her, she cannot spend the day in explanation. Still, her departure resounds, is itself expressive; and, like Joan Fontaine speaking from beyond the grave in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, she leaves behind a bewildered former lover who must respond to her act. How Clément takes this is left open, but if he is able to recognize Jennifer’s say in things, he will take the measure of himself—of his world—by her unknownness.

Needless to say, Jennifer’s actions can be taken wrongly and distorted altogether—for, as Cavell is acutely aware, “metaphysical speculation about freedom or self-creation” can be retrogressively appropriated as a cover for social injustice. The challenge of *Pas son genre*, as of Cavell’s work in general, is to make out another way. It is a call to take aesthetic judgments as seriously as do Ibsen’s Nora, Dequenne’s Jennifer, and the women of the *Contesting Tears* melodramas—all uncompromising in the exercise of their tastes, all Kantian before being told so. As Cavell so beautifully puts it in *The World Viewed*, “the persistent exercise of your own taste, and thence the willingness to challenge your taste as it stands, to form your own artistic conscience,” is of paramount importance; no one else can do this for you. In uttering the words “pas son genre,” in owning our judgments and thus (re)claiming our voices, we might be consigning ourselves to unknownness, but this remains far preferable to imitative relationships and disingenuous exchanges. We may not always be able to imagine a concrete future, but as Cavell says of Ibsen’s Nora, perhaps no future we might imagine is, in the end, as important as the sense that we have one.

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