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Todd Haynes' Melodramas of the Unknown Woman: *Far From Heaven*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Carol*, and Stanley Cavell's Film Ethics

Wim Staat

On June 19, 2018, Stanley Cavell died; he was born September 1, 1926. His work on philosophy and film will remain relevant for a long time to come. The present essay, discussing Todd Haynes' melodramas, will take Cavell's film books as its point of departure, although his philosophical works are relevant as well. Cavell's genre of the melodrama of the unknown woman is relevant for three of Haynes' films: *Far From Heaven*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Carol*. The film *Far From Heaven* (2002), set in the late 1950s, is about a homemaker married to a successful businessman who is a homosexual. The film shows that she befriends her gardener, as the female lead does in Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (1955). Haynes' five-part miniseries *Mildred Pierce* (2011) is a melodramatic update of the 1945 Hollywood film noir with the same title and is closer to the original novel in its depiction of female independence during the Great Depression. Finally, *Carol* (2015), set in the winter and spring of 1952 to 1953, portrays a strong woman losing a custody battle because of her adultery with a young lesbian lover. In all three titles Haynes refers to the iconography of pre-1960s' Hollywood filmmaking and respectfully incorporates stylistic features of that time.¹

What does a Cavellian understanding of these melodramas entail? And what will become key scenes? To be sure, Haynes' recent melodramas differ from Cavell's favorite melodramas made in the 1930s and 1940s, but it was Cavell himself—not just in his melodrama book but also in his earlier book on remarriage comedies—who emphasized that his examples should be updated and less confined to his personal viewing history. In fact, Cavell's work "The Good of Film," lists more than a dozen contemporary films all expressing the same concerns as his favorites from the 1930s and 1940s.² Important for Cavell is that a good film addresses certain issues and is not so much confined to a certain era. These issues are always relevant for

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those interested in film ethics, yet they do not pertain, Cavell writes, to “front-page moral dilemmas” which tend to play down “moral complexities into struggles between clear good and blatant evil, or ironic reversals of them;”³ alternatively, the issues addressed in good films, according to Cavell, “concern the difficulty of overcoming a certain moral cynicism,” which as a problem is not so much expressed in moral dilemmas but rather in everyday conflicts “between public demands and private desires.”⁴

As Cavell has emphasized in *Contesting Tears*, the female protagonists in his favorite melodramas characteristically are hindered by thwarted romantic expectations.⁵ In *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Dir. Max Ophüls, 1948), the desires of the lead character are unknown for her object of affection while she is actually nearby. Nevertheless, the melodrama’s heroine is articulate about what she would have wanted. However, the Ophüls film lets her die before her letters are read by her unsuspecting, self-satisfied love interest. In general, the protagonist of the *melodrama of the unknown woman*—a phrase now coined as Cavell’s particular genre—is articulate, mature, and confident. Her love is not only denied by an individual too ignorant and self-absorbed to recognize it, and, beyond his particular ignorance, also obstructed by social strongholds and conservative morality.⁶

For Cavell, the melodramas of the unknown women should be related to specific comedies of the same era because these comedies present happy ends for known—that is, acknowledged women—the women in the melodramas typically do not live happily ever after, precisely because they remain isolated from communal celebrations of mutual acknowledgment. Cavell’s melodramas of unknown women therefore generically relate to the comedies he has described earlier. His book on comedy, *Pursuits of Happiness*, was published in 1981, and his book on melodrama, *Contesting Tears*, in 1996; in the latter Cavell introduces the melodramas as derived from the comedies.⁷ Cavell’s favorite comedies are not so much celebrations of romantic love, but rather acknowledgments of mutual maturity by equal partners, portrayed by somewhat older actors like Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy in their most celebrated roles, significantly past the age of teenage romance. To emphasize the characteristic return, in the end, of the partners to a marriage previously in crisis, Cavell calls these films “comedies of remarriage.”⁸ The crucial difference between Cavell’s favorite comedies and melodramas then is whether or not the acknowledgment of the partners’ equality can be celebrated. In the melodramas, there is no such celebration.

Contesting Tears features four melodramas, and although they belong to the same genre, of course they are different in various ways as well. Some of these differences emphasize what is generically crucial. The heroines of the melodramas in *Contesting Tears* differ in their independence from men. Specifically, as described in the first chapter of this book, a happy end still

seems possible in *Gaslight* (Dir. George Cukor 1944) when Ingrid Bergman's character, Paula, finally appears to find love in the arms of an accommodating police inspector. Crucially, however, there is no societal acknowledgment of what would be her independence. In Cavell's next chapters, most of the unknown women do appear stronger, but also more isolated from their community. After the subsequently presented private romantic relief of *Gaslight* and the post-mortem letter in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*,⁹ the Bette Davis character, Charlotte Vale, in *Now, Voyager* (Dir. Irving Rapper 1942) develops most strongly towards becoming an independent woman, yet she also appears furthest removed from the mutual acknowledgment characteristic of the partners in the comedies of remarriage. In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell's fourth and final melodrama, *Stella Dallas* (Dir. King Vidor 1937), features an unacknowledged woman whose fate perhaps most inevitably develops towards isolation. More independent than Paula in *Gaslight*, but less comfortable in her splendid isolation than Charlotte in *Now, Voyager*, Barbara Stanwyck's Stella is most harrowingly caught between her own social backgrounds and the society from which she, as the loving mother of the daughter outgrowing her, actually is excluded.

The central characters of Haynes' melodramas appear to develop towards independence as well. First, like Paula's consolation in *Gaslight* by her police-inspector friend, the well being of Julianne Moore's character, Cathy, in *Far From Heaven* appears to depend on the confirmation of her friendship by a man. Unlike *Gaslight*, however, there is no consolation for the heroine of *Far From Heaven* because the object of her love interest is excluded from social-cultural reaffirmation himself: he is African American. Next, just as Barbara Stanwyck's Stella in *Stella Dallas*, Kate Winslet's Mildred in Haynes' *Mildred Pierce* is caught between her ambitions for her daughter in one regard and her own unsophisticated upbringing and kitchen career in another. Inevitably, her own child will leave her behind in isolation. Finally, in *Carol*, both lesbian protagonists suffer the consequences of their socially unacceptable relationship. Although there is a connection with the lack of acknowledgement suffered in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the individuality of Charlotte in *Now, Voyager* is a more appropriate context for the independence of protagonists in *Carol*. Untouchable Charlotte sometimes seems to have inspired *Carol*, and possibly Therese as well. However, as a couple in *Carol*, they appear to be less lonely than Charlotte in *Now, Voyager*: they embrace their togetherness as if they indeed were the heroines of a remarriage comedy.

Cavell's philosophical argument

Character independence is crucial for both Cavell's comedies and his melodramas. First, the comedies of remarriage feature strong characters who

will have their independence reconfirmed by each other's publicly acknowledged reaffirmation of their marriage. For Cavell, *independence* does not mean *isolation*. Successful, independent characters, for Cavell, are socially embedded characters; contradistinctively, isolated characters can actually become seriously waning personalities because of continuously postponed public reaffirmation. In the melodramas, then, even when the protagonist is portrayed as a strong, independent woman, Cavell implies that her isolation inevitably will devastate her. The melodramas, therefore, are about unacknowledged women—*knowledge as acknowledgment* is particularly significant in relation to these films.

The point Cavell makes about knowledge in the melodramas of the unknown woman brings him close to what he has explored in a more strictly philosophical line of reasoning early in his career. In a more abstract way, not directly related to the realm of film, understanding knowledge as acknowledgment brings us closer to another aspect of Cavell's work. To wit, Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Claim of Reason* appear to belong to a line of work completely separated from his writings on film.¹⁰ Later in his career, Cavell has attempted to unite these strands of interest: *Cities of Words* features parallel chapters connecting canonical thinkers in the practical realm of ethics and politics in one view, to particular melodramas and comedies in another. Nevertheless, already in *Must We Mean What We Say?*—a title that is the inversion of an imperative and, as such, an allusion to ethics—there is ample evidence of thinking beyond the epistemological points of departure apparently inherent in Cavell's American philosophical upbringing.¹¹

In his *Must We Mean What We Say?* chapter on "Knowing and Acknowledging," Cavell points out that there is a difference between "knowing that I'm late" and "acknowledging that I am late," which is relatively unimportant to his first subject in this chapter, philosophical skepticism, but all the more important when the significance of these phrases is researched in the realm of ethics: the first phrase expresses *certainty*, the second implies the *understanding of an ethical obligation*.¹² Strictly speaking, the skeptic would only be interested in certainty, Cavell points out, and not in the implied obligation. In contrast, Cavell himself—in this chapter already more concerned with ethics than epistemology—is more interested in the obligation.¹³

In *The Claim of Reason* Cavell refers to his 1969 "Knowing and Acknowledging" chapter to make sure that his distinction between the two—certainty and an understanding of an ethical obligation—is related to his understandings of literature.¹⁴ Literature, he implies, will actually help to move beyond the self-indulgence implied by the philosophical appreciation of skepticism, stuck in the rut of "providing solutions one does not

believe to problems one has not felt.”¹⁵ Alternatively, Cavell embraces the expansion into ethics already suggested in the 1969 essay, but now more thoroughly presented as the understanding of acknowledgment featured in the literary counterpart to filmic melodrama: tragedy. Moving beyond epistemology and skepticism, “acknowledgment is to be studied, is what is studied, in the avoidances that tragedy studies.”¹⁶ The tragedies themselves already study acknowledgment; it is not Cavell-the-scholar who introduces acknowledgment into the tragedies. Still, key in this sentence is the term *avoidances*. In Cavell’s understanding, they are the opposite of successful attempts to find acknowledgment in the significant others who are most clearly present in the repeated marriages of his favorite Hollywood comedies. Hence, our understanding of the significance of the melodrama of the unknown woman is centered on the avoidances encountered by Cavell’s heroines. The unacknowledged woman of the melodramas actually is alone, not just because it is her fate in the end, but also because she is actively avoided and therefore isolated in her attempts to establish her character.

For Cavell’s melodramas of the unknown woman, active isolation means that his heroines overtly suffer in public spaces. Indeed, the privacy of their homes still is the place for these women’s recurring, heartfelt sorrow, but the hardship is never limited to their private life. To use *Gaslight* as a clear example, the public piano recital as the context for the embarrassment Paula has to endure, in its oppressiveness and resulting avoidance of sociality, is more directly devastating for Paula than her more slowly undermining experiences at home. Paula, who is training to be a stage-performing singer herself, does not find reconfirmation by her husband of their marriage against the background of an attentive recital audience; on the contrary, he scares her into a panic for which he quite observably removes her from the recital room, actually making the concert momentarily stop. The resulting public humiliation undermines every attempt by Paula to regain self-reliance and prevents her from reestablishing her independence of character.

Even though this public display of isolation in *Gaslight* calls attention to itself, there is no front-page moral dilemma here. Cavell makes clear that the key moral issue in *Gaslight* and in his other melodramas is publically experienced lack of personal acknowledgment, not capital punishment, whistle blowing, or civil disobedience.¹⁷ Cavell points out that in his perspective on film ethics the interplay between the private and the public in the melodrama of the unknown woman is more important than the overt display, in moral-issue films, of the consequences of abortion (*Cider House Rules*, Dir. Lasse Hallström, 1999), whistle blowing (*The Insider*, Dir. Michael Mann, 1999), and the like. This point is not to say that publicness

does not play an important role in his favorite films, sometimes even in the shape of newspaper headings, demarcating the difference between public and private; on the contrary, the tragedy of the melodramas emerges most effectively where the private and the public meet or, better yet, clash.

Suburban confinement in *Far From Heaven*

In Haynes' three melodramas, the active isolation of female protagonists, in accordance with Cavell's genre conventions, amounts to a specific negotiation of public and private realms. In *Far From Heaven*, Cathy (Julianne Moore) is presented as a homemaker; together she and her husband host an annual party in their house, an important social event for the local elite. Framed on the living room wall, Cathy and her husband feature as Mrs. and Mr. Magnatech, her husband's employer, a television-set manufacturer. The couple is also featured in the society pages of the local newspaper. However, the secrecy surrounding her husband's homosexuality undermines Cathy's self-confidence. After her attempt to find consolation for her loneliness in the company of her gardener, she is no longer the well-respected community member she was before; instead, the same crowd that gathered in her house before now actively avoids her. Cavell would have appreciated here that not the front page but rather the society pages are relevant for Cathy's dilemmas.

Far From Heaven presents the suburban dream of a family home set in 1957, and extensively uses as its melodramatic point of departure the soul-searching of Douglas Sirk's character Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) in *All that Heaven Allows* (1955). Haynes not only pays homage to Sirk's content matter, but also mimics Sirk's elaborate settings, lavish costumes, and even his camera movements and shot angles. However, as John Gill points out regarding content matter, Haynes' 2002 film could effectively be more explicit than Sirk in the 1950s, specifically about race and homosexuality.¹⁸ The main difference in the dramatic set up is that in Sirk's film a widowed mother finds solace in the arms of a Thoreau-toting gardener (Rock Hudson), whereas Haynes' separated housewife, Cathy, will be forever isolated from her own gardener because of his social expulsion, which she herself made tragically unavoidable. *Far From Heaven*, in comparison with one of Cavell's favorite melodramas, no longer features the consoling arms still prominent in *Gaslight*, but has its heroine become the victim of active social avoidance. Also, to prevent misunderstandings about the nature of *Far From Heaven's* homage to Sirk, the film does not engage in ironic reversals or tongue-in-cheek pastiche. Gill in fact remarks that both "Haynes and Julianne Moore explained," as can be seen in the DVD extras, that "there is no irony in *Far From Heaven*," even if several critics have

attempted to present the film as a “postmodern parlour game, even a deconstructionist marvel.”¹⁹

Cavell does not refer to the classical postwar melodramas by Douglas Sirk,²⁰ but on account of his attempt to steer clear of front-page moral dilemmas, he would agree with Laura Mulvey’s assessment, in reference to Sirk, that melodrama in the late 1950s flourished “as a style of film-making in which a social ‘unconscious’ is both acknowledged and displaced.”²¹ What would be acknowledged, is what Cavell refers to as the successful balance in remarriage comedies between the social and private aspects of the heroine’s life, which is exactly what the melodramas contradistinctively lack. In the melodramas, the reconfirmation of a well-balanced social and private life is withheld from the heroine’s life—in Mulvey’s terms: the melodramas have the heroine displaced from the realm of acknowledgment. And this displacement leaves the heroine alone, isolated from acknowledgement.

By the time of the release of *Far From Heaven* in 2002, the dynamics of American society had surely changed, which is why Mulvey, in reference to Haynes’ homage to Sirk, writes that “*Far From Heaven* can only mimic Sirkian cinema stylistically, since it is necessarily more literal and explicit about taboo issues than would have been possible in Hollywood even by the late 1950s.”²² Nevertheless, even if *Far From Heaven* does indeed explicitly address homosexuality and interracial relationships, Haynes does not stray from Cavell’s claim that the drama resides in the everyday consequences of the clash between the public and the private, not in front-page explicitness. In other words, and closer to Cavell’s assessment about the melodrama of the unknown woman, even if the differences between Sirk and Haynes are *thematically* assessable—unlike Sirk, Haynes can indeed be explicit about taboo issues—what would be more interesting is a *stylistic* assessment of the dramatic everydayness of the conflict between publicness and privacy in Haynes’ contemporary tribute. The generic suburban setting in *Far From Heaven* could be seen therefore as an abstraction hostile to Cathy’s soul-searching: “desire, corporeality and the personalities they embody are drowned in suburban abstraction.”²³ Indeed, the avoidance of intimacy in such a hostile environment isolates Cathy and has, as Anat Pick writes, “*Far From Heaven* rigorously unfold the tragedy of abstraction as the drama of the obliteration of physicality and identity.”²⁴ Cathy’s everyday life no longer gives her any intimate acknowledgment.

For Cathy and her gardener Raymond (Dennis Hayberth), there is no privacy in Cathy’s suburban home, although her relatively secluded garden provides the first surroundings for her meetings with him. When she extends her friendship with Raymond and they enjoy the autumn foliage there is little privacy, however, because Haynes makes sure that they appear

to be strolling in “some corner of a municipal park.”²⁵ The artificiality of the landscape contrasts with the indubitably heartfelt genuineness of the friendship she feels for him. Even when Raymond takes Cathy outside for a walk and Cathy suggests a path more secluded, their intimacy is negotiated. Here, *Far From Heaven* reaches its seemingly most natural setting away from societal interference, and befitting the great outdoors Raymond tells Cathy that “Sometimes it’s the people outside our world we confide in best,” clearly referring to the paradoxical intimacy that Raymond and Cathy are experiencing at that very moment. Cathy, then, confirms Raymond’s theory, explaining how, “Once you do confide, share with someone, they’re no longer really outside are they?” The pond, however—their own Walden, so to speak—is not natural. It has carefully sculpted stairwells that, even if they look somewhat overgrown, appear to have a nature-by-design construction. Thus there is no “natural” privacy for Cathy and Raymond, a point that is immediately emphasized in the next scene. Out for lunch with Cathy in Raymond’s favorite restaurant, an African American senior chides Raymond for bringing a white lady to this place: “What do you think you’re doing, boy?” Moreover, the couple is spotted entering the restaurant by one of Cathy’s lady friends who turns into the local gossip girl making sure that there is nothing private about an intimate luncheon in an African American restaurant. From the perspective of Cavell’s unknown, displaced woman, the drama already is apparent, albeit momentarily postponed.

Mildred Pierce’s inevitable conflict with her daughter

Haynes’ 2011 five-part miniseries is a closer adaption of the 1941 James M. Cain novel than the 1945 Michael Curtiz film that changed the story to include a police interrogation befitting the noir style popular at the time.²⁶ Haynes’ *Mildred Pierce*, set in the 1930s marred by economic hardship, is less exuberant than *Far From Heaven*: “restricted lighting now is naturalistic, and close-ups are avoided.”²⁷ Indeed, Rob White continues with a quote from Director of Photography Ed Lachman for *Far From Heaven* as well as *Carol*, who explains about the depiction of Mildred (Kate Winslet) that the film’s creative team “tried to create a certain distance, as if she’s being observed.”²⁸

Compared with *Mildred Pierce*, *Far From Heaven* was almost expressionistically dramatic. The artificiality of *Far From Heaven* was even more radically dramatic than the back-to-nature idyll still present in Sirk’s *All that Heaven Allows* with its final suggestion of Rock Hudson in a Walden beyond the impersonality of suburbia in the late 1950s. Even though the psychological bleakness of suburbanism of *Far From Heaven* was countered

by exuberant color schemes borrowed from *All that Heaven Allows*, Hayne's film inevitably prevented idyllic transcendence. However, it would be a mistake to understand the naturalism of *Mildred Pierce* as a relatively unobstructed way into the identification with its lead character; on the contrary, the naturalistic style apparently was intended by the filmmakers as a suggestion that Mildred was always being observed, under surveillance.

In the second half of the series, when Mildred's achievements as a business woman warrants a climb on the social ladder, she seems prepared to stand the test of having successfully escaped her own backgrounds. By ostensibly showing what Mildred considers to be high-class artifacts in the privacy of her home, she proves ready to remind an observant guest of her personal success. But her success remains limited to economic success, of which Mildred's love interest Monte (Guy Pearce) conversely reminds her. He surely is an attractive man, but what is most appealing about him for Mildred is his high-class, leisurely style, which Mildred herself is never able to fully assume. When she is able to buy Monte's Pasadena mansion, her purchase in fact only emphasizes the class difference between her and Monte, and more devastatingly, between her and the daughter she has successfully raised into Monte's upper class. Like Stella in *Stella Dallas*, Mildred raises her own daughter to distance herself from the limited cultural resources Mildred has to offer. On her way to adulthood, Mildred's daughter Veda (Evan Rachel Wood) inevitably will leave her behind.

Similarly, Cavell is convinced that Stella understands the unavoidability of the active role she has to play in her separation from her daughter. Cavell writes about Stella that she shows that she does not belong to the upper class because of her choice of costume: "Stella's excessive costume ... makes her an object of ridicule to refined society."²⁹ More importantly, however, Cavell is convinced that Stella will not passively endure the inevitable, but here, wearing the costume, already actively "precipitates her plan to separate from her daughter."³⁰ Cavell does not believe that Stella passively awaits the inevitable separation from her daughter Laurel; instead, according to Cavell, she understands that her daughter's well-being in fact depends on her actively seeking it. For Cavell, it is clear that Stella is not oblivious to the effect of her public appearance: "her spectacle is part of her strategy for separating Laurel from her."³¹

In the final episode, Mildred marries Monty, and her high-class husband jokingly reminds the crowd at their wedding reception of the active role he had to play in Veda's education before he married Mildred. Personally addressing Veda, but simultaneously entertaining the champagne-drinking wedding reception guests around the fire place, including Mildred, Monte recalls how he was a factor in Veda's education becoming a high-class classical singer: "When I discovered you, practically pulled you out of the

gutter, you were strictly keyboard.” To which Veda responds—skipping the reference to the gutter—that her change from keyboard to voice was actually quite coincidental. Mildred, in contrast, must have immediately understood the gutter reference as a reference to her. Again like Stella in *Stella Dallas*, Mildred understands that for Veda to become independent, Veda eventually will have to leave Mildred behind, and that Mildred in the end will even have to be avoided. Mildred acknowledges the inevitability of the social separation from her own daughter. Towards the end, Mildred (like Stella with her daughter Laurel) understands the active role she has had to play in the development of her daughter Veda’s independence, particularly from her mother. Arguably, Mildred here already understands that Veda’s avoidance of her would be not so much passively endured, but rather tragically provoked by herself.

In the final scenes of *Mildred Pierce*, the separation, even if unavoidable, is devastating for Mildred. She is completely overwhelmed when she finds Veda in her husband’s bed. More importantly, she appears to be less affected by Monte’s adultery, or by the fact that his adultery was with her own daughter, than by Veda’s behavior. Veda does not appear to be ashamed in front her mother at all and rather provocatively descends naked from the adulterer’s bed, slowly walking towards the bedroom mirror to brush her hair. Mildred reacts. She attacks Veda and grabs her by the throat, after which Veda crawls to the piano, unable to sing a single note, dramatically demonstrating that in fact it was her voice that Mildred attacked. Fade to black.

In the final 11 minutes of the series, the epilogue, Mildred remarries Veda’s father and returns to her humble beginnings in her first restaurant. More importantly, the epilogue also is where Mildred and Veda meet for the last time and Mildred recognizes that, as Cavell would say, she inevitably had to play her part in the plan to separate from her daughter. Mildred’s attack on Veda was carefully prepared by Veda herself, as underscored by Haynes’ choice of excessively melodramatic non-diegetic music. Their last encounter, now close to Mildred and Veda’s old home, is goodbye. Veda indicates that she is in a rush to catch a plane and therefore does not have time to step into the home in which she herself grew up. Here, Mildred finally understands that even though her attack on her daughter may have been an act on impulse, it also was as predictable as it was emotional. Now, Veda, standing next to a taxi on her way to the airport, is ready to finalize her separation from her mother. Mildred realizes that this final goodbye became inevitable after her violent reaction to her daughter taking her place with Monte. Mildred’s violence was not a coincidence at all; instead, it would let the unavoidable final separation between mother and daughter take effect, allowing Veda to move out to the East Coast, to establish herself as the eminent singer she was destined to be, and, not least, let herself be escorted by

Monte's sophistication to become the socialite her mother Mildred already had begun to create.

Carol's costly independence

Haynes' melodramas feature strong women, not unlike Cavell's favorites from the 1930s and 1940s. What is crucial about these women is their lack of acknowledgment, which is why Cavell's favorites, as explained before, can be called *melodramas of the unacknowledged women*. Lack of acknowledgment always isolates these strong women from society. Interestingly, Haynes most recent melodrama, *Carol* (2015), features not one but two strong women who will indeed be isolated from society because of their attempts to integrate their personal lives into a community unable to accommodate their choices. In other words, Carol and her lesbian lover Therese do acknowledge each other, and in that sense the women are not alone, but even New York City in the early 1950s will not fully acknowledge them as couple. Indeed, the public life of restaurants and bars will have no problem with paying gay patrons, but as becomes painfully clear to Carol and Therese this acceptance will not entail civil rights protecting, for example, Carol being a mother to her only daughter.

Nevertheless, because of the mutual acknowledgment inherent in Carol and Therese's decision to leave husband and boyfriend and live together, *Carol* is closest to Cavell's comedy of remarriage, the parental genre for the melodramas. Clearly, *Carol* is not a comedy, but the theme of acknowledgment does show how close Cavell's melodramas are to his comedies, and more importantly, focusing on mutual acknowledgment in *Carol* helps to find its key scenes from an ethical perspective. Mutual acknowledgment in the comedies always takes place not only in the realm of the private but most importantly also in the realm of public life. Indeed, the film's love scenes in private rooms have a special way of becoming public. A private detective, hired by Carol's husband, is able to place a sound-recording device to the wall adjacent to Carol and Therese's room. He has recorded their love-making, and Carol immediately understands how the tape harms her in divorce settlement negotiations to be conducted in the offices of her husband's lawyers. It is how their private life is violently publicized so that Carol's adultery supposedly proves her an unworthy mother.³²

Inevitably, because of its becoming part of a public record, the couple's private life is changed. There are immediate consequences in the sense that Carol rushes back to New York, leaving Therese behind in an attempt for damage control, and more general consequences occur later on, related to Carol's family life with her daughter, as evinced in therapy sessions for Carol—with a “very expensive doctor” Carol's mother in law readily

points out. Haynes combines these scenes of Carol's family refurbishment with scenes depicting Therese becoming a professional photographer. Marking the transition in both their lives is the scene with Carol's voice-over reading her goodbye letter to Therese. Carol's "I release you," accompanies Therese's darkroom development of the pictures she took of Carol, pictures becoming part of Therese's portfolio helping her to land her first job as a newspaper photographer.

Retrospectively, the earlier scenes in which Carol and Therese were shown in through-the-window shots not only were iconographical preparations of Therese's professional portfolio, in a more general sense they were also preparing for the publicization of intimacy inherent in these photos. Here, *Carol* confirms Rob White's earlier remarks about Lachman's approach as director of photography to using naturalism as a stylistic feature of surveillance.³³ The references by Lachman and Haynes in *Carol* to street photography in the 1950s are accompanied by references to cure-by-therapy of homosexuality in the same era, the latter already featured in *Far From Heaven* for Cathy's gay husband. Both Carol's therapy sessions as discussed by her mother in law and Therese's street photography are about *the private becoming public*, a key element of Cavell's comedies and melodramas. Had *Carol* been a Cavellian remarriage comedy, then these negotiations of redrawn boundaries between the private and the public would be a characterizing feature of the film, as the difference between Cavell's melodramas and comedies is that the comedies are successful re-negotiators of private and public space and the melodramas are not.

For *Carol*, *Adam's Rib* (Dir. George Cukor 1949) is relevant, a Hepburn-Tracy comedy about competing family lawyers unable to keep their private life from being featured in the newspaper's society pages. It is a prime example of Cavell's claim that the comedies of remarriage really are about the continuous demarcation of private and public life, epitomizing what he, without intended exaggeration, calls "the fate of the democratic bond."³⁴ It would be a mistake, therefore, to confine the relevance of remarriage comedies to the love life of their protagonists, for they are about individuals becoming part of public life. Indeed, the privacy of a happy marriage cannot exist, Cavell contends, without the marriage being verified in the openness of public life: "You must test [marriage] in the open or else mutual independence is threatened."³⁵ As the Hepburn-Tracy characters become stronger as individuals precisely because their marriage is tested publicly, so do Therese and Carol's individualities become stronger towards the end of the film when Therese affirms her love for Carol. When Therese and Carol are on the move, from one generic motel or hotel room to another, they already are travelling away from privacy. However, the nature of their lesbian relationship is kept hidden. Indeed, it is not until

the final scene, that the crowded bustle of a public restaurant in the finale is the backdrop for Therese saying yes to their relationship. After their separation marked by Carol's therapy and Therese's budding career, the evening restaurant is the place for their remarriage, so to speak.

Haynes has constructed the couple's remarriage in a doubled scene, bracketing almost the entirety of the film as a flash back. Four minutes into the film, Therese and Carol sitting down at a restaurant table are spotted by a passer-by who interrupts their conversation. A sound bridge then connects the present to the images of the past, the time of their first encounter in the department store where Therese works and Carol is a customer. An hour and forty minutes later, the film is back in the present of their restaurant-table meeting, albeit not yet the up-scale dinner restaurant forming the backdrop of Therese's later affirmation. No, this earlier meeting for tea is in fact the first after their separation in the motel. Unlike the scene in the fourth minute, however, now the camera does not present the perspective of the passer-by closing in on the two; instead, we are presented with the conversation between Therese and Carol from the perspective of the participants themselves, not the passer-by. Now it becomes clear what is interrupted. It is Carol's awkward, almost formal invitation, without looking Therese in the eye, to come live with her in her new apartment: "I was hoping you might like to come live with me, but I guess you won't...". Therese's face appears blank, without emotion: "No, I don't think so." Immediately, Carol changes to a less imposing invitation to join her and some friends in a restaurant for dinner, later that evening. Therese does not respond, or does not know how to respond. Right before the interruption by Therese's acquaintance, Carol finally breaks the formality of their meeting, now looking directly at Therese and saying: "I love you." Therese is not able to respond, however, even if she would have wanted to, as their conversation is interrupted.

The significance of their restaurant conversation, from the perspective of the two women, has completely changed from what appeared to be just an awkward moment in a casual meeting with a passer-by presented in the fourth minute. The passer-by proves to be Therese's former fiancé—for him the awkwardness of the moment may have seemed entirely restricted to his previous engagement with Therese. Hence, the two scenes are the same and yet entirely different. In fact, the repeated scene is Haynes' way of showing what a difference in perspective entails for our understanding of the boundaries between public and private life.

Conclusion

Stanley Cavell's theory of remarriage comedies and melodramas of unknown women helps to find key scenes in Haynes' three melodramas.

These scenes are highlighted by the perspective on these films generated by Cavell's insistence that popular film is an apt medium for the analysis of the values inherent in the culture that surrounds us. The ethical relevance of these films is not that they will provide insight into major dilemmatic issues; rather, these films help to understand how film ethics belongs to more everyday moral issues concerning, in Haynes' melodramas, loneliness (*Far From Heaven*), motherhood (*Mildred Pierce*) and friendship (*Carol*). These films should not be dismissed because of their popular and fleeting entertainment characteristics. Indeed, there is no underestimation of popular melodrama, neither by Cavell nor by Haynes. As Cavell would have argued, Haynes' melodramas are presentations of changing entanglements of private and public life.

Although Cathy in *Far From Heaven* does indeed suffer loneliness, this theme is not specifically tied, however, to this particular film. For Cavell, in fact all heroines in melodramas of the unknown woman are lonely, precisely because they lack acknowledgment. It is the prime characteristic of these melodramas. The difference between the melodramas and the comedies is that the latter do have this mutual acknowledgment. The comedies feature women who may very well reconfirm their independence in and through the community of which they are a part. This community is not limited to the intimacy the women experience from being with their husbands, but inheres in the public renegotiation of their bond. The melodramas lack this successful renegotiation; even Therese and Carol, in spite of the comparative strength of their own romantic relationship, do not renegotiate their bond publicly until the closing seconds of the film, significantly later than their frustrated tea-room meeting earlier that day.

In reference to Haynes' contemporary melodramas being more explicit than Sirk's, Jonathan Goldberg writes, "melodramas may fasten on social problems that reflect the historical moment of a given film's creation."³⁶ Their subject matter, Goldberg suggests, is a reflection of the social agenda of the time. Haynes's *Far From Heaven* from 2002 is about homosexuality and racial discrimination, whereas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* from 1955 appears to be about the social isolation of widows, which some may consider a comparatively minor social issue.³⁷ Implied here is that, unlike Haynes in 2002, Sirk was restricted by the Hays Code still in effect during the 1950s.³⁸ However, this approach is not the way in which Cavell believes the melodrama of the unknown woman is relevant in regard to social problems. To be sure, Cavell would not want to deny the relevance of governmental or production-house restrictions on cinema effective in a certain era, but for Cavell the melodramas' "historical moment" is the insight these films provide into the efficacy of daily restrictions for the private lives of socially experienced protagonists. It is not the subject matter that makes a

film relevant for ethics, it is the insight these film provide into the effectiveness of average everyday values and norms. Front-page moral dilemmas did not interest Cavell. This focus is why for Cavell the melodramas of the unknown woman are secondary to the comedies of remarriage: the comedies need to be understood first because of their successful, reiterated negotiations of private lives in public realms, so that the melodramas failed negotiations then can be properly understood.

This is not to say, however, that the melodramas and the comedies do not have political agendas. These agendas can become pertinent issues because of Cavell's intended reconfiguration of analyses: the philosophical relevance of the melodramas and comedies is film ethics, not epistemology. And it is by way of ethics that political issues gain prominence, first in the comedies. In *Cities of Words*, Cavell extends his descriptions of the democratic relevance of his favorite comedies in reference to John Locke. The remarriage comedies are "revelatory of the nature of democracy... [in] that I owe to my society a meet and cheerful exchange to reaffirm my consent."³⁹ Private lives inevitably have public significance, Cavell claims, and it is because of the intricate balance inherent in the continuous negotiations concerning the boundaries between private and public life that the comedies of remarriage, that is, renegotiated marriage, are exemplary—here, we see ethics at work.

But *Far From Heaven* is not a comedy of remarriage, nor is *Mildred Pierce*. As we have seen, *Carol* in a way does feature a merry couple, but their mutual dependence is not celebrated publicly until the closing seconds of the film. The motel- and hotel-room encounters in *Carol* are secret, certainly not public celebrations of mutual dependence. That is why in all three films the lead characters are existentially alone, even Carol and Therese—loneliness always is a key theme. To loneliness, then, *Far From Heaven* adds spiritual bleakness in lush suburban surroundings, *Mildred Pierce* adds self-denying impositions of motherhood, and *Carol* the responsibilities of friendship.

On friendship as a moral issue, Cavell refers to Aristotle's descriptions of friendship. In the comedy of remarriage a mature couple transcends romance and develops friendship so that it can be, as Aristotle would have it, both cooperative and antagonistic.⁴⁰ For Cavell, loneliness prevents both aspects of the friendly insight into sociality. We need friendly conversation, then, not only for comfort and but for confrontation as well: "one cannot achieve this perspective alone, but only in the mirroring or confrontation of what Aristotle calls the friend."⁴¹ When Carol leaves Therese behind, Carol's letter read in voiceover explaining her hasty departure is the betrayal of what Therese and Carol seemingly developed: their friendship. Mutual acknowledgment confined to the privacy of bedrooms cannot but

disappoint friendship. Therese and Carol's friendship needs the public confirmation of that friendship in the final scene of *Carol*, but it is only in these final seconds of the film that it extols the melodrama. Before that, their friendship is still in need of reconfirmation, and in that sense Carol and Therese are not different from Cathy in *Far From Heaven* who also had to experience being separated from her friend the gardener.

Haynes' three melodramas of unknown women have key scenes that focus on rearranged boundaries in private and public lives. Race, homosexuality, and gender in these melodramas have never become the front-page moral issues that they were in the 1950s and still are now. For Cavell, this point has not implied, however, that these films lack political relevance. To be sure, the key scenes described earlier have not determined a political agenda, but instead featured delicate demarcations of private versus public lives: they show interactions in the realm of a negotiated space for intimacy with publicly acknowledged consequences. For *Carol*, coming closest to the remarriage comedy, there was the optimism of the final scene. And for *Mildred Pierce* there was hope in her remarriage at the end. Devastatingly, however, Mildred was separated from her daughter, like Cathy was from her friend. They have ended up very much alone.

Notes

1. Most of Haynes films have been addressed in the context of Queer Theory, including his melodramas. John Gill, for example, writes on Haynes first melodrama: "Where—or indeed whether—*Far From Heaven* sits in the spectrum of New Queer Cinema is a topic that is still being debated" (Gill, *Far From Heaven*, p. 94). Similarly, Jonathan Goldberg, in his book *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility*, has recognized Haynes' one academic publication, showing an interest in "Homoaesthetics in [Fassbinder's] *Querelle*," as a precursor to Queer Theory (*Melodrama*, p. 30, 43–4, 67–8; Haynes, "Homoaesthetics and *Querelle*," in *Subjects/Objects*).
2. Cavell, "The Good of Film," in *Cavell on Film*.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
4. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, p. 11. Robert Sinnerbrink in *Cinematic Ethics* is critical about what he suggests is Cavell's reduction of politics to ethics. Typically, Sinnerbrink observes in considering *His Girl Friday* (Dir. Howard Hawks, 1940), Cavell is less interested in major political issues than in regenerated romance. However, according to Sinnerbrink, "crime, punishment, and political corruption in *His Girl Friday* is central" (p. 47) and not secondary to the marital issues of the protagonists.
5. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*
6. Cavell is more specific about Hollywood Melodrama than, for example, Thomas Elsaesser in "Tales of Sound and Fury: The Family Melodrama," in *Monogram*. Haynes himself, particularly in the DVD extras on *Far From Heaven*, repeatedly uses the Elsaesser essay to connect not only with Douglas Sirk (1897–1987) but also with the elaborations by R.W. Fassbinder (1945–1982) on the idea that Hollywood melodrama should be taken more seriously than was usual at the time. For an

elaborate recent overview of academic literature on melodrama, see Jonathan Goldberg's *Melodrama: The Aesthetics of Impossibility*.

7. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*; Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 5. Cavell explains that shortly after the publication of *Pursuits of Happiness*, he grew convinced that:

there must exist a genre of film, in particular some form of melodrama, adjacent to, or derived from, that of remarriage comedy, in which the themes and structure of the comedy are modified or negated in such a way as to reveal systematically the threats... that in each of the remarriage comedies dog its happiness (*Contesting Tears* p. 83).
8. As in the subtitle of Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*.
9. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is atypical because of the death of its protagonist. In *Cities of Words*, Cavell no longer includes this film among the melodramas through which he introduces ethical analyses.
10. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*; Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*.
11. Cavell often refers to American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) in an attempt to find a close-to-home alternative for his own American training in “modern philosophy... dominated by epistemology... making the fields of moral philosophy and the philosophy of art and of religion secondary, or even optional” (*Cities of Words*, p. 2).
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 256–7.
13. Less interested in skepticism in a narrow, epistemological sense, Cavell claims that skepticism is more relevant in an ethical context. Cavell in his first film book, *The World Viewed* (1971), already was gauging the political consequences of “the endless repetition” of the same love stories in a world that needs continuous reassurance that our existence matters: “The myth of the movies replaces the myth according to which obedience to law... is obedience to the best of myself, hence constitutes my freedom—the myth of democracy” (p. 214; the quote is from a Cavell 1972 lecture later included in the enlarged edition). Lara Giordano holds that this point means that Cavell's writings on film have been political from the start (“Cavell, Secularism, Cinema: The Politics of *The World Viewed*,” in *Constellations*, p. 536).
14. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 393.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 389.
17. Cavell, “The Good of Film,” p. 334.
18. Gill, *Far From Heaven*, p. 10.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
20. A relatively early work that takes the melodrama seriously is Thomas Elsaesser's “Tales of Sound and Fury: The Family Melodrama,” referred to earlier. It seems an appropriate reference here because of its direct reference to Sirk's melodramas, and Todd Haynes also refers to this work in the DVD comments. Compared with Cavell's melodrama of the unknown woman, Elsaesser is both more general in his reference to 19th-century popular stage plays, and more specific because he uses Sirk's melodramas to make a Freudian point about American society in the 1950s. Cavell's specificity inheres in the fact that his melodramas are defined in relation to his comedies of remarriage.

21. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, p. 160.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
23. Pick, "Todd Haynes' Melodramas of Abstraction," in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All that Heaven Allows*, p. 153.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Gill, *Far From Heaven*, p. 48.
26. Linda Belau and Ed Cameron suggest that the Hays Code in the 1950s "repressed feminine desire" ("Melodrama, Sickness, and Paranoia: Todd Haynes and the Woman's Film," in *Film & History*, p. 35) that engendered a supposedly more masculine version of *Mildred Pierce*. With the mini-series, Belau and Cameron write, "Haynes has managed to create a fractious maternal melodrama that could not have been produced at the time of the original film" (p. 36).
27. White, *Todd Haynes*, p. 107.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 201.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.* Here, Cavell distances himself from feminist readings of Stella's behavior, more specifically Linda Williams' 1987 characterization of Stella as "oblivious ... to the shocking effect of her appearance" (Williams, quoted by Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 201).
32. Haynes has decided to leave out the references to dyke bars, butch-femme romance, etc., still prominent in the Patricia Highsmith 1952 novel *The Price of Salt* on which the film was based (see Patricia White's "Sketchy Lesbians: *Carol* as History and Fantasy," in *Film Quarterly*, p. 11). In this way Haynes has emphasized the privacy of Carol and Therese's lesbian relationship versus the violation of that privacy when the evidence of their relationship is brought into the offices of a law firm.
33. White, *Todd Haynes*, p. 107.
34. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 193.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
36. Goldberg, *Melodrama*, p. 42.
37. Gill, *Far From Heaven*, p. 10; Mulvey, *Death 24x*, p. 160.
38. Goldberg, *Melodrama*, p. 43.
39. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 68. Cavell begins his *Cities of Words* chapter on Locke (1632–1704) with a reference to John Milton (1608–1674): "The laws of the genre of remarriage comedy culminate in the definitive demand of marriage for 'a meet and happy conversation,' a phrase from Milton's tract on divorce" (p. 49). The phrase "meet and cheerful" in the *Cities of Words* quote (p. 68) then is a reference to John Milton's *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Restored to the Good of Both Sexes* (1643–5).
40. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 173.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

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