Thinking Film

Why Is *Leap Year* Not a Comedy of Remarriage?

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# Why Is *Leap Year* Not a Comedy of Remarriage?

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Some might think that a better question would be: "Why on earth would anyone think that it *was* a remarriage comedy?" So let me first acknowledge the apparent force of the case against my way of embarking on this chapter before trying to contest it.

*Leap Year* (2010: Anand Tucker) concerns a successful New York businesswoman (Anna: Amy Adams) who—frustrated by the failure of her surgeon boyfriend (Jeremy: Adam Scott) to propose on their fourth anniversary—follows him to Dublin in order to make use of a supposed, specifically Irish tradition that on February 29 women are allowed to propose to men. Travel problems leave her stranded in rural Ireland, where she has to enlist the help of a surly pub-owner and chef (Declan: Matthew Goode); and as the two make slow and bickering progress to her destination, they gradually fall in love, leaving Anna with a dilemma when Declan disappears after seeing Jeremy propose to her on their arrival in Dublin. When she discovers (back in the United States) that the proposal was primarily prompted by his desire to secure their joint lease on a swanky apartment in a very conservative condominium, she abandons Jeremy, returns to Ireland and proposes to Declan. The film ends as they depart on their honeymoon.

So, the film looks very much like a romcom, a genre with apparently indefeasible popular appeal, but this one met with a remarkably uniform hostile reception upon its release. Critics mocked its premise, viewing the idea of a leap day proposal not as an emancipatory romantic gesture (Anna's repeatedly declared view) but as a reactionary piece of gender politics; and they poured scorn on its vision of twenty-first-century Ireland, replete with genial drunks, awash with superstition and social conservatism, entirely lacking in public transport, mobile phones, or internet access, a land in which Dingle is closer to Wales than Dublin, and which generally exemplifies an unregenerate form of canonical Hollywood Oirishness. Even the established charms and talents of Adams and Goode were unable to overcome these obstacles and reach audience hearts: the overall US gross takings by 2020 barely doubled those of its opening weekend, and the worldwide gross takings were significantly less than double its small budget. In short, it was a popular and critical flop.

On the other hand, it didn't go entirely unnoticed that its makers might have intended—however ineptly—to acknowledge some kind of relation to the history of its own enterprise. In

*Time*, under the headline “*Leap Year*—The Worst Movie of 2010” (a declaration he was confident enough to make early in January of that year), Richard Corliss declared:

> You don’t have to have seen the 1945 Brit film *I Know Where I’m Going!*, with Wendy Hiller as the prissy traveler [*sic*] who finds improbable love, to know that *Leap Year* is a simple ransacking of older, better movie romances. And of bad ones too: the scene in which Anna and Declan, barely on speaking terms, are forced to have a big smooch in public, got an airing in *The Proposal*; and the local dance where the warring parties start to fall in love was in . . . *The Morgans*? Doesn’t matter; they’re all the same deficient movie.[1]

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Set aside the two latter reference points, where the critic’s venom succeeds only in subverting the potential insight of his own comparative method (by implying that bad films, like Tolstoy’s happy families, are essentially indistinguishable from each other): one can see why the Powell and Pressburger film might have come to mind. Hiller’s Joan Webster is trying to reach a remote Scottish island named Killoran, on which she plans to marry a wealthy industrialist who has rented it from the laird, but as she waits out in the inclement weather that prevents her from making the final short boat journey from the mainland, she meets and quickly becomes attracted to that laird (Roger Livesey). As well as the shared Celtic culture and landscape (just how clear *is* Hollywood on the difference between Ireland and Scotland?), this film and *Leap Year* both make pivotal use of a ruined castle as the embodiment of a mythic vision of the power and the threat posed by genuine romantic passion. In the 1945 film, we are told that the laird has shunned the ruin ever since he heard his nanny reciting its history to him as a child, but his reason for doing so is shrouded in mystery until the very end, when Joan’s apparent departure prompts him to overcome his reluctance. As he cautiously explores the building, we hear the voice of his nanny recounting an atrocity committed by one of his ancestors (who drowned his faithless young wife and her lover by chaining them together and throwing them in a well); with her dying breath the woman curses any future laird who enters the castle, prophesying that “never shall he leave it a free man; he shall be chained to a woman to the end of his days, and shall die in his chains.” It is at this point that the laird sees Joan marching resolutely back to the ruin, and rushes to meet her—at which moment the film concludes.

Does this glimpse of their conjoined future show that they have fulfilled the curse, or that they have broken the spell? The weight of the question, and of the consequent realization that they have done both (and so can equally well be thought of as transforming a malediction into a blessing or as revealing enchantment to be a kind of imprisonment), has been amply prepared for by the film’s carefully developed but ultimately uncanny ability to capture the enigmatic depth and power

of this remote Scottish culture's synthesis of hard-nosed pragmatism, myth, and magic—something exemplified in particular by the way non-human animal lives are seamlessly interwoven with those of their human fellows, and both with the land's extremes of beauty and violence. This is why David Thomson calls *I Know Where I'm Going!* "a genuinely superstitious film";[2] it is one in which we effortlessly accept that Joan's increasingly passionate bouts of prayer for good weather, and the laird's sense that crossing the castle's threshold might be death-dealing, take the true measure of the transformative fate with which they are struggling. The only thing *Leap Year* has to offer by way of such cultural invocation is a series of supposedly comic exchanges about such burning questions as whether a black cat spells good or bad luck for an impending journey—a wholly superstitious idea of what superstition might be. So when Declan and Anna climb to a ruined castle, and Declan recites a similar tale, according to which two young lovers forced to travel incessantly to avoid the vengeful wrath of the woman's older husband find themselves incapable of leaving this very castle once they take in its glorious view, it's not difficult to see why his vision seems threadbare in comparison and its application to the film's couple essentially unearned.

We could stay a little longer than Corliss himself does with his openness to the relevance of accomplished historical exemplars, and note *Leap Year*'s equally clear reference to Peter Weir's 1990 film *Green Card*, in which a woman's desire to inhabit an apartment in a conservative condominium also leads to the mere pretense of a marriage transforming itself into the real thing; but the potential relevance of *I Know Where I'm Going!* is enough on its own to emphasize that a target missed is no less a target aimed at, and so to invite the following question. If Anand Tucker and his writers could plausibly be read as invoking other films from 1990 and 1945, however ineptly, might there not be other—even less recent, and potentially more pervasively formative—cinematic reference points to be identified? I want to suggest that *Leap Year* is in fact primarily under the influence of *It Happened One Night*—Frank Capra's Oscar-winning 1934 film starring Clark Gable (as Peter Warne) and Claudette Colbert (as Ellie Andrews). The correspondences are so extensive that it can be hard to achieve a perspicuous survey of them, so the following sequence of descriptive clauses—each equally applicable to both—should be regarded as open to extension.

Prompted by her father, a well-to-do and self-possessed young woman sets off in pursuit of the man she regards as the love of her life. Hindered by bad weather and a lack of money, she acquires an initially unwilling companion on her long and challenging journey who quickly sees that she might provide him with a way of solving problems he has created in his career, and who regards her as so naïve about the ways of the world that ordinary people such as himself inhabit that she needs to be both protected from them and educated in them. The education primarily takes the form of a series of more or less hectoring lectures; the protection involves a series of rescues—

when her luggage is stolen, he recovers it by the use of violence; he provides a car when needed, as well as steering her through the vagaries of bus and train travel; and he provides a roof over their heads for a night by initiating the pretense that they are a married couple. That shared night involves the use of a blanket/shower curtain to divide their room, at once preserving their modesty and enhancing their erotic power over one another. It further involves the man's attempts to provide food for her in the form of carrots, as well as time spent beside a river from which he carries the woman, and in which the reflections of the stars are so bright that they can be stirred around. The same locale prompts him to articulate his private fantasy of having someone so captivated by the natural beauty of an unspoiled landscape that she would be willing to share it with him. Both narratives end with the same three scenes, although differently ordered: a large and elaborate wedding which is interrupted just when vows are to be exchanged; the man's insistence on a small, precisely calculated financial recompense for his travel expenses, while refusing outright to accept a large sum of money from which he could truly benefit; and the man's apparent inability to respond immediately and directly when the woman proposes to him by proposing to share his fantasy—first remaining mute, then absenting himself for reasons that barely make sense to him, let alone to the audience.

An even closer look at *Leap Year* strongly suggests that it's as if its makers had set themselves the task of ensuring that any given element of Capra's movie would have its analogue—however displaced or transposed—in their own. This applies as much to the smallest of details (as when Anna inflicts farcically excessive damage to her bedroom in Declan's pub, simply because that allows it to echo the brief early scene in which Ellie violently destroys crockery and furnishings on her father's ship) as it does to the most well-known set-piece (when, lacking any explicit analogue to the famous sequence in which Ellie flags down a ride by revealing her stockinged legs, *Leap Year* shoehorns in an allusion to it by having Anna say, for no particular reason, "I've been told that my legs are my best feature").

Few readers of this collection will be unaware that *It Happened One Night* is the earliest of the six films that Cavell offered as members of his genre of remarriage comedy. So once we see just how fanatically faithful *Leap Year* is to that earlier film, we may now want to reformulate my initial question once more, and ask "How could such a meticulous transcription of a remarriage comedy *not* be a remarriage comedy?" To ask this question is, in effect, to ask whether *Leap Year*'s mode of relating itself to a remarriage comedy actually instantiates the way in which two authentic members of that genre relate to one another. But before I attempt to answer *that* question, I must first briefly address the fact that Cavell himself sometimes appears to think that the very idea of there being contemporary members of his genre of remarriage comedy is problematic.

Cavell is perfectly happy to talk of, and to identify, more recent films as having "the feel" of remarriage comedy, or "keeping something like a remarriage surface," or "invoking the genre rather than continuing it" (all formulations to be found in his 2000 essay "The Good of Film"[3]); what he appears to object to is the idea that such films might constitute full-fledged members of that genre. And his primary objections relate to intervening shifts in historical context: "the fear of divorce has changed, the threat of pregnancy has changed, the male and female stars and the directors and writers who put them in action are gone" (CF, 342). But I can't say that I find any of these points decisive: I see no obvious reason for thinking that our contemporary context couldn't invite the projection of the symbolic significance of divorce, childlessness, and the possibility of offspring, as Cavell's genre established it; and I see no reason to think that there are no current stars, directors, and writers capable of bearing up under the standards set by their predecessors.

What seems to me a more decisive basis for skepticism here is the sheer depth and complexity that Cavell has incorporated from the outset into his characterization of remarriage comedy as a genre; and much of that flows from the unifying role he assigns to myth in his articulation of that genre's identity. On his account,[4] the members of a genre in his specific sense of that term (what he christens "genre-as-medium") "share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and . . . each member represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance" (*PH*, 28); and what they inherit above or before all is a myth, which Cavell begins to recount as follows:

> A running quarrel is forcing apart a pair who recognize themselves as having known one another forever, that is from the beginning, not just in the past but in a period before there was a past, before history. This naturally presents itself as their having shared childhood together, suggesting that they are brother and sister. They have discovered their sexuality together and find themselves required to enter this realm at roughly the same time that they are required to enter the social realm, as if the sexual and the social are to legitimize one another. . . . The joining of the sexual and the social is called marriage. Something evidently internal to the task of marriage causes trouble in paradise—as if marriage, which was to be a ratification, is itself in need of ratification. So marriage has its disappointment—call this its impotence to domesticate sexuality without discouraging it. . . . And the disappointment seeks revenge, as it were, for having made one discover one's incompleteness, one's transience, one's homelessness. Upon separation, the woman tries a regressive tack, usually that of accepting as a husband a simpler, or a mere, father-substitute. . . . This is psychologically an effort to put her desire, awakened by the original man, back to sleep. (*PH*, 31–2)

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The unifying role of this myth should not, however, be envisaged as requiring that each member of the genre must exhibit one and the same narrative content (either the same narrative or one which amounts to a re-ordering of the same narrative elements). For on Cavell's understanding of myth, each telling of any myth is a retelling of it. The remarriage myth as Cavell just told it, for example, offers a psychoanalytically informed retelling of the Christian myth of the Garden of Eden, just as *The Lady Eve* offers its own retelling of that myth and just as Freud elsewhere retells what we might think of as the original Greek myth of Oedipus; but of course, Sophocles presents his own account of Oedipus as a recounting of an ancient tale, one always already familiar to his audience and their predecessors, hence as an inherited account of the otherwise-unaccountable origins of their community. If, as Cavell says elsewhere, "Myths will generally deal with origins that no-one can have been present at" (CR,[5] 365); and if no-one was or could have been present at the true beginning of the cosmos, the polis or distinctively human life; then second-hand accounts—that is, accounts which present themselves as recountings, as new versions of an absent earlier one—are the best we could possibly have, and so aren't really second-hand at all (since it makes no sense to talk of the original or firsthand version).

Cavell applies this general point to remarriage comedy in two ways: his recounting of the myth of remarriage not only implies that the pair who are its concern have an essentially mythological understanding of the unaccountable origin of their own relationship (and are contesting its best interpretation), but also entails that each member of the genre that inherits this myth constitutes a retelling of it. In other words, each member of the remarriage genre embodies a way of making sense of its identifying myth's way of making sense of things (of marriage, but also—in the terms of Cavell's construction of it—of sexuality, society, desire, separateness, finitude, and so on). Each such critical evaluation therefore amounts to a critical evaluation of the interpretations of all its fellow-members, a view of the myth that is also a view of all the other views of that myth. So we should expect each member's version of that myth to be distinctive; and if a given member of the genre (appears to) omit an apparently significant clause or provision in the myth, it can nevertheless maintain its claim to membership of the genre by compensating for that lack—for example, by introducing a new clause or provision to its retelling of the myth which proves to contribute to a description of the genre as a whole.

Take the fact that Cavell's fuller (re)construction of the myth includes the clause that, in order to achieve the perspective needed to recover from the threat of divorce, the central pair typically retreat from the city to what Cavell calls "the green world," akin to a Shakespearean forest, which is most often represented by Connecticut. Cavell himself points out that there is no

such green world in *It Happened One Night*, but he claims that the film compensates for this absence by its emphasis upon their journeying together, thereby inviting us to view the necessary achievement of perspective as not so much a state or condition as a matter of directedness or orientation, a willingness for adventure, which invites a reinterpretation of marriage as itself a process of quest and adventure. And prompted by this perception, he finds that adventurousness in turn plays a significant role in each of the other films of remarriage; and so it continues (*PH*, 29).

Any defender of *Leap Year*'s claim to be a remarriage comedy might well take heart from these ideas of shared inheritance and compensatory recounting and regard the film's systematic fidelity to its source as doubly justified: first, because it establishes a connection to cinematic history that has to be massively emphasized, precisely because so few of its viewers can be expected to credit it; and second, because it establishes a background against which its specific differences from its source gain particular salience and force. They might, for example, argue that its transposition of *It Happened One Night*'s life on the road to Ireland amounts to an emphatic equation of improvisatory journeying with the inhabitation of the greenest of green worlds; and if that world is somewhat caricatured in order to facilitate the necessary achievement of perspective, then surely the same was true of the original remarriage comedies' ways of representing life in Connecticut. Likewise, they might see Anna's investment in proposing to her chosen man as a way of underlining and interpreting the fact that Ellie takes the lead when the possibility arises of collaborating in the realization of her man's imagination of what married life might be. Just as Ellie begins her journey by seeking to affirm her initial public choice of mate and ends by privately revising it, so Anna learns to distinguish submission to a baleful public tradition from personal enactments of autonomy.

I have two (or two kinds of) reasons for resisting any such defense. The first has to do with whether these transpositions are genuinely compensatory, in the sense Cavell specifies: Do they amount to revisions of the inherited myth that enrich our understanding of its capacity to make sense of things? Anna's experiences may educate her in some ways, but her second proposal seems just as much in thrall to the idea of a public declaration as was her first: it may not occur on leap day, but it certainly occurs in front of others, as if Anna cannot rid herself of the idea that being the proposer necessitates public exposure and the risk of humiliation. Is this an advance on Ellie's realization that she and Peter could inhabit a shared world of intimacy, but only by avoiding any truck with the social world's understandings of marriage—only by realizing that world privately? As for the green world of Ireland: if that world had contributed the kind of complex texture that it displays in *I Know Where I'm Going!,* then we might have learned something new about the way an authentic willingness to remarry must confront the internal relationship between erotic enchantment

and spiritual enchainment. But *Leap Year*'s vision of the Celtic world is so lacking in imagination that its invocation does no more than repeat what *It Happened One Night* has already taught us. In other words, these differences don't make enough of a difference, or a difference of the right kind: since they either deaden or positively foreclose the myth's vision of human transformation or transfiguration, they don't constitute a study of the genre's defining conditions so much as a lifeless reiteration of another's member's enabling recounting of them.

And this takes me to my second (set of) reasons for resistance, which are rooted in the way Cavell uses the idea of conversation to characterize a feature of each film's narrative, a feature of their relation to each other, and a feature of their audience's relation to both. His readings of each film are intended first of all to show that their central pairs engage in a conversation about how best to account for the unaccountable origins of their relationship, and thereby more generally disclose marriage as aspiring to a condition of meet and happy conversation. And it is in coming to appreciate this that Cavell is enabled to appreciate how each comedy engages with the other comedies in a critical conversation about the best available account of their own founding and unifying mythological inheritance. Likewise, as the pairs in the comedies struggle to manage transfiguration, and in particular to reconceive marriage as itself a transfigurative condition—as unending remarriage—so the comedies effect compensatory transformations on one another which serve to disclose deeper reaches of shared significance in their relationship, and so disclose their individual mode of cinematic significance as itself always subject to reinterpretation in view of its present and future fellow-members of the genre. Just as the mode of being of the pairs in the comedies aspires to be one of continuous becoming, so the mode of being of the members of this and all genres-as-medium stands revealed as one of continuous becoming (as its meaning unendingly unfolds in view of future developments of the genre and of its critical reception).

Against this background, my second reason for denying genre membership to *Leap Year* can now be articulated as follows: the central pair of this film engage in something like the opposite of the meet-and-happy conversation we encounter in genuine members of the genre. Declan's surliness toward Anna is the negation of Peter's way of talking to Ellie: it reveals no general capacity to educate, and no specific desire to help Anna to cultivate her innate capacity for self-overcoming; and whereas Peter's nurturing impulses gradually modify and ultimately come to inform his exchanges with Ellie, Declan's merely occasionally interrupt his persistent mood of black cheerlessness. It's as if Declan and Anna spend most of their time together in the kind of cursed marriage that Peter and Ellie briefly pretend to share when private detectives invade their autohome cabin.

To be sure, *Leap Year* attempts to account for this, by giving Declan a romantic prehistory in which another woman betrayed him with a mutual friend. But then the film assigns to Anna the task of diagnosing this, and of devoting herself to the task of rescuing Declan from it, and so from himself; and that precisely inverts the relationship between the man and the woman of genuine remarriage comedies—in which the woman seeks education from the man, who must demonstrate his suitability for the role by demonstrating a willingness to be taught how best to occupy it, even if that requires sacrificing his pride. Declan exhibits no such willingness, and so Anna receives nothing resembling an education from him. And the inevitable result of depicting such a negation of meet and happy, mutually educative conversation is that *Leap Year* disqualifies itself from the meet and happy, mutually educative conversation between genuine members of the genre of remarriage comedy. Instead (rather like its male protagonist), it oscillates between neurotically elaborate reiterations of the contribution made to that conversation by one existing member, and unmotivated, essential meaningless modifications to it; and that is no way to illuminate the subject matter under discussion.

Another way of making this point would be to say that, unlike genuine members of this genre, *Leap Year* systematically fails to reward our engagement with it. It fails to provoke or invite genuinely illuminating critical conversation; it fails either to nurture or to educate our aesthetic (and ethical and philosophical) responsiveness to the topics and themes of which members of this genre are trying to make sense. In other words, *Leap Year* cannot be a remarriage comedy because it's a bad film[1].

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[1] *Time* magazine online: Saturday, January 9, 2010, http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1952703,00.html.

[2] *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 4th ed. (London: Little, Brown, 2002), "Michael Powell," entry, 695.

[3]In Rothman (ed), *Cavell on Film* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), hereafter CF.

[4] In *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), hereafter "PH."

[5] *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

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[1] I'd like to thank my daughter, Ellie, for directing me to *Leap Year* as we endured a pandemic lockdown together.