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The world of film and world particles in the criticism of Victor Perkins

In a 1962 piece on Howard Hawks' comedies, first published in *Movie*, Victor Perkins began by raising an objection to Howard Hawks' own reservation about the world of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). Hawks had lamented, in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich: 'If only the gardener had been normal.' Perkins countered that the complete absence of normality in the film was one of the most important determining factors in its greatness. It would have been a 'cardinal error,' Perkins insisted, to introduce a recognisably real figure who would stand apart from the pervasive irrationality of the narrative proceedings ([1962] 1996: 68). He goes on to claim that not only *Bringing Up Baby* but most of Hawks' best comedies, 'depend upon the reversal of all our preconceptions about character and behavior' (68). In the world of *Bringing Up Baby*, 'a postman's reaction to the announcement that you are about to be married is not "Congratulations!" but a somber "Don't let it throw you, buster!"' (68). Perkins' initial reference to Barry Fitzgerald's drunk, befuddled gardener, Mr. Gogarty, leads him by the end of his opening paragraph to one of his inspired, swift linkages: of the minor character, the gardener, with the far more minor figure of the postman, who peeks into the film for only a few moments. Perkins would have us share his intuition that it is the world of *Bringing Up Baby* itself

that calls these kindred antic creatures into being. They both belong in this world, by dint of balmy eccentricity, whereas the normative house servant Hawks envisions emphatically does not.

Throughout his distinguished career as a teacher and film scholar, Perkins emphasised the crucial significance for film narrative of the concept of the created world. In his extraordinary essay 'Where is the World? The horizon of events in movie fiction,' Perkins takes issue with the suggestion that the fictional world was no more than a 'loose metaphor' (2005: 16). He acknowledged that this view might be widely and uncontroversially endorsed, for it has the dubious ring of common sense to recommend it. But he decisively rejects the lazy imputation of looseness to the concept of the fictional world. He characterises this position as 'nearly [how I cherish this qualifier] the opposite of the truth' (16). Then he sets out to demonstrate anew not only that the fictional world deserves worldhood status, but the ways in which this matters to our experience of film. After a brilliant reconsideration of the ending of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), which offers us, in terms which are intricate and difficult to parse, a double sense of *Citizen Kane*'s own reality and its relation to the world we inhabit outside it, separate from it but entangled in Welles' process of illumination, Perkins raises the question of why the fictional world issue has been neglected by so many engaged in film studies. He proposes a brief explanation of why fictionality rather than worldhood is the privileged frame of reference. He believes that the avoidance of 'world' may derive from film theorists' predictable 'recoil from all that smells of realism' (22). This assumption may have some bearing on one's assessment of *Citizen Kane* and Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) (which Perkins also analyzes in his essay). The worlds of both of these films are in constant experiential communication with things we know and recognise in the larger world. But in the case of *Bringing Up Baby*, our first Perkins example, it is not the 'smell of realism' that makes one wary of giving *world* its due in the reading of Hawks' comedy. Perkins' most impressive case for the indispensability of the film world concept is to be found in his handling of moments or bits, which I choose to term world particles. What Perkins has shown me, again and again, in his work – and for me it has

been his most efficacious, endlessly renewed gift – is that the essence of the world can be extracted from judiciously chosen, intensely felt particles.

It was vital for Perkins that a film narrative not be reducible to a set of events, to cause and effect logic, or the image patterns we can mechanically trace through secure categories (e.g., those of genre convention). He saw the threat of mechanisation everywhere in the ways viewers respond to movie experience, and he regarded this grinding down of perception and imagination – in the reception of art as well as in human affairs – with abhorrence. Perkins writes in 'Where is the World?':

An event becomes a cause only in its relation to webs of circumstance, together with, say, desires and fears. Why a cause should be understood as a cause, and why an effect should count as an effect, are matters that can be assessed only within a world. It is, after all, a very particularly constituted world [Perkins is referring to *Citizen Kane*] in which one man's death can be the reason for squads of people to set off in an effort to identify the personal meaning of a familiar word. (22)

My primary objective in this essay is to examine and celebrate Perkins' thrilling intuitions about certain world 'particles' which he taught me how to see – easily overlooked, seemingly inconsequential peripheral details of sound and image in which Perkins discerns the *sense* of the film world. Readers of *Film as Film* will have little difficulty recalling instances: Marnie twice turning her face to walls during crisis; Emma's black-veiled funeral hat in *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) carried off in the wind and trampled by the hooves of a vengeance-mad posse; Kay's loss of her belongings in the rapids in *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, 1954). Perkins is not only concerned with the revelatory force of the particle in its narrative context, but also how the cosmology of the work as a whole is inscribed in it. Before taking up some memorable examples of Perkins' particle discoveries and his demonstration of their adhesive power (in binding emotionally and imaginatively related particles to them so as to form a governing world idea), I will spend some time considering Dorothy Van Ghent's pioneering study of the fictional world, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953). Van Ghent is as

concerned with the world's connection to form in literature (and implicitly with the search for form in the self) as Perkins is in film. Although her book builds on the criticism of Mark Schorer, R.P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, and I.A. Richards, her own way of articulating the meaning and value of the created world is as impassioned, moving, and persuasive as any that I have encountered. I am reasonably sure that Perkins was familiar with Van Ghent's study, and was indebted to both her elegant formulations and the trenchantly moral cast of her thought. In quoting her, for the purposes of this comparison, I will substitute the words film and viewer for novel and reader, where the exchange does not do violence to the capacities of either medium.

Film, like the novel,

is able to express the most profound ideas, but because of the nature of this medium, these will lie implicitly in the conjunction of the events that are bodied forth. The ideas in a [film] are largely for the [viewer's] inference, his inference of the principles by which the happenings in the [film] are related to each other.

A [film] itself is one complex pattern, or Gestalt, made up of component ones. In it inhere such a vast number of traits, all organized in subordinate systems that function under the governance of a single meaningful structure, that the nearest similitude for a [narrative film] is a 'world.' This is a useful similitude because it reflects the rich multiplicity of the [film's] elements and, at the same time, the unity of the [film] as a self-defining body [...].

A good [film], like a sound world, has to hang together. It has to have integral structure. Part of our evaluative judgment is based on its ability to hang together *for us*. And like a world, a [film] has individual character; it has, peculiar to itself, its own tensions, physiognomy, and atmosphere. Part of our judgment is based on the concreteness, distinctness, and richness of that character. (17)

In the next few sentences of this passage from her introduction, Van Ghent brings us closest to what chiefly matters for Perkins in his demand that the worldhood of a film be acknowledged, and assigned a value as experience.

Finally, we judge a [film] also by the cogency and illuminative quality of the view of life it affords, the idea embodied

in its cosmology. Our only adequate preparation for judging a [film] evaluatively is through the analytical testing of its unity, of its characterizing qualities, and of its meaningfulness – its ability to make us more aware of the meaning of our lives. All these tests test the value of the film [I would add the phrase 'as experience' here, since that is her implication] only *for us*, and value for us is all the value that matters. (17-18)

Van Ghent somewhat surprisingly combines the necessity for moral and aesthetic testing with a seemingly relaxed surrender of the need for objective criteria, or the 'amplitude' that comes from readerly consensus. Daniel R. Schwarz, in a 'reconsideration of Van Ghent's humanist poetics,' points out that for her the process of reading emphasises the common ground shared by the author and skilled reader. 'Her book [employing a Gestalt model which perceives experience as a dynamic process] shows us how humans makes sense of their world and that novels are about testing, discarding, recreating perceptions – a process central to reading and writing novels, [to viewing and directing films], and also to living.' (96)

Two final quotes from Van Ghent's readings of particular texts will help us to see more clearly what she and Perkins mean by their insistent concern with the 'idea embodied in its cosmology'. Speaking about Thomas Hardy's weakness for abstractions and his habit of interrupting the narrative of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1892) in order to propound general, abstract truths, she offers an alternative mode of 'philosophical vision' that comes from adhering to 'the body of particularized life,' the 'living form' (240). 'What philosophical vision honestly inheres in a novel,' Van Ghent declares, and again I will substitute the word 'film' – 'inheres as the form of a certain concrete body of experience; it is what the experience "means" because it is what, structurally, the experience is.' (240) My second quote, from her great reading of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), provides an exemplary illustration of the sort of ethical thinking I associate with Perkins, as she considers the dangers of failing to integrate aesthetic and moral modes of responsiveness:

Moral and aesthetic experience have then in common their foundation in feeling and their distinction from the useful. The identity that James explores is their identity in the most capacious and most integrated – the most 'civilized'

– consciousness, whose sense relationships (aesthetic relationships) with the external world of scenes and objects have the same quality and the same spiritual determinants as its relationships with people (moral relationships). But his exploration of that ideal identity involves cognizance of failed integration, cognizance of the many varieties of one-sidedness or one-eyedness or blindness that go by the name of the moral or the aesthetic, and of the destructive potentialities of the human consciousness when it is one-sided either way. His ironies revolve on the ideal concept of a spacious integrity of feeling: feeling, ideally, is *one* – and there is ironic situation when feeling is split into the 'moral' and the 'aesthetic,' each denying the other and each posing as *all*. (265)

The integration of aesthetic and moral perception in Henry James provides a fitting transition to Perkins' own characteristic approach to world particles in film. Perkins possessed what amounts to a genius level of intuition for the most telling, revelatory bits in a narrative – those that usher us with startling swiftness into a film world's most enticing paradoxes. The particles that Perkins identifies do not remain small or confined under his ardently inquisitive gaze. Something unstressed, out of the way, teasingly ephemeral, easily bypassed or forgotten because it lacks strong story focus becomes – when singled out by Perkins for extended treatment – an essential key to the movie's most beautiful aim, the idea embodied in the cosmology.

It is worth recalling that when *Film as Film* was written, the analysis of movies was far less dependent on stop-frame inspection, which current technology has made generally available. The close engagement with passing details was far more reliant on memory than on scrupulously accurate, comprehensive notation. The ready access of all the visual and sound particulars of a scene has many obvious interpretive advantages, but at least one infrequently mentioned limitation. Our careful reconstructive labor arguably tends to equalise the weight and force of moments in the narrative flow. Everything achieves hyperclarity and additional import in the process of being slowed down or frozen. We can lose sight of how the peripheral sights and sounds in an actual

screening compete with story values and performer expressiveness for an alert, but still catch-as-catch-can viewer. How do appearances rise up and make a claim on us when we are not yet sure where to direct our gaze, or to what end? The world particles that Perkins' delicately discriminating eye fastens on are the result of an unusually full immersion in the internal experiential dynamics of narrative.

The first particle from Perkins' trove that I'd like to reconsider is Barbara Bel Geddes' idle handling of the fly-swatter in the opening scene of Max Ophüls' *Caught* (1949). Perkins discusses this action on two occasions – in 'Must We Say What They Mean?' (1990) and 'Moments of Choice' (1981). I will quote from the shorter assessment in 'Moments of Choice' to

supply a preliminary account of the terrain Perkins brackets for investigation.

In the opening scene of *Caught*, the car-hop heroine is apparently sharing a harmless dream with her flat-mate when she fantasizes a chance meeting with a handsome young millionaire. But what is calculating and predatory in this innocence is conveyed by her punctuating her words by making idle passes with a fly-swatter while lying open-legged on the bed. What is blind in her calculation, too, emerges from her complete inattention to her own gestures and their evident meanings. (1981: 1144)

In Perkins' later, lengthier commentary, he draws attention to the fact that the bed on which Bel Geddes' Maud

(not yet re-christened Leonora) is propped, leaning against the wall, has been the space used previously in the scene for Harper's Vogue daydreaming by both Maud and her cold water flat roommate, Maxine. Maud's fly-swatter speech occurs in an extended take – at close range – from which Maxine is excluded. Her nearby presence as listener is indicated by brief, harsh interjections and what Perkins deftly describes as the 'grubbily material sound of clattering plates and sloshing water from her dish-washing' (1990: 6). The sound of the fly-swatter, for the length of its presence in the action, is more pronounced than the off-screen sound of the dish-washing, as Maud randomly taps and thwacks her trouser leg. Maxine currently works as a model in a fashion store. We learn that Maud wishes to ascend from her job as car-hop to Maxine's status, and possibly, after a planned stint in the Dorothy Dale School for Charm, to move beyond it by attaining a wealthy husband. Perkins also notes how Maud's working girl look is reinforced by her just concluded act of washing her aching feet in a large basin. Before distractedly picking up the fly-swatter, Maud has towed off her feet and she sits now on the rumpled bed sheet, in close proximity to the fashion magazines which she and Maxine were vicariously leafing through as the film commenced.

I include this array of supplementary details to demonstrate how Perkins' decision to concentrate on the fly-swatter was by no means an obvious, much less inevitable choice. It is entirely conceivable, even likely, that a viewer would register the key elements of this introductory episode without singling out or taking memory-hold of the fly-swatter. It is not given symbolic highlighting, nor is it mentioned by either character in the scene. Most viewers would probably give far greater emphasis to the fashion magazine that is prominently displayed in the credit sequence, its pages turned there by a visible hand. One might also be struck by the Dorothy Dale Charm School brochure that Maud inspects and comments on (it will have a bearing on her future in the narrative, and identifies her immediate goal). Or one might pay attention to Maud's somewhat protracted foot washing ritual, or the joint effort of the two roommates in a cramped, humid apartment to figure out a cost-cutting budget for Maud to attend Dorothy Dale's. What will she need to give up to make this plan possible? Finally, one might pick up on Maud's declared



wish for an 'ordinary mink coat' as opposed to Maxine's desire for the more exotic chinchilla. Coats of various kinds become an important image pattern in Maud's (soon to be Leonora) development. The fly-swatter is not an artfully hidden element in the dramatic proceedings, but neither is it conspicuous. The camera does move in to study Maud in sustained close range during the fly-swatter action, but her verbalised fantasy of meeting an eligible man of means at a perfume counter seems to take precedence over the lax, unthinking gestures accompanying it. We might grant the fly swatter some incidental gestural clarity, given its extended use, but not, in Perkins' judicious phrase, 'excessive clarity'.

Perkins does not show how the fly-swatter's extended moment in *Caught* creates a magnetic field for other world particles from *Caught*, or how Max Ophuls builds upon what it so nonchalantly and uninsistently conveys. I shall trace out some of the lines of implication that this image and its style of presentation generate. The fly-swatter action takes us backward in the scene to Maud and Maxine's first gestures in the film, as they hurriedly flip through the pages of their fashion magazine, and in friendly competition point at advertisements of luxury goods (jewelry, dresses, coats) that they aspire to own some day. They differentiate themselves as fantasy consumers by making separate choices. One can detect a resemblance between Maud's tapping fly-swatter and the young women's hovering hands and darting-in-to-claim finger pointing, which proceed without time for either contemplation or thought. The hands give the impression of having pre-formed inclinations. They instantly know and pounce upon the things that an efficient, pervasive marketing system has taught them to want. They playfully daydream of bypassing some of the constraints of their current hard-up circumstances, and making an ascent to a realm where happy belonging is marked by posed, self-indulgent display.

As Perkins attends to the bored and aimless behavior of working girls, he finds an inducement to use what he knows about fly-swatting to show him something complicated about romantic projection. What freshly occurs to him is divulged by his phrase about the potential of something both 'calculating and predatory' in Maud's innocent handling of the fly-swatter. Perkins does not endeavor here to make Maud's seeming



innocence into a mask for a more sinister temperament or set of motives. Rather he posits the view that innocence can co-exist with calculation and predatory instincts and do so easily and unremarkably, without placing innocence under strain. Innocence in this context is not synonymous with either naivete or purity. It has to do with what is unformed, pliable, generously (perhaps too generously) receptive in one's nature. Maud has not reached the stage in life where she has made up her mind about the world, with its many faces, openings, pressures, blockages, and more importantly, Maud hasn't made up her heart about the world. Maud can speak about her dreams leading to certain results without recognising these dreams as stale, recycled, cultural hand-me-downs. She still finds ways to play inside them without having quite figured

out a direction for her sense of herself which will make her personally accountable. Whatever blunders she has made thus far in her progression to self-definition do not seem to be of great consequence, or irreversible. They are not the sort of missteps that come back to haunt her.

So, an innocent Maud picks up, without noticing that she is doing it, a domestic implement associated with pest removal (who could possibly question anyone's need or right to swat flies?) and filth. The fly-swatter is designed for efficacious, guilt-free acts of aggression, miniature killings. One swats to clean one's surroundings, but children need to be told not to touch the dirty surface of the swatter. It is filled with germs, left by the fly victims. Beginning with its title, *Caught* seems to have as its primary focus, and governing idea, female

victimisation and passivity. If there is a metaphoric wielder of the 'swatter' writ large in the narrative, it is Smith Ohlrig (Robert Ryan), the millionaire whom Maud / Leonora 'lands' with fairy tale rapidity. When we switch the control of the swatter to Leonora's mate, it cruelly exemplifies Ohlrig's, understanding of how relationships work exclusively in terms of power. He crushes the will and searching life of his partner with the 'single stroke' of their joining, and entombs her in the 'filth' of his lucre. Leonora's absorption into his vast, suffocating power sphere does indeed reduce her power to think or move independently, but it does not, in any obvious respect, reduce the viewer's preliminary impression of her as an innocent – now, a wronged innocent. Her identity is threatened with erasure by a paranoid psychotic who opposes all of her attempts at reciprocity, self-assertion, and inner development. Leonora's own, by contrast, modest 'calculating, predatory' proclivities are scarcely visible in her marriage, given the monstrous, untrammelled exhibition of these attributes in her husband. Nonetheless, Leonora's arrival at her marital destination has been achieved by the figure that Perkins anatomised in the swatter scene: an agent who advances her interests without watching or – more in keeping with Ophuls' title – 'catching' herself.

Her Dorothy Dale preparation for her modeling work – artful poses with the repeated refrain '\$49.95 plus tax' demonstrates apparent passivity in action, but with calculated results. As Perkins points out, charm school as well as her modeling work have educated her about self-presentation and its advantages. Her persisting innocence depends on her not being driven to question the superficiality of the education she has settled for. Her insulating ignorance has not yet brought her an unmanageable increase of pain. As Leonora coyly tells Ohlrig as he tests her 'submissiveness' on their first meeting by driving the two of them recklessly in his expensive car: 'I know that you've never been married before.' This sort of knowledge still counts more in her estimation than an open-eyed, skeptical assessment of the disturbing behavior he proudly manifests. Ophuls returns here to the co-existence of innocence and predation in Leonora within *Caught's* world. Smith Ohlrig's predation is overwhelmingly evident in his manner of taking. Leonora is by comparison a small stakes taker. She pardonably thinks in her distractedness that she is

essentially a giver, one whose capacities for giving in the 'normal', wifely way are not sanctioned. In fact, they are ruthlessly rejected. She does not feel recognised or valued for what she assumes she is 'in herself'.

When Leonora eventually flees from Ohlrig's mansion prison in an agony of frustration, she takes her mink coat with her, one of the objects she spoke of to Maxine with the greatest tenderness in her opening scene daydream. At that stage of fanciful, innocent wishing aloud, she sketched an altruistic picture with two 'ordinary' mink coats – one for herself, the other a gift for her mother. Both would be shown to others in the small town she grew up in, as the outward proof that she had arrived, successfully, that she mattered. 'Showing' soon

becomes modeling in a store as self-creation, a viable image of achieved selfhood, if only the coat were hers. When Leonora takes the coat from Ohlrig's 'preserve', the question the narrative raises is not whether she is entitled to it – call it meager compensation for enslavement under his roof – but whether the person she now aspires to become is not blindly, yet still innocently, attached to the coat's image.

The romantic and moral counterweight to Ohlrig is Dr. Quintana (James Mason), an overworked, underpaid, idealistic pediatrician for a working class clientele. In her relatively brief period of employment as a receptionist in the office he shares with Dr. Hoffman (Frank Ferguson), a gynecologist, Leonora demonstrates exceptional competence and work





aptitude. But Quintana, who is powerfully attracted to her, expresses concern about her preoccupation, a quality of disengagement resembling 'not thereness', which he notices in her way of pursuing both her work and her private life. He is not simply intuiting the secrets she is keeping from him about her failed marriage with Ohlrig. And though insecurity and jealous uncertainty may cloud his judgment, one feels that he is responding accurately to a lack of attunement in her: attunement to who she is and where she is. Once more we are redirected to that crucial world particle Perkins singled out for contemplation. Maud / Leonora absent-mindedly performs a set of mild and forceful taps with a fly-swatter while she improvises an innocent fantasy about setting

the stage for a male admirer's discovery of her. She reveals qualities of calculation and predation as she proceeds with her speech, which ends with her reward, a 'caught' man of wealth responding to her perfectly timed feat of self-display. He recognises the exchange value of what she has artfully prepared for his gaze, and thereby resolves – through the act of choosing her – the problem of being. In her persisting innocence (an exemption from self-awareness), Maud / Leonora can distance herself from the dirt of the swatter, and the parts of herself that mirror the aggressor's own taking and calculation.

Ironically, Dr. Quintana is attracted to the very aura of innocence in her that he seeks to eradicate. He tries to

distinguish between the innocence of her Cinderella yearning for transformation and the disabling quality of her 'unformed' nature – unformed in a manner that prevents her wholehearted commitment to the work world he occupies. She is too lightly present, like a dream visitor. He is entranced by Leonora's simplicity, yet simultaneously regards it as an illness that she suffers from, and that he can cure. The cure would somehow preserve her softness, and her sleepwalker's freedom from taint. Late in the film, Leonora is persuaded by Ohlrig to come back to her, and she disappears without explaining to Quintana or his partner the 'hows' and 'whys' of her vanishing. In the scene where Quintana and Dr. Hoffman respond to the fact of her absence, Ophuls creates an extraordinary moving camera shot where we pass back and forth over Leonora's unoccupied receptionist's desk as the two doctors are standing in their office doorways on either side of it. As the scene proceeds, with shots that alternate between isolation and linkage, they obliquely reflect on the curious circumstances of her having gone 'missing' and Quintana is finally advised by his colleague to do what he can to forget about her. Leonora is not, of course, physically present, but the prominence of her desk in the scene, and the camera's ghostly, oscillating passage above it strongly evokes her. It is almost as though she is eavesdropping on their conversation. The way the scene is dramatised reminds us of Leonora's noncommittal way of floating from place to place, person to person. Present or absent, she is sheathed in unawareness, a beguiling remoteness. The camera recapitulates, on a grander scale, Leonora's unthinking way of handling the fly-swatter in the first scene, with its shifting motion and power to 'expose' her, glancingly. The doctors (one of whom knows that she is pregnant) get nowhere in their attempt to pin Leonora's motives down, to assign her actions to the realm of accident, guilt or innocence. Perkins' world particle manages to 'catch' the idea that the whole film struggles to elucidate: Leonora's various attempts to find herself through hiding.

An even less highlighted sprinkling of world particles from Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) is briefly identified and illuminated in another quietly dazzling paragraph from Perkins' 'Moments of Choice'. When I first encountered this passage, I was under the impression that I had a firm, comprehensive grasp of the visual design of Ray's film. And yet I had somehow overlooked Ray's concise, reverberating

introduction through gesture (in body language) of the central fixation in the film's world: 'the uncertainty of emotion' (1981: 1144). Perkins elaborates on this phrase, with arresting precision – 'a story of passion dogged by mistrust in which only the strength of feeling (not its nature) remains constant' (1144). In order to accentuate, subtly, the ubiquitous ambiguity of gesture, Ray assigns in the opening minutes of the film 'the same gesture to three different characters' (1144) within a relatively compact scene. Perkins points out that this

repeated gesture occurs within a scene that also establishes the film's Hollywood setting: each of [three male characters involved in the movie industry] approaches another character from behind and grasps his shoulders with both hands. The first time, it is a perfunctory and patronizing greeting whose pretense of warmth is a bare cover for the assertion of superiority. Then, between the hero and an old friend, it conveys intimacy and genuine regard. Finally, when a large-mouthed producer uses the shoulders

of the hero himself as a rostrum from which to publicize his latest triumph, it is seen as oppressive and openly slighting. (1981: 1144)

Perkins encourages us in this segment to envision the world of Ray's film entirely through the lens of gesture, and the manifold potential for suspicion, affront, permissible excess, overt and latent threat, seductiveness, and romantic doubt that gesture contains.

I immediately recall Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart) straightening the grapefruit knife, with comic bewilderment, as a lead into an exchange with his beloved, Laurel Grey (Gloria Grahame) that balances on the knife edge between ardent trust (on his part) and mounting tension (on hers). Or Brub (Frank Lovejoy) hugging Sylvia Nicolai (Jeff Donnell) too tightly as he performs a possible murder scenario directed by Dixon; or the insinuating, pressure-filled revelations of the masseuse, Martha (Ruth Gillette) as she administers a massage to Laurel; or Laurel turning in her chair to size up Dixon, who sits behind her, as she learns that he is a murder suspect; or Mildred Atkinson (Martha Stewart) shifting between confidence and puzzled consternation as she tries to interpret Dixon's gestures after accepting his invitation to come to his apartment; or Dixon's 'accidental' striking of his best friend and agent, Mel (Art Smith) during a violent outburst at a restaurant celebration; or Dixon's 'making amends' actions





shortly afterward in the privacy of the restaurant men's room; or something coiled, needy, and imperious in Dix's gestural repertoire with Laurel, not only in their embraces but in their casual interactions. What is finally laid bare in both Dixon and Laurel during the final, terrifying shipwreck of their relationship, and what – beyond the reach of visibly incriminating gesture – remains hidden?

It is worth noting that in the opening triad of shoulder squeezing gestures that Perkins analyzes, Dixon, the screenwriter protagonist (not yet disqualified for hero status) is the figure who performs the gesture in a manner that is spontaneous, open, and affectionate, with no sly twist or element of reserve. Dixon's action is placed in the middle of the progression, and he serves as the balancing corrective to two false extremes. Dixon's eventual undoing comes about when his initially appealing directness and aversion to dissembling combine with his lack of restraint and paranoia (the latter due to psychic damage inflicted by war). His outbursts turn troubling and finally insupportable as openness becomes mired in compulsion, and his audacity spins out of control. Too much of Dixon Steele is released and exposed both in the ongoing police investigation and in his efforts to solidify his romantic relationship. After failing many tests, he sacrifices all claims to the balance that seemed not only a genuine but a hard-won personal attribute in our early acquaintance with him. It is

as though Dixon has the entire screen history of Humphrey Bogart to draw upon for the validation and replenishment of this balance. But it is not enough to save him. As we track the 'uncertainty of emotion' through its moment to moment, multitudinous gestural configurations in *In a Lonely Place*, we acquire an ever stronger, morally penetrating awareness of an 'impalpable organizing form' which presides over the appearance of every behavioral cue in gesture's broad regime. The power of gesture to yield truth and to frustratingly obscure it is the shaping force of Ray's film world.

The last of Perkins' film particles I will examine, and at greater length, is taken from *Film as Film* (1972). Although this book abounds in stirring, resplendent examples, the segment of his chapter 'The World and its Image' that exerted the most decisive influence on me is Perkins' descriptive commentary on the kitchen scene from Vincente Minnelli's *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1963). This analysis is paired in my mind with Stanley Cavell's paragraphs on the issue of 'Who is following whom?' in his essay on *Bringing Up Baby*, which first appeared in a 1976 issue of *The Georgia Review*, and later became a chapter in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981). *Bringing Up Baby* opened this discussion, and is proving difficult to leave behind. Cavell showed how the recurrent uncertainty about 'following' in Hawks' narrative could be simultaneously approached as a

children's game and a means of unfussily elucidating the comedy of equality. One needs to take the children's game as much to heart and mind, as an adventurous realm for thought in its own right, as one does the gender questions that shadow the play, if one is to arrive anywhere of interest with either. Cavell cites the hilarious moment during Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn's hunt for the leopard Baby in the 'night woods of Connecticut, he carrying a rope and croquet mallet, Hepburn with a butterfly net,' when he turns around to 'discover her on all fours behind him' (1981: 135). Cavell persuaded me, in what seemed a thunderous burst of experiential edification, that one can and should hold on to all the absurd particulars of Grant's predicament and perplexity, to make a fitting approach to the seemingly larger issue of how men and women, beyond the scope of this farce, take each other's measure. We must continue to dwell on Hepburn 'on all fours' insisting that she is not playing (when she appears crouched down to avoid the branches swinging in her face that Grant, as so often, unthinkingly releases). And if we do behold her in this luminous light of nonsense, we are in the proper position to add Cavell's follow-up explication to the picture. Old and New Comedy are suddenly indistinguishable. *Bringing Up Baby* seriously and frivolously 'poses a structure in which we are permanently in doubt who the hero is, that is, whether it is the male or the female, which of them is in quest, who



is following whom' (135). If in our haste to get to the point of unsettled gender dynamics one loses sight of the trickily madcap experiential situation, with the children's game magically embedded in it, we lose touch with what makes Cavell's so-called higher claims worth pursuing.

Perkins' reading of the kitchen scene in *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* brought about an exhilarating shock of discovery for me comparable to that produced by the Cavell invocation of children's games. I recall encountering the two analyses at roughly the same time, in the summer of 1976. This fortuitous coupling somehow altered, overnight, my way of thinking and writing about film. I had a dim memory of seeing *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* in 1963, the year of its release. I did not associate the film with Vincente Minnelli. The film was linked in my mind with *The Andy Griffith Show*, because of Ronnie Howard's central contribution to both. I had an additional category available for 'placing' the film – early 60s sentimental fluff, overlaid with winking bachelor sex comedy. The film could confidently be described as formulaic MGM product, very much of its historical moment, in which the aims of family comedy and those of smirking prurience uneasily mingled. Possibly the extreme impact of Perkins' treatment of the scene owed something to the fact that he offered no preliminary, knowing disclaimer. The film was not approached as one different in kind and potential achievement from the movies grouped around it in the chapter, including work by Hitchcock, Preminger, and Ray. One was apparently not obliged to enter the scene experience being evaluated through a field of defensive concessions. Also pertinent to my response is the fact that Perkins' detailed reconstruction of the elements in the narrative segment caused me to remember my long ago single viewing of it, and to recollect at the same time that I had been moved by the scene, possibly to the point of tears. I was suddenly mortified by the realisation that the depth of my involvement with the father-son exchange had not prevented me from blithely dismissing the film as a whole once I had finished watching it. I had needed a ready-made, simple genre category to handle the problem of aesthetic judgment, and I found it effortlessly, automatically. How could the quality of Minnelli's observation and staging at particular points throw the whole question of what this film understood and contained into doubt?

Perkins' paragraphs on Minnelli revealed to me that what the director dramatised in the kitchen setting achieved its force by being part of a distinctive fictional world that genre conventions could not adequately account for. However many domestic scenes set in kitchens I may have watched in both television series and movies, they could not predict or restrictively determine what Minnelli's kitchen scene might express. Any more than the experiences I might have in actual kitchens would be dictated by my prior sense of what is emotionally likely there. In *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* Minnelli's sensitive deployment of familiar activities and objects within a kitchen on a singular occasion made his scene not only personal, but transcendently delicate and piercing. What came through to me with such vividness that it caused a wrenching psychic shift in my viewing practice is that this modest comedy drama (at least in such fragments as those Perkins commemorated) yielded values and quivering intimations equal in potential communicative power to the best work done in this medium. The limits of revelation could not be known and evaluated in advance, according to movie type or the aspirations that presumably go with type. It is not the case that Minnelli's scene arrests, perhaps invades us, only in the light of prior knowing. In addition to being awakened, unaccountably, by things we see in a comedy drama that nearly every spectator would describe as 'predictable', we might also be internally scrambled and to some small degree expanded, even remade, by what we allow in.

Let us begin our re-visiting of the Minnelli scene and the world that encompasses it by noting, with Perkins, that the kitchen once occupied by a recently deceased mother gives the environment a 'nuance' for the father-son exchange that distinguishes it from similar conversations set in school, street, or living room. Perkins insists, as he does so often in his writing, that we fully absorb, rather than take for granted, the associative resonance of décor. Eddie (Ronnie Howard) and his father, Tom (Glenn Ford) are preparing lunch together on Eddie's first day back at school after his mother's death. The scene has an outwardly calm, relaxed, and matter-of-fact tone for most of its length which conveys, misleadingly, the progress of parent and child in adjusting to the circumstances of bereavement. It might be argued that the scene does not appear to gauge adequately the difficulties that both



of them are contending with as we drop in on them in the midst of performing routine tasks. One expects to see, on the part of Tom or Eddie, some pronounced hesitancy, discomfort, or withdrawal. Instead the two seem to be competently engaged in their respective activities. Tom is preparing soup from a can, perhaps without practiced ease and manifesting a barely discernible haziness. Eddie wipes and sets the table and then climbs up on a kitchen stool, where he continues to stand as he opens a cupboard to remove two bowls (for the soup), then a cup and saucer. Perkins identifies the unstressed counterpoint between the 'ordinary household routine' of lunch making and a quick shared meal, on the one hand, and on the other, 'the empty strangeness of their situation' (1972: 76).

Perkins aptly observes that Eddie is taking over activities that his mother would likely have performed in the recent past. No mention is made of this in the dialogue, nor is there any underscoring in the first beats of the scene of troubling memory interfering with Eddie's handling of his assigned duties. Part of Tom's apparent comfort in how the father-son chat is going derives from their mutual concentration on actions that don't necessitate eye contact or a clear assessment of Eddie's present emotional state. Tom believes that his



questions to Eddie about his school day, following a slightly awkward explanation of the soon to arrive new housekeeper, are a satisfactory acknowledgement of Eddie's possible fears, and an invitation to address his feelings openly. And here is where Glenn Ford's placid, collected manner is exposed as a tactical evasion of Eddie's grief, as well as his own. Tom imagines that by feigning self-mastery and relaxation (as though things are already 'back to normal' for him and he can resume the pleasures of old familiar patterns without a hitch) Eddie can watch his father 'being strong' and emulate his composure. His son should be able to recover his buoyancy and spark without having to spend much time in grown-up disorientation and darkness.

The stool that Eddie climbs and stands upon allows him to surpass his father's height. One of the film's central ideas – again, not directly referenced in the dialogue – is that the child has inadvertently become the 'father' to the man. Eddie is better at living through, staying in touch with and vocalising his pain and sense of loss than Tom is, who (like so many film fathers and real fathers of the period, puts all his chips on denial). Tom mistakenly believes that he is modeling stoic resolve for Eddie, and deflecting excessive exhibition of inner turmoil, because his son must be spared the sight of further suffering. In fact, Eddie is picking up on his father's unconscious need that the boy return to his former chipper resilience quickly so that Tom can rely on *his* poise, steadiness, and childhood knack for surmounting woe. A child has more resources for present tense, spontaneous being than loss-hardened adults do, and can outwit the past's ghastly desire to cling. The film encourages us to place our faith in this myth of the resilient child, but at the same time to pursue our doubts about it. When Minnelli shows us Eddie perched on the kitchen stool, he does not look strong, even though he



is displaying a matter-of-fact shrewdness in his calm talk of his teacher at school's ploys for comforting him. The stool is visibly sturdy. Minnelli does not angle the camera in such a way as to evoke danger or apprehension about the possibility of a fall. But the manner in which Eddie stands alone on his mother's stool does infuse the entire kitchen atmosphere with a feeling of precarious fragility. And fragility, Perkins rightly contends, is what the scene and the world of the film are most interestingly (and recurrently) about.

I am reminded of Scottie Ferguson's cheerful, confident climbing of the stool in Midge's apartment early in *Vertigo*, and the terror awaiting him as he reaches the top. There can be an abyss lurking right beside the most commonplace, familiar, and secure domestic object. The world particle from Minnelli's kitchen scene which possesses molten charge in its immediate context and diffusive amplitude (many paths into the film's world radiate from it) focuses on Eddie's handling of the cup and saucer from the cupboard. Leading up to the key action, Tom, speaking with simulated casualness from behind Eddie (his preferred position of avoidance) asks, while rubbing his hands pleurably, 'What did the teacher say today?' Eddie replies 'About mommy?', instantly attuned to his father's drift. Tom nervously agrees with a 'Yes', while concentrating more intently on food preparation. Minnelli beautifully synchronises Eddie's reference to 'mommy' with his opening of the cupboard door from his elevated vantage point on the stool. Revealed to us behind the cupboard door is an assortment of inverted glasses, cups hanging from hooks, and neatly stacked plates and bowls. Everything the cupboard contains brings 'mommy' into quiet focus, as though giving Eddie's memory (reopened, like the



cupboard) vivid, palpable form. It is no accident, of course, that all of the objects exposed to view are breakable. They emanate a shared fragility. Eddie's offhand comments about his teacher's special attentiveness and emotion during his first morning back at school suggest an almost wry quality of detachment. He both appreciates her kind gestures and sees through the effort she is making, which is virtually an obligation, given what's happened to him. As he continues to deal with selecting bowls for soup, Eddie's back remains turned to his father. There is more than a hint that Eddie sees through Tom's display of hearty comradery and accepts it in the same knowing spirit as he did his teacher's gentle commiseration. Tom then asks him, steering into safer waters, asks what he did in school, and Eddie, modulating his mode of response to greater inwardness, responds 'Nothing much.' Tom, failing to catch Eddie's change of tone, jokingly presses Eddie for more details. 'I'm sure you did something.' At this climactic, supremely delicate moment Eddie confesses that there was something he wanted to do, but didn't. His father, continuing to be oblivious, in a reflexive self-protective fashion, inquires what it was. Holding a cup in one hand, Eddie reaches into the cupboard shelf with the other and removes a saucer. Cup and saucer starkly rattle as he brings them together in his hands. He pauses as he contemplates these all-at-once foreign objects, in a medium shot, before softly acknowledging: 'I wanted to cry.'

Perkins talks about the convergence of these items and Eddie's pained admission with his customary, compact elucidation of the most important point.

The harshness of the action – cup and saucer rattle unpleasantly as, on 'I wanted to cry', Eddie brings them together – makes the episode solid and convincing so that it is both very moving and completely void of sentimentality. Also,



the emphasis on Eddie's frailty prepares us for a subsequent scene in which he will break down [in his room] at the sight of a dead goldfish. (76)

As in the case of Ophul's fly-swatter, Perkins is staunchly insistent about the director's necessary avoidance of over-emphasis, of coaxing emotion from the situation by false or garish means. Perkins wants us to recognise how much it matters for the edifice of feeling that the cup and saucer create an unpleasant, grating sound rather than a poignant one. Minnelli manages to keep the cupboard ordinary and neutral in its presentation, so the opening up to an assemblage of specific maternal objects and emotions remains half-hidden, *unannounced* by the manner of framing but still accessible to a viewer who intuits the fragility of the father-son interaction. If the mother's association with setting or character action received more overt emphasis, the scene's impact would be greatly diminished. The scene would dissolve into bits of coy calculation. In Minnelli's version, the scene ends with Tom somewhat taken aback by Eddie's direct expression of vulnerability. He is turned away from Eddie at the opposite counter as Eddie, also turned away, speaks of his thwarted wish to cry. There is a space between them that is wider than it first appears. Minnelli keeps Tom

and Eddie apart and isolated in separate one-shot framings. Tom is troubled and uncomfortable. He gazes outward, in the direction of the camera, as if uncertain how to proceed. Eddie continues to stand on the stool, grasping the pressed together cup and saucer. We are close to the point where the pair's need to free each other from their mutual standstill will achieve that outcome. Before the resolution can happen, however, the door buzzer sounds.

The new housekeeper, not yet revealed visually, has arrived at the apartment's front door, and Tom moves, with unmistakable relief, to answer the buzzer's timely interruption. The camera observes Tom shifting away from Eddie as he traverses the considerable distance between kitchen and hallway entrance. Although Tom has a definite reason to leave the conversation with Eddie in midair, he seems exposed in an act of repressive flight from what Eddie has set before him. Mrs. Livingston's (Roberta Sherwood) bustling arrival on the scene allows Minnelli to shift register decisively. With commanding self-assurance she invades the apartment and kitchen space providing an ebullient, blunt-edged cheerfulness – pushy but not insensitive – for Tom to hide behind. (Intriguingly, she brings with her a record player, which she informs Tom she intends to use to learn another language. The language she



alludes to is Spanish, but her entire attitude generates a different feeling language than the just concluded scene presented to us.)

The goldfish episode that Perkins alludes to is unexpectedly harrowing, a scene of unbridled, helpless emotional nakedness. As Tom assures his wife's best friend, Elizabeth (Shirley Jones) during a visit to his apartment that he and Eddie have settled back into a normal routine, we hear a piercing off-screen scream, coming from Eddie's bedroom. Minnelli cuts to Eddie, stripped to the waist, standing behind his large aquarium – extending the glass fragility of the kitchen – and continuing to scream uncontrollably as Tom, followed by Elizabeth, enter through the door behind him. On the bedroom wall, by the left side of the door, is a dartboard with a single red dart stuck not far from the center. A dead goldfish, whose orange form approximates Eddie's hair color, floats on the surface of the tank. We can make out other, active fish beneath it and a small, ornamental home at the aquarium's base. After Tom's first unsuccessful attempt to subdue Eddie's hysteria by embracing him, he spots the dead fish, and instantly breaking contact with his son, cups the fish's body in his hands and flees the room to dispose of it in the toilet. During his absence, Elizabeth stays with the wailing Eddie

and Mrs. Livingston enters as a third concerned witness, but one less capable than Elizabeth of addressing the boiling over feelings of Eddie directly and without fear. When Tom returns, Eddie's breakdown is still in progress. Tom's concern pivots without warning into unchecked, angry frustration. To get Eddie to stop – clearly as much for his sake as the boy's – he strikes him across the face, shakes him and thrusts him onto his bed without releasing him. Before joining Eddie in panicked loss of control, he calls out 'Please' several times. We may notice peripherally that the aquarium is suddenly shown to have a red base on which the whole structure rests. Adjacent to the aquarium is a small dark model airplane which is more directly linked to Tom's desire for 'flight' escape than Eddie's.

Elizabeth watches Tom's explosion from behind the bed, waiting for an opportunity to attend to Eddie in a different manner. As Tom, trembling, explains to Eddie haltingly that the fish are not 'him' but 'it', and that he flushed the dead one down the drain while many others remain alive, Eddie, also shaking, strives to calm his father's agitation. He repeats with pitiful determination the phrase 'It's okay, dad' by way of reassurance. Tom then disengages and returns to the doorway in pacing confusion. Elizabeth draws close to Eddie, covers the exposed

half of his body with a bathrobe and wipes his mouth. She speaks the self-evident truth about what brought on his attack: 'Eddie, you were thinking about your mother, weren't you?' The close-up two shot of Elizabeth and Eddie heightens our sense of restored safety and connection, as she looks after him. Yet no sooner does Elizabeth mention the link between Eddie's outburst and his mother than Minnelli cuts to a shocking extreme close-up of Tom swinging his head to glare at Elizabeth in a mounting rage. Having been seized by fury and making no effort to resist it, he swiftly leaves the bedroom, and slams the door.

A scene of such jagged, uncompromising extremity cannot easily be integrated into a narrative structure that is primarily concerned with Tom Corbett finding a suitable replacement for his deceased wife, Helen. The tone of this bachelor search is often comic, and Eddie supplies much guidance throughout, by turns diverting, stealthy, unreasonable, and wise. However, a closer examination of the film's methods and materials, following Perkins' interpretive lead, brings forth numerous surprising affinities with the fragility theme that the opening scenes so potently establish. As with many film stories involving parental loss – especially those with a 'light' tone

– *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* presents the absent, never seen (not even in a framed photograph) Helen Corbett as a paragon, a combination of the ideal, perfectly blended attributes of wife and mother. At no point is any acknowledgement made of trying episodes in the reign of this embodiment of nurturing love. In mythical terms, Helen inhabited an earthly paradise before the fall. Fragility is what inevitably, and with inconceivable abruptness, comes in her wake, since she took the familial virtues in their purest imaginable form with her. Until her hazy, unspecified final illness, one can almost believe that Eddie and Tom lived without strain, sorrow, or a sense of incompleteness. We accept this enigma of lost wholeness quite readily in fiction, as though Helen corresponds, in Robert Bly's enticing phrase, to 'Someone we know of, whom we have never seen.' (2018: 55)

When the film begins, radio host, Norman (Jerry Van Dyke) delivers in voice-over a crooning, salacious tribute to housewives, and we gradually discover that the unified discourse of vanished Helen, who had the power to reconcile all contradictions, has been supplanted by a perplexingly mixed language (in which the proportions of the domestic and erotic are skewed). Norman invites his largely female audience of radio listeners to 'wake up' to a Manhattan morning that feels at once dreamlike and degraded. He goes on to caution them – with incongruous seductiveness – about the dangers attending even the simplest, most ordinary break of day tasks. We are introduced to Tom impatiently listening to Jerry's silken patter while moving about (trying to take a mother's place) in his kitchen. Just before Tom is visually identified, we are shown a boiling glass pot of coffee on a stove, burning someone's fingers, an immediate confirmation of Jerry's radio warning. The damaged, recoiling hand belongs to Tom, who we then observe hastily preparing breakfast in his dress shirt and tie. Carlos Losilla's essay on *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, which bears a dedication to Victor Perkins, 'who looks and looks' (2009: 359), considers the film in the context of the numerous Minnelli narratives, starting as far back as *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945) which are preoccupied with angel surrogates, dream doubles and the resurrection of the dead. *The Pirate* (1948) and *Brigadoon* (1954) continue this progression. By the 1960s, Minnelli films with a ghostly lost



world component, which feature the return of a woman either from death or the doomed imprisonment of old age, trace a deepening obsession. Included in this group, along with *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, are *Goodbye Charlie* (1964), *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970), and *A Matter of Time* (1976). It is entirely appropriate to place *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* in the company of Minnelli's ghost stories, as Losilla does, and to interpret it in that light.

Elizabeth's first appearance in the film, at the doorway of Tom's apartment, bearing a gift of homemade fudge from her own apartment across the hall, is presented by Minnelli as an uncanny visitation. Tom reacts to Elizabeth as though he were seeing his wife returning, in the company of the woman who, since Eddie's birth, had been her best friend. He observes, after his momentary shock and resulting daze, that he had somehow beheld Helen right beside her. Eddie's own introduction in the film has a similarly haunted quality. After Tom fails to locate him in his own bedroom when he is attempting to rouse him for breakfast, he searches through the other rooms with increasing alarm, finding him at last sleeping concealed beneath a blanket on his own bed. Eddie occupies the side that until recently belonged to his mother. When asked to account for his 'bed hopping' he mentions unconcernedly that he had felt 'cold' when awakened during the night. The child immediately seeks to ascertain whether his father is mad at him for this obviously mother-motivated transgression. Tom appears unwilling to confront the emotion underlying this surprising (to him) manoeuvre, just as he later refuses to see, as Elizabeth does, the mother's death reflected in the floating goldfish. Tom's first dialogue in the narrative is with a milkman who enters the kitchen unceremoniously after Tom has neglected to leave a note indicating what the adjusted milk delivery requirements will be from now on. We see the milkman place a quart bottle in the obviously cold refrigerator.

Elizabeth as reflection of Helen returned from the dead is a less disturbing version of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Ligeia' plot, which deals with a powerful first wife escaping death to return to her partner through the vessel of a 'weak' replacement, one



not only passive in her own right but erasable. A common reading of the courtship logic in Minnelli's plot is that Tom makes the easy final choice of the nurturing Elizabeth – a volunteer nurse with a deep attachment to Eddie – over the more challenging, multi-faceted fashion consultant, Rita – a career woman who values her independence, has a 'stricter' conception of parenting, and who serves as Elizabeth's chief rival. (The third candidate for Tom's affections is guileless Dollye (Stella Stevens), a deceptively bright child-woman who is, except in matters of artful maneuvering, a near-double of Eddie himself.) What most commentaries on the film neglect to attend to is the unusual quantity of exceptionally heated quarrels that Tom and Elizabeth enter into throughout the narrative. Nearly all of their interactions build to painful, unresolved discord. Tom endeavors to maintain an appearance of poised assurance in Eddie's presence. The negative force that he holds in check when around Eddie, in order to spare him further upheaval, he hurls at Elizabeth, losing control of himself in her presence repeatedly. Elizabeth's responses to his outbursts match his level of abrasive vigor. All of this tension, misunderstanding and acrimony seems generated by the interdiction against bringing Helen back, as though Tom is fighting the temptation to have the lost marriage over again, in a near identical form. The utopia of the 'flawless past' with Helen collides with the desecrating wish to supplant her with her best friend and confounding double. There is treachery and betrayal, as many ghost stories tell us, in the desire for sameness, repetition.

I am reminded here of Perkins' unforgettable discussion of Orson Welles' voice conjuring up (as disembodied narrator) the lost plenitude of the Amberson past at the beginning of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). Welles' opening tone-poem creates a subtle, gently ironic dissonance between the images of a refined, picturesque, achingly lovely, vanished idyll and the imminent tumble into wreckage and loss. 'We are told that the Ambersons had magnificence', Perkins writes, 'but what we hear [in Welles' voice] is that they have the speaker's heart. It is possible that his attachment is to their frailty more than to their pomp' (1999: 21). Joseph Cotten's Eugene Morgan has a modest courtship accident – a burlesque backward fall into a bass viol – which proves sufficient to change the initially evoked world of comfort, largesse, reliability, and slow moving time [Welles' narrator croons 'They had time

for everything'] with one stroke. His slapstick mishap, as it were, locks the gates of paradise against him. And the spectator is cast out of the garden as well in the very process of being gently, mellowly ushered into it. The 'crime' of Eugene Morgan is his belief that the past can be repeated, that a lost chance can be retrieved and lived again in the same old way. It is not only George Minafer (Tim Holt), the son of Morgan's beloved, who cries out in protest of this plan. The world of the film itself stands against Eugene's dream of making the past go into reverse and giving him Isabel Amberson Minafer (Dolores Costello) at last.

The coffee pot bubbling – in a comically dangerous fashion, as the narrator Norman sounds his note of warning at the beginning of *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* – coincides, as I previously noted, with hapless Tom entering the narrative for the first time. His reaching, then burned hand marks his uncertain attempt to merge father and mother roles as a newly widowed parent. The coffee pot turns up again at the commencement of Tom's second quarrel with Elizabeth after she spends the night nursing Eddie, when he is battling a high fever. More significantly, the cup and saucer that Eddie held onto as he spoke about 'not crying' is being used by Elizabeth as Tom offers her breakfast. We witness a reactivation of the

earlier scene's fragility – objects handled in a way that conveys barely contained feelings – when Tom makes a blundering attempt to pay Elizabeth for her caregiving service. Minnelli has Tom hold out the glass coffee pot toward Elizabeth, as if to refill her cup, at the precise instant that she withdraws from him in angry hurt. Less than a minute before their bitter confrontation starts, Elizabeth and Tom share a laugh over Eddie's explanation to her of how 'brave boys don't bleed when they're hurt. No matter how big the hurt, they hold the blood in.' Tom spends the majority of his time in the film contriving 'adult naïve' ways for him and Eddie to 'hold the blood in.' Although Elizabeth does not mean to be the instigator and facilitator of bleeding 'out in the open,' that is her primary role in the film. If Tom is to enter – for the second time – the marriage that death has taken from him, he must be torn open. The spirit of Helen Corbett, using Elizabeth as her medium, seems to preside over that gradual stripping bare.

Minnelli's penchant for paradoxical exchanges of light and dark, so often conjoined with fragility, is present from the outset of his film career. In *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), a potentially comic scene of a young man and women furthering the cause of romance by touring the rooms of the girl's household with a long-armed lamplighter and extinguishing



the lights in various chandeliers becomes surprisingly delicate – indeed, fragile – as the creation of darkness speaks simultaneously of the quickening of love and the fleetingness of life. Judy Garland's Esther Smith, the girl in question, later sings a somberly beautiful Christmas song, balancing acceptance and regret, to her younger sister, Tootie (Margaret O'Brien), while holding her gently in an upstairs bedroom. Tootie is too worked up to go to sleep, she has told Esther, because she is waiting for Father Christmas. The song, instead of calming her, fills her with angry desperation. She runs outdoors to destroy a family of snow people that were visible from her window. The snow figures unmistakably represent the members of her own family and the waning possibility of any adequate protection coming to her from this group. Warmth and tender closeness, instead of keeping the child's crystal of faith intact, crack it open, and in through the fragility flows chaos.

When Eddie disappears from summer camp in the final section of *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, and Tom drives out to the camp in panic to search for him, Minnelli provides not only a demolition of Tom's carefully maintained defenses and evasions, but more startlingly, a sustained depiction of the father's core vulnerability. Minnelli shoots Tom's car drive with the identical effect of surrealistic hysteria that he devised for Lana Turner's drive through the rain in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). When he enters Eddie's camp cabin after getting the news that search parties have not yet located him and that there are plans to drag the lake, Minnelli recapitulates, through visual rhyme, a pair of object-centered actions from early in the film, and in so doing places Tom belatedly inside his son's emotional perspective, so often – until now – blocked to his gaze. He finds a pair of Eddie's sneakers resting on his son's otherwise vacant, neatly made bunk bed. He hesitantly picks up the sneakers by their tied strings and presses them together in much the same fashion that Eddie joined his mother's cup and saucer together in the kitchen scene. Tom then walks over to the screened window sill on which rests a jar containing a swimming goldfish. A net adjacent to the jar succinctly tells us of the fish's recent capture. It eloquently attests to Eddie's arduous efforts at replacement. Tom then notices that Eddie's best friend, Mike (Leslie Barringer), is lying awake in his upper bunk and staring at him. In a

trembling, unguardedly tearful questioning of the boy, he displays the extent of his cumulative grief and stretched-to-the-limit weakness in a manner that Eddie himself has never been allowed to witness. He asks Mike whether Eddie has ever ventured into the woods alone, an imagined action that is as metaphorical as literal. He begs Mike to share any secret knowledge of Eddie's thoughts and feelings that he might possess, which Tom, for whatever reason, has not been let in on. Tom is unaccustomed to being so openly powerless, baffled, and dependent, but his desperate fear of having lost Eddie for good makes further masking and control impossible.

At this moment of exhausted privation, he receives a telephone call from Elizabeth, who informs him that Eddie has made it back to her apartment in New York safely, through a series of risk-filled actions. Minnelli includes no shots of Elizabeth in this call. We stay with Tom clutching the receiver helplessly, in a cabin back room. What transpires in the hallway of Tom's apartment building and in his apartment itself after his return journey (another anguished, hysterical car trip, presented in reverse angle from the first, so we see only the back of Tom's head) is the most extended, agonised quarrel episode in the film. The confrontation with Elizabeth culminates when Elizabeth slaps his face after he declares that he 'sees why her previous marriage failed'. Tom is enraged that Eddie seeks her out in an emergency ahead of himself, enraged that she nurtures him expertly, enraged at her accusation that he has hit his son, and enraged that she has found a tactic to make Eddie prefer her to any other woman he dates. (Rita, Tom's fiancée, mirrors that part of Eddie that self-protectively schemes, manipulates, and strives to exclude. Eddie fails to recognise the qualities that the two of them share in their ongoing skirmishes.)

If the ghost of Helen is somehow present in Elizabeth and guiding her actions, it is plainly not her intention to revive the abstract idyll that her marriage to Tom putatively resembled. She seems intent on creating an atmosphere for Eddie in which he need not be ever-accommodating and hide what is going on inside him. Elizabeth provides a sanctuary in her apartment across the hall, separate from all the places in his dealings with others where openness and direct contact with his pain and uncertainty are not allowed. And Tom, if he is to



have, in effect, the same marriage again with a woman who shares many of his former wife's qualities, must be broken down, challenged in his denial, emptied out by panic and confusion before the possibility of return and sameness are permissible.

The memorable, exquisitely fragile ending of the film depicts another phone call, this one from Tom inviting Elizabeth for a date after Eddie has cajoled him, from his now authoritative position at the kitchen table, to believe in her love for him. Minnelli preserves the separate apartment domains of Tom and Elizabeth. (Tom has hardly ever crossed the threshold of her living space in the film, and on

the one occasion where he steps inside it, is there only for a few moments.) The distance that is maintained is all the more remarkable given the fact that Elizabeth's door is hardly ten feet away from his own. During the concluding phone call, both Tom's and Elizabeth's entranceways are open, permitting Eddie, who occupies the space between them, to attempt by back and forth looks to bring the two closer together.

As the phone call progresses (completely inaudible to the film spectator) the two adults appear relaxed and comfortable, a state that may have something to do with the distance that they continue to depend on. Eddie becomes Minnelli's surrogate director, striving to achieve cohesive, satisfactory resolution to his dream of restoration. His shifting gaze wills the still separated pair into happy 'edited together' harmony. The film ends without Tom or Elizabeth being released by decisive action from their manageable stasis. Our final view is of Eddie in close-up, his head still moving in both directions, eager to persuade himself (and us) that his need for an end to limbo and loss can be attained by fervent, concentrated willing and wishing.

Thomas Elsaesser, in his influential 1970 reconsideration of Minnelli's work, argued that his films 'invariably focus on the discrepancy between an inner vision, often confused and uncertain of itself, and an outer world that appears as hostile because it is presented as a physical space littered with obstacles' ([1970] 2009: 87). The bass line of the Minnelli world *in toto* is a conspicuous alienation, but Elsaesser insists that Minnelli does not lament the alienation he persistently identifies and delineates with such Expressionist power. He chooses instead 'to concentrate on [and assign primary value to] the energies of the imagination released in the individual during this process of (social?) decomposition' (87). Richard

Dyer adds to this that the endings of Minnelli films 'are only apparently happy. The keenness of the longing for the ideal lingers in the mind, leaving a dark undertow to even the most glittering of his musicals' (1981: 1153–4). Eddie's impassioned creative undertaking at the film's end is to arrange for something apparently new that revives and perfectly duplicates the remembered form of what has been lost: the restored idyll of Helen, Tom, and Eddie, with Elizabeth and Helen becoming a fused entity, smoothing over all cracks with undivided tenderness. As Julian Barnes reminds us, in his novel, *The Noise of Time*: 'An idyll, by definition, only becomes an idyll once it has ended' (2017: 31). The final vision Eddie surrenders to in *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* is a vivid prospect, including literal doors that Eddie himself has forced open. As long as Tom and Elizabeth stand in their adjoining spheres and manifest no discomfort, fear, or indecision, Eddie can anticipate a fast-approaching end to distance, with all psychic damage repaired.

Eddie's concluding waking dream is strongly reminiscent of the young child Johnny's (Dickie Moore) in the closing shots of Josef von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* (1932). Johnny's mother, also named Helen (Marlene Dietrich) seems to have been brought back to life – after a lengthy separation – as she

appears, unexpectedly, in his room at bedtime. After washing him and preparing him for sleep, she is joined, near his barred bedroom crib, by her estranged husband, Ned (Herbert Marshall), who is Johnny's father. For an indeterminate period, Johnny and his father have lived together on their own. Johnny persuades his parents to repeat an old ritual bedtime story, the fairy tale of their first meeting by a river in which his mother and her friends were swimming. Helen and Ned manage to play their respective parts in the story, though the shadows of subsequent pain and betrayal linger in the nursery air. Helen brings out a windup toy carousel and sings a familiar lullaby to its music box accompaniment. Johnny, half-asleep, either sees or dreams of his parents drawing nearer to one another, in forgiveness and rekindled love, as his eyes close. The final, heartbreaking close-up, whose weighty emotional task – as deep as the deepest fairy tale – is to heal all wounds with the touch of a finger, shows Johnny's hand stretched through the bars of his crib, touching the wings of the angels on the toy carousel, one by one, as they continue to go around. Eddie's position as entranced onlooker and presiding angel in his in between space, is one that similarly strives to bring about his mother's return, exorcising the fear that Elizabeth will not remain Helen 'for keeps' in his father's still unintegrated gaze.

Let us return, in closing, to Victor Perkins' still pertinent, still challenging question for film studies, 'Where is the world?' The argument I've presented is that in film worlds, every particle is a potential reflector of the whole's sense, but that a special gift of discernment is required to find the particles in any given world that connect us to the qualities of experience in it that matter most. The discovery of such particles, as my reading of Perkins' criticism amply confirms, is typically a perceptual shock, that both delights the viewer and disrupts the path of knowing. The achievement of world form is, for Perkins, always simultaneously an ethical and aesthetic achievement, but he scrupulously avoids judgments on these issues that feel facile or premature. One feels always that the most desirable pairings of ethics and aesthetics for him paradoxically combine ease (an absence of forcing) with a necessary internal pressure.

For a film world to 'hang together' it is not required to manifest that Aristotelian will-o'-the-wisp unity. No film



critic understood this more acutely than Perkins, and possibly explains why he expended so much interpretive labor on that most triumphant, recalcitrant instance of structural disarray, Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*. I chose *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* as my most extended test case for thinking about world and world particles not because the film entirely breaks free of its affinities with breezy, leering, bachelor comedies, but precisely because it doesn't. Nevertheless, something substantial within it, belonging unmistakably to the sensibility of Minnelli, secures a more subtle, tantalising, complexly affecting shape. The fragility that Perkins unearths in his reading of the kitchen scene, where it suffuses every element of the father-son interaction, gives a direction to our experience, our meaning-making activity as partakers of the film's world. The pursuit of the idea embodied in the cosmology – of fragility continually surfacing in the midst of blithe busyness and of a ghostly undersong – enables a form to coalesce, forcefully, perhaps indelibly, despite resistance from opposing energies and impulses within the work.

Adrian Martin, in his absorbing defense of Minnelli's much maligned *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970), asserts the value of confusion in film world articulation (2009). Not everything that finds a place in a film's world belongs to it to the same degree, with the same intensity of adhesiveness or expressiveness. Martin talks about *Clear Day* 'stretching to the breaking point its central contradiction', and gaining interest from the resultant pressure (386). 'How hard is the problem that a narrative sets itself?' Martin inquires, and what does that resistance contribute to our understanding of the impressive, conditional 'holding together' of the fictional world? (385). The particles or unit passages of the individual film have additional possible connections, of course, to the director's overall cosmology, developed throughout a career. We can think of the evolving nature of that cosmology as the impalpable organising form that brings coherence to a director's creative vision. One might further note that Minnelli, like other film artists, has as much claim to transform the culture that he finds himself in, and where he does his work, as to be a symptom, determined by it.

'To advance our grasp of the worldhood of fictional worlds', Perkins characteristically observes in the conclusion of 'Where is the World?', 'should be a priority in thinking about cinema' (2005: 39). But that grasp can only be improved

if we also believe what Perkins notes, without elaboration, in 'Omission and Oversight in Close Reading': 'No criticism, detailed as it may reckon to be, will ever encompass all that might be observed about a passage of film, or even a moment' (2017: 384). We will, if fully responsive to our film experience, locate the vital, transfiguring world particle, as Perkins repeatedly does, and then, once we draw what we can from it, it will fortunately find a way to elude us.

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