

4-1-1983

Review Of "Pursuits Of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy Of Remarriage" By S. Cavell

Richard Thomas Eldridge
Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (1983). "Review Of "Pursuits Of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy Of Remarriage" By S. Cavell". *Philosophy And Literature*. Volume 7, Issue 1. 140-142.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/304>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage (review)

Richard Eldridge

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 7, Number 1, April 1983, pp. 140-142
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/phl.1983.0009



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/phl/summary/v007/7.1.eldridge.html>

ple, Culler shows that genetic semiology seeks to gain insight into the meaning of poetry by considering how poets write while descriptive semiology is concerned with the way a poem gets interpreted by critics as well as what conventions make possible disagreements among critics about the meaning of a poem.

In "A Problem of Audience" Andrew A. Tadie and James P. Mesa demonstrate descriptive semiotics. Their problem is: What made it possible for a contemporary of Davenant to understand the Deistic theme of the *Seige of Rhodes*? The authors discover that the clue to the meaning is found in Davenant's divergence from his favored Terencian Five-Act Structure of English drama. By introducing a disruptive element into an accepted theatrical format, Davenant signaled to the astute among the audience that there was a deeper structure of meaning in the play.

Leon Satterfield provides an example of genetic semiotics in "Toward a Poetics of Ironic Sign." In order that irony may be understood when it occurs, Satterfield shows how the kind of irony that implies an ironist is created. On the one hand, he describes the types of irony (rhetorical and situational) he is concerned with and outlines the clues given by the author that make the recognition of irony possible. On the other hand, Satterfield provides some insights into what the author betrays about himself when he writes in an ironic mode. The essay successfully demonstrates why irony is easily missed or misunderstood by the reader.

Finally, a critical note: Tzvetan Todorov outlines Bakhtin's resistance to the language of technology for discussing communication, which uses such terms as "encoding/decoding," "addresser/addressee," and "context/message." Instead, Bakhtin prefers the more fluid connotations of "speaker," "auditor," "utterance," and "intertext," which imply the social nature of communication.

Todorov's point hits a nerve in Western semiotics, philosophy of language, literary criticism, and this collection. Indeed, most of the essays in this volume assume a model of communication derived from the technology of electronic communication, where a sender codes a message and telegraphs it to a receiver who decodes it. According to Todorov, Bakhtin opposes this view and proposes that communication is an intimate relationship, a communion of persons that cannot be explained or described in a way analogous to electronic communication. The difference between Bakhtin and his Western contemporaries is that of an organic or social model of communication versus a technological or analytic one.

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

PARRISH W. JONES

Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage, by Stanley Cavell; 283 pp. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, \$17.50.

Why might a philosopher who has been interested in such things as skepticism, private languages, Thoreau, the third *Critique*, and *King Lear* now write a book consisting of

readings of seven comedies made in Hollywood between 1934 and 1949? What could the works of Capra, Cukor, Hawks, Sturges, and McCarey have to do with those of Shakespeare, Kant, and Wittgenstein?

Cavell's effort has long been to map the transformations of the human attempt to discover objects—for example, Platonic forms, private introspectible innate ideas, or natural phenomena which disclose God's action—inherently revelatory of the natures of things, especially of the nature of a life worth living, and to suggest that the worth of a life (or a practice or a work of art) must and can be reckoned in the absence of such a discovery, though such reckonings will themselves remain open to criticism. Attempts to discover once and for all the conditions of a worthwhile life are themselves understandable as reflections of fantasies of freeing oneself from reckoning and of the finite human nature which gives rise to such fantasies.

Suppose we take up Cavell's suggestion. How might we carry out the sort of reckoning of the worth of a life which Cavell claims is possible? We might "retain the idea of ourselves as created and attempt further to *humanize* this creation, identifying ourselves now as the creators of ourselves, since obviously no *other* being could be eligible for such a role." Achieving happiness while so understanding ourselves would require us, as he puts it in *The Claim of Reason*, "to accept responsibility for ourselves in particular . . . to consent to our present state as something we desire, or anyway, desire more than we desire change" (p. 465).

What makes the movies Cavell considers in *Pursuits of Happiness* interesting to him is that their leading characters manage seriously to question and finally to consent to their present states. They succeed in taking "a new step in the creation of the human" (p. 65). The question which, Cavell says, is "all but continually" on Cary Grant's mind in *Bringing Up Baby* is "what am I doing here, that is, how have I got into this relation and why do I stay in it?" (p. 130). Grant's question, or some transformation of it, surfaces in each of the seven comedies Cavell reads. "The overarching question of the comedies of remarriage is precisely the question of what constitutes a union, what makes these two into one, what binds, you may say what sanctifies in marriage" (p. 53), and, further, what makes for happiness in a human life generally.

The kind of relation—remarriage—achieved and accepted by Colbert and Gable, Grant and Hepburn, Fonda and Stanwyck, and other couples requires adventurousness and inventiveness, the recovery or invention by the couple of a shared childhood, their transportation to an extraordinary world, often Connecticut, in which their fantasies can be realized and confronted (cp. Shakespeare's forests), their confusion (indicative of reciprocity) of active and passive roles, and in general the achievement of "purposiveness without purpose" (p. 113), as though shared joyfulness in pursuing nothing at present could guarantee shared joyfulness in pursuing anything in the future. "The happiness in these comedies is honorable" (p. 65)—the criteria of happiness they propose are worth taking seriously—insofar as they succeed in "showing us our fantasies" (p. 18), in making their wishes and avoidances and inventions recognizable to us as imaginably like our own.

There is nothing in *Pursuits of Happiness* like a demonstrative argument to show the necessary and sufficient conditions for human happiness in all circumstances. But to the extent that philosophizing requires conversation with others about matters of common

interest, Cavell's talk about happiness in these movies is surpassed in depth and interest by very little contemporary writing.

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

The Nature of Criticism, by Colin Radford and Sally Minogue; x & 180 pp. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981, \$30.00.

The Nature of Criticism is packed with arguments, many of which are concerned with investigating the precise nature of specific critical claims advanced by well-known writers such as René Wellek and F. R. Leavis. Radford and Minogue know both literature and criticism better than many philosophers of art, and, unlike most theorists, are willing themselves to engage in criticism and to chide critics for mistaken readings and ill-supported interpretations. Because of its unusual — and largely successful — “case study” approach, its willingness to consider diverse aspects of criticism, its detailed, fine-grained examination of the logic of critical judgments and arguments, and its philosophically sophisticated but accessible treatment of its topics, *The Nature of Criticism* is well worth reading.

The first chapter, “The Complexities of Critical Judgements,” attempts to show that even such banal classificatory judgments as “*Hamlet* is a tragedy” harbor hidden moral assumptions and “can be evaluative in various complex ways” (pp. 9–10). It also examines the presuppositions of representative interpretive claims in order to determine the critical admissibility of information external to the text. This leads naturally to a discussion of the nature of critical arguments, with the relation between a feature cited by a critic in an argument, and its effect (on the critic and on us, as readers of the text and the criticism in question) being the primary object of attention. Differences between scientific and critical arguments are noted (p. 49), and it is urged that the basis for the objective idiom in criticism is agreement in our critical responses.

The case study method is at its best in the extensive, detailed analysis of Christopher Ricks's interpretation of part of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Many of the ideas previously introduced — many not noted above — are put to work here, and other new ideas, such as the view that the normative dimension of critical arguments does not preclude but rather presupposes a causal dimension, are advanced and argued for. If anything can serve to demonstrate that “critical arguments are frequently complex, elusive and rhetorically misleading as to their true nature, very diverse, and often dubious” (p. 114), it is Radford and Minogue's long, complicated, and subtle discussion.

Another question taken up by Radford and Minogue asks whether there are any necessary conditions for excellence in art. Both Clive Bell's and Monroe Beardsley's views are considered, then rejected, and Beardsley's definition of aesthetic experience is also objected to, being criticized as both too narrow and “eccentric.” Radford and Minogue conclude that it is unlikely that there are any substantive criteria of excellence in art.