

Farming Out Resentment: *Up in the Air*

Asking ourselves what business (if any) humans have up in the air is as good as asking, as the ancients did, what business humans have (if any) at sea. Where Odysseus was likely to draw Poseidon's wrath by laying claim to the sea, no equivalent old world antagonism threatened a human claim to the land nor to the skies above his head. If Poseidon's brother Zeus had little reason to fear man's encroachment upon the heavens, it was only because technological shortcomings made any such encroachment unthinkable.¹ By the time the necessary technological breakthroughs were in place (there are historical parallels between the rise of aviation technology and *motion* picture technology), the risk of undercutting the divine lost resonance and what was once a question asked with some sense of moral urgency was, instead, muted.

I do not want to say that *Up in the Air* (2009) reminds us that the moral question of encroachment—of human beings' strange existence at either sea or sky—is still a pertinent one. Rather, I take Jason Reitman's film to inherit some of the moral angst in posing that particular question, which is to say the movie does ask what sort of life is the best to live, what sort is proper to "humans." *Up in the Air*, which explores the nexus between commerce, conversation (between a man and a woman) and technology, has much to say in this regard.

I should say that the crisis that follows significant human discovery or advancement (technological or otherwise) presents something more than merely another opportunity to relive or replay intellectual parlour games. If the knowledge of what we can do or what we are as a species begins

by defining what we are not—and then, by virtue of (our) immediate physical geography or surroundings—then our encroachment is not necessarily an encroachment upon whatever spaces we understand *other* species to occupy but an encroachment on what we take ourselves to be. The crisis, one of differentiation, sounds a Girardian note:

The impression of difference in a society that is not in a state of crisis is the result of real diversity and also of a system of exchange that “differentiates” and therefore conceals the reciprocal elements it contains by its very culture and by the nature of the exchange. Marriages for example...are not clearly perceived as exchanges.²

So the threat of how we define ourselves as a species (in relation to other species) is, after all, an internal threat—of how we come to think about and engage with other human beings within a society. Girard’s theoretically tactful insertion of marriage into a discussion of differentiation can also be taken as aesthetically untactful, as though true “pursuits of happiness” occur away from or have little to do with the types of *exchanges* we more readily (but more blindly) engage in during times of peace—the sort, as Girard puts it, not “clearly perceived,” meant more to prop up society and a system of differences in which we create meaning.

Girard’s lack of tact I take to be the reason behind Cavell’s reluctance to take up the issue of exchange primarily as it concerns marriage, including the conditions that elicit its (i.e., marriage’s) successful operation and the kinds that sustain its day-to-day prerogative. Since I plan to make use of what Cavell takes a successful marriage to be, and since I also plan to say that *Up in the Air* speaks to both his conception of marriage as well as to conceptions of economic exchange, let us consider how these two conceptions might clash.

[T]he achievement of human happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs...

...[The pursuit of happiness] applies only in contexts in which there is satisfaction enough, in which something like luxury and leisure, something beyond the bare necessities, is an issue. This is why our films^[3] must on the whole take settings of unmistakable wealth; the people in them have the leisure to talk about human happiness, hence the time to deprive themselves of it unnecessarily.⁴

Cavell understands the direction of interpretation to lead us either away from the economic (taken as “tropes” for the spiritual) or toward it, which is, in effect, to ask “what money...can make you do.”⁵ If we take as given that spiritual bare necessities differ from economic bare necessities, we understand why we ought not to consider the latter because in pursuit of human, rather than animal, knowledge, we must be clear on the nature of the ground we share (as humans). The way Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) carries on a life above ground does not make him more desperate for life’s bare necessities, though it does betray in him a denial of something else—say, spiritual bare necessities. (This seems quite apparent—outside of any discovery, or *anagnorisis*—after one of Ryan’s opening voiceovers.⁶) Where we think of the latter to be contingent on the former, *Up in the Air* asks us to consider whether movies (the art form most heavily dependent on capital) have anything at all to say about economic bare necessities.

A quick word on Cavell’s intentions. Cavell very explicitly assigns to the call for philosophy, or to philosophy’s call, a feminine register, which is to say that with the invention of the modern woman, the one whose efforts were kick-started at the 1848 Seneca Falls convention (legislatively, societally, that is, and *not* morally, aesthetically) came the beginnings of a new human consciousness, the sort whose voice was uncovered through the arrogation of female subjectivity and experience. With the concomitant rise of psychoanalysis, and its emphasis on unconscious desires, came the concerted attempt at giving voice to those moments otherwise considered passable. This new way of looking at the world or acquiring knowledge required being open to the world of everyday and ordinary experience—in short, making room for a type of intellectual passivity, a characteristic we tend to associate with the female (rather than the male) of the species. The pacification or feminization of human consciousness—made most explicit by Freud’s case studies, which relied on women or the “agency of women” to “first realize” its findings (“as reported in the *Studies on Hysteria* and in the case of Dora”⁷)—thus contributed to culture’s “inner agenda,”⁸ less the emancipation of women than that of a new human being. Film, like psychoanalysis, then, required female subjects to realize this new consciousness, banking on the depiction of everyday “hysterias” most notably through the depiction of marriage.

Despite Cavell’s claims of passivity and despite, even, his restraint in avoiding philosophical argumentation for the sake of reiteration, to say

he is philosophizing in anything but an active register *seems to* undermine the authority of his philosophical voice. (All I may be saying is that the feminization of philosophy and the weakening of philosophy are not the same thing.) So when Cavell discusses the films he does from the historical vantage point he does, he is philosophizing from a discernible position of strength, which is to say that his elision of economic considerations in favour of spiritual ones is carried out in admirable (in a sense, requisite) philosophical and aesthetic form for the sake of a philosophical project that speaks of America's best self, of her greatest philosophical achievements. If, as Girard reminds us, in times of "peace" we are "concealed" from the economic, indulging instead in the spiritual dimension of our everyday relations, so much more is required of our philosophy. Does this mean that philosophy is (or risks being) misguided, that it masks over economic necessities with spiritual ones? Answering this question means allowing art and politics, in a sense, to collide, which means picking up on a thread left to us by Cavell and responding to *it*, which is further to accept that if Cavell has elided economic concerns, he is less philosophizing under a metaphysical "cover" than using such cover to articulate what America's best self has afforded us—that is, a new human consciousness, the achievement of which is most palpable in his discussion of American cinema and, I hope, somewhat apparent in my discussion here.

NATALIE KEENER: If there's one word I want to leave you with today, it's this: *Glocal*.

The move from global to local denotes a move from the general to the specific, something a loose philosophical discussion might characterize as an exercise in deduction (the word is *glocal* and not *lobal*). I do not mean that Natalie Keener's (Anna Kendrick) neologism is an example of deductive reasoning; merely that what she is looking for, what she stakes her authority on in this case is that the general can or ought to speak for the particular, which is making a claim or exposing a bias toward a certain type of knowledge, one which favours a priori knowledge over posterior verification.

Said business strategy, of making the global local, actually centres on the direction of (our) knowledge, which is to say that the strategy not only asks if making the global local is worthwhile but whether or not afforded the means to do so, we are *required* to do so. The question is

whether technology serves us, or whether we must alter the nature of our day-to-day relations to suit the prerogative of business, which is, in a sense, to subordinate human needs to technological capabilities, to be beholden to those capabilities. These sorts of questions warrant a certain type of philosophy, and the nexus between philosophy and technology takes me to George Grant, who might respond that “the computer does not impose on us the way it should be used.”⁹ Or does it?

The responsibility of reining in technology, of humanizing a discussion we suddenly have reason to believe can be dehumanized, is the moral prerogative Grant asks us to consider, as though the temptation is to employ technological capabilities suddenly at our disposal to avoid dealing with human needs and desires, which means avoiding the burden of deciding when, how, and if to carry out actions that will have consequences. (Who has the authority to decide such [technological] matters, and, more specifically, who has the authority to quash possibilities, whether seen or un[fore]seen?) In the film, Natalie implements her new project to restructure the entire firm after being seconded by her boss, Craig Gregory (Jason Bateman). Ryan Bingham raises his objections to Natalie’s plan to downsize only after the fact—after, that is, Craig has made his decision to “ground” his staff. Obviously, no one has asked Ryan if the firm’s new strategy is sound. When Craig later approaches Ryan privately, in Ryan’s office, in a post-facto attempt to gain his consent, Craig can do little but appeal to the authority of something else, as though his hands indeed are tied, and as though he owes a debt, somehow, to the very technology he has antagonized: “Don’t blame me, blame the high fuel costs, blame insurance premiums, blame technology.” We do know that Craig has misgivings about the project, which he initially expresses as skepticism toward Natalie herself (“Who does this kid think that she is?”). But later, when we hear him say, “Coke and IBM have been doing this for years...are you familiar with them?” not only are we crushed by logic of economic actions taken elsewhere, we are suddenly aware that Craig may have, in a sense, relinquished his own authority on the matter, that the decision to fire people via a new technological go-between has been made before it has been discussed, not only between Craig and Ryan but between Craig and Natalie.

Grant’s negative formulation of the phrase, as in “the computer *does not* impose on us the way it should be used,” reminds us that computers are “neutral instruments.”¹⁰ The succeeding “should” establishes a debt owed, in this case, by the computer *to* humans. The computer owes us,

exists to serve us; we do not serve it. This is better understood with the positive (and hypothetical) formulation of the phrase—that is, “the computer *does* impose on us the way it should be used.” Although we take the sentence to be false, we understand the debt obligation in this case to flow from human beings *to* computers, as though we owe it to computers to use them in a certain way, the way they are somehow dictating. The original negative formulation, by acknowledging a computer’s neutrality, carries the understanding of a computer’s “potential dangers” not in the machines themselves but in the “potential decisions of human beings about how to use computers.”¹¹ Of course, all technology can be used for good or bad purposes, though Grant’s tidy philosophical phrasing isolates the heart of the matter as one outside of everyday discussion if only because the implied dangers or threats remain unseen, which means they exist as a spectre, behind a seemingly harmless modal verb. So if a technology cannot impose on us how we *should* communicate with one another, we seem obliged, in some way, to discuss *how* we might use such technology (if at all). *Can we even imagine such a discussion?* Is talking to a screen the same as talking to a person? If you say, “Certainly not!” then you are making the case that discussing how and if we should use technology (say, to terminate someone’s employment via video-screen) is a worthwhile discussion, as though we must isolate, at the very least, what might be lost as a result. Yet the best answer we might come up with is that we cannot know unless we try. But, by then, the computer *has* been imposed on us. So how do we discuss something that has yet to come into being?

I do not propose an answer to this question, nor do I feel *Up in the Air* suggests an answer. What the film does show, however, is our fear of such discussion in the first place, of discussing the moral terms surrounding decisions we prefer be made as business decisions. When Ryan Bingham, still in his office, argues with Craig in retaliation that “there is a dignity to the way I do it” (as opposed to how Natalie wants to do it—i.e., fire people), he is not scrambling to justify his economic well-being because his salary is never really in jeopardy (he is not fired, merely “grounded”). What is in jeopardy is the *means* to that salary. He is pleading with Craig on humanistic, rather than opportunistic, grounds, so we immediately understand him to be fighting a losing battle, which means that whenever the potential myopia of human beings is exposed, the best recourse for characters like Craig is to simply dehumanize the exchange by appealing to efficiency, profits, or technology. In this way, technology

does impose on us its own ethic. Technology has effectively snuffed out the local.

The film's first irony—that of Ryan being hired to fire other people only to be fired (i.e., “downsized”) himself—is not realized as the film *progresses*, but very early on. The irony of the movie's opening lines (“And they send some yo-yo like you in here to try to tell me that I'm out of a job? They should be telling you *you're* out of a job!”) is not the principal irony of the movie, the eventual uncovering of which might account for the plot of movie. Rather, the noted irony, which some astute viewers may be calling out or anticipating *during* the initial voiceover, is, just as quickly, realized or recognized. In viewing the remainder of the film, much of what we *anticipate* its original narrative momentum to be is taken away. Ryan is “grounded” roughly 23 minutes into the film. Now what?

When Ryan later tells Natalie, on their way to St. Louis, “We are here to make limbo tolerable, to ferry wounded souls across the river of dread,” he is describing, in metaphorical terms, his own journey in the film, prophesying his own outcome, for he himself, at this point, is in limbo. The foreshadow is noteworthy because this film is so aware of the story conventions it exploits that we are beholden to it to chart for us a way forward, as though the film's mastery of the generic conventions it finds itself in demands newer conventions.

What are our options? Perhaps Natalie is a suitable foil for our new-found sympathies or pity for Ryan; but then, her authority is backed by Coke and IBM and *that* is the authority we crave and which is, very early on, realized. After Coke and IBM have crushed Ryan's existence, we find we have lost our bearings. We are forced, then, very quickly, to turn our minds to Alex Goran (Vera Farmiga) because we understand that she can repair (where Natalie cannot) Ryan's tenuous existence in the world of this film, affording us opportunity to begin anew in considering possibilities inherent in Ryan Bingham. Yet the conditions of Ryan and Alex's first meeting, grounded as they are in a professed attitude of disinterestedness, may not be enough to galvanize our trust in her (or Ryan, for that matter). But caught adrift as we are, we have little choice but to offer our tacit approval.

The stance of disinterestedness, the sort often feigned by two people intensely interested in one another, seems to be real (and not feigned) for Alex; but is it real for Ryan? Because Ryan meets Alex in Dallas *before* finding out his days up in the air are numbered—at a time, that is, when

he has nothing to lose and everything to gain—we have reason to believe that he signs up for exactly what she does, a relationship of platonic sexual gratification. Alex discloses her intentions right off the bat: “We’re two people who get turned on by elite status. I think cheap is our starting point.” Yet to this statement Ryan does not exactly agree (though he does not exactly disagree). He replies with, “There’s nothing cheap about loyalty,” affirming, in his own right, a peculiar sort of ethic, one that says the world has meaning but that such meaning is cultivated not between two human beings but between a human being and a corporate entity.

What are we to make of Ryan’s awkward endorsement of loyalty, a quality repeatedly reiterated by the slogan of the airline Ryan frequents, not a traditional flag-carrying national but one that features the colours of the American flag prominently in its corporate logo? When Ryan chooses to fly *American*, is he showing loyalty to a country, to a corporation, or both?

The question of loyalty to country—in face of, or in competition with, corporate or business interests—raises the possibility of reading Ryan as “Davos man,” the disinterested and uprooted world citizen with allegiances to no particular nation, only capital. Samuel Huntington excoriated the caricature he coined because such characters make a caricature of existence, which is, on Huntington’s part, a repudiation of nihilism rather than a celebration of it.¹² The irony in using the moniker ‘Davos,’ a definitive place that undermines place, says something about the uprootedness of Davos, a city located in the Swiss alps, itself provincial in a country known for being neutral and the annual meeting place of the G20’s global elite at the World Economic Forum.

The ethic of Davos man is to forgo any conflict rooted in national aspirations in favour of a global international order where universal values are homogenized and human loyalties (to country) papered over. At this level of disinterestedness, human needs are diluted for the sake of fostering a *specific* type of human interest, as though all human interests ought to be subordinate to the principal one of pursuing capital. Hence we can say that Ryan’s valuation of loyalty, the pinnacle of which is symbolized (for him) through the acquisition of ten million American Airlines AAdvantage miles, is too closely aligned to a naked pursuit of capital to be worthy of significance. Furthermore, carrying out such transactions as he does—in a profession requiring little (well, at least brief) real interaction with other human beings—could only be the

expression of a type of human interest that serves to foster a stance that papers over real human needs. So Ryan's moral stance is one of disinterestedness after all.

Yet the reason I believe Ryan has not reached the same level of disinterestedness as Alex—that a true and alarming level of disinterestedness has not solidified in him as it has in her but has, instead, offered up a rival possible moral outcome to that of ultimate disinterestedness—is because, soon enough, the line between personal and professional loyalties, for Ryan, begins to blur. This is not a sign of moral decadence but of human needs hence *not* a weakness. What Ryan banks on is that his valuation of loyalty, mediated though it is by corporate propaganda, is not simply utilitarian. Ryan hopes that the principles that seemingly organize his professional existence *can* instruct him in his personal one because thus far only his work has garnered him any sort of adult education, which, at the very least, has allowed him to cultivate, and hence value, loyalty. Is he demanding too much of his profession? The demand is less in question than the willingness to make it because true disinterestedness means forgoing the need to make demands in the first place, which is a flat-out denial of human (spiritual) needs. Hence we can interpret Ryan's inability to commit not as a denigration of loyalty but as a stance of holding loyalty, as a value, higher than anything he is presently capable of. To commit to a marriage and fail would indeed make him feel cheap. (We do find out from his sister Kara that her parents' marriage failed and that Kara's, and [presumably] Ryan's, mother began calling her new man Jack her "boyfriend," which drove Kara "up the wall" because "boyfriends are for kids.") My final clue for reading into this film an alternative ethic propelling Ryan's existence, and not merely one of disinterestedness, comes when he butts in line at the St. Louis Hilton, to which an impatient customer behind him replies, "He just waltzes in and cuts in line?" only to be silenced by, "We reserve priority assistance for our Hilton Honours members." This is proof that he has some moral standing, for he is later rebuffed in Wisconsin—in the same position this time as the woman he cut in front of earlier—excluded from the line reserved for members of the "Matterhorn Program," another moniker symbolizing the highest peak of disinterestedness in a country of neutrality (Switzerland), a summit Ryan has not yet scaled.

That he chooses Alex, or comes to expect or make demands upon her loyalty, may have more to do with contingencies quite out of his control—say, in his feeling betrayed by the corporate model he has pledged allegiance to. I am not exactly suggesting that it is up to Alex to redeem

Ryan's valuation of loyalty in lieu of his betrayal, though fate does grant her this power (though she may not quite know or be aware of this). What I am saying is that Ryan is still willing to stake a claim in the world, to test out his particular understanding of it, which means he is willing to show an interest in the world rather than disinterest even at risk of being struck down.

So while Ryan has an ethical departure point of sorts, we must ask if Alex can say the same, or if Ryan has, in a way, met his match, some higher version of his supposed best self though merely "with a vagina." Alex clearly has a different ethic than Ryan, one he may, in a sense, both reject and aspire to because Alex *is* being disloyal to her husband and kids, though Ryan, initially, does not know this. Certainly Alex's intent is not to hurt *them* but to satisfy her own desire, the very human need for improvisation. She believes (in fact, has every reason to believe) Ryan "signed up" for the same thing. She made sure, Googling Ryan's profile before meeting him on the cruise ship in Miami, something all "modern girls do when [they] have a crush." She seems more impressed with his credentials than she lets on (though Natalie clearly is not, more on this later). Ryan's professed "philosophy," summarized by his slogan, "What's in your backpack?" *is* one of complete disinterestedness. So, do we have reason to feel, as Ryan does by the end of the movie, betrayed by Alex or don't we?

Despite brutally informing Ryan that he is merely "a parenthesis," Alex ends the exchange by leaving room for further conversation: "If you would like to see me again, then give me a call." Ryan, who has recently acted as mediator to reconcile the possible split of his sister Julie and her future husband, now faces, once again, the validation of a philosophy of disinterestedness, though minus Alex as model to denigrate the value of the quality he has all the while clung to (i.e., loyalty). Rather than follow her lead and insist that everything *is* trivial (other than "family," perhaps, Alex's "real" life—though she has trivialized her family life by refusing to risk it, to make demands upon it), he transfers one million of his miles to the newlywed couple allowing them to travel the world. He validates his own valuation of "loyalty" by preserving its possibility in two other people, which means (on his part) risking betrayal again.

By validating the particular version of loyalty he does—say, of fidelity in marriage—is Ryan (or the film's director) castigating Alex? We know little of what motivates her save for her desire for "escape," believing, as she does, there to be little opportunity for play in the marriage

household and, further, that if one truly desires play, it is better to keep work and play separate. That is, one way to cope with the tricky business of mixing love and work is by refusing to mix them, to compartmentalize each. If this indeed is Alex's strategy, affording herself happiness while living up to her responsibilities as a "grown-up," as though the two are mutually incompatible, then what has occurred is a transvaluation where what was once considered work is now play and what is considered or supposed to be play has become work. How did this happen?

This brings me to the film's commentary on economic necessities and how such necessities factor into our "pursuits of happiness," which means responding to Cavell's elision of economic considerations, though in this case to supplement, rather than take issue with, his original conversation. The outer contingencies surrounding the popularity of the Hollywood romances he discusses more often act as vehicles for dismissing the films in question, disregarded as they often are as "fairy tales for the Depression."¹³ In response, Cavell simply disregards such contingencies—for the sake, that is, of drawing out salient moral lessons. Does this mean that economic concerns have *nothing* to do with the lessons Cavell draws from the films he discusses? Or does this imply, rather, that certain films warrant economic considerations while others do not, or warrant something entirely different, say philosophical consideration exclusively? What are we to make, for example, of *Up in the Air*'s direct engagement with post-Lehman America?

That Jason Reitman took it upon himself to insert "real" testimony of those who lost their jobs, moments of "real life," says that however we wish to talk about the pursuit of happiness in America, we can no longer ignore issues of economic bare necessities, or, at the very least, that we have reached some sort of critical juncture where pursuing happiness is no longer guaranteed because the fabulous wealth of America is no longer accessible to ordinary Americans.

Yet even if we say this film is aware of economic bare necessities, none of its major players must balance economic necessities with happiness. That is, Ryan, Alex, and Natalie do not exactly have to trade off spiritual necessities for economic ones at any point in the film. If the film is primarily about *them*, in what ways are their pursuits of happiness undermined by the pursuit of capital, if at all?

Though she is never desperate for money or a job, we do know that Natalie followed a boy out of college to Omaha, forgoing the better (that is, better paid) part of the American dream for love. We get the sense, once things go sour, that her initial pursuit of love over financial

strength could only be perceived (by her and us) as a childish weakness (Alex is more stunned by Natalie's "confession" in the lobby of the Miami Hilton than Ryan). Ryan, though never directly threatened with unemployment, has spent his entire life out of school chasing ten million miles, a type of capital to the extent that its pursuit allows him to forgo or avoid human commitment and love, what many would consider a rival pursuit of happiness.

But why should romance be the true, or exclusive, pursuit of happiness? Cannot the pursuit of capital be *as* legitimate a pursuit of happiness, particularly in America? I take this question to be posed and answered in the exchange between Ryan, Natalie, and Bob (J.K. Simmons). When Ryan corners Bob in his office in St. Louis, telling him that he abandoned his dreams by leaving French culinary school to start work at 27 grand per year, Ryan may be speaking somewhat presumptuously if Bob's dream all along *was* to make money. Yet Ryan's ploy works. You could argue that nothing Ryan said or did necessarily elicited from Bob his capitulation. If we take Bob's reaction *as* a capitulation, we are forced to conclude that either circumstance or shame forces him into compliance. If you say it is circumstance, that he is at the end of his rope, must make amends somehow, must look on the bright side of things, you are saying that money is not everything and that the pursuit of happiness is *possible* without money. If Bob had responded by saying something like, "Pursuing money has always *been* my dream!" the implications of the statement would not please us. If you say that he has been shamed into compliance, made to understand that he did initially make a deal with the devil and that, since, he has never truly been happy, then you are also saying that the naked pursuit of capital is no excuse to forgo one's dreams. Despite Ryan's authority or lack of it in this case, there is a lesson in this exchange. Pursuing love and not money is what, in the long run, makes *us* happy.

The irony of Ryan advising one thing and doing another is not lost on us if we believe that the accumulation of ten million miles is a "dream" only inasmuch as Ryan's particular professional contingencies have allowed him to dream up such a number in the first place. Natalie confronts Ryan on his "bullshit philosophy" (not unrelated to his accumulation of miles), and Ryan denies it as philosophy at all, calling it merely "a life choice." Ryan may choose to be up in the air, which is to say he may genuinely find happiness with the so-called perks of flying ("the recycled air, the artificial lighting, the digital juice dispensers, the cheap sushi" all

of which remind him he is “home”). Yet he does not choose the isolation (twice he rebuffs the obvious charge, exclaiming “I’m surrounded!”—first to his sister Kara on his cell phone at the Dallas airport, and second to Natalie in the shuttle on the way to the Miami Hilton) because, in a sense, who would choose it?—a recluse, perhaps, though we do not take Ryan to be one. This may be a question, once again, of tradeoffs—that is, the idea that any job that makes us happy brings with it other peripheral contingencies we must deal with and accept. But then, what Ryan’s so-called pursuit of happiness forces us to ask is if there is, or ought to be, particularly in America, a tradeoff for happiness—if the best we can hope for is its partial achievement, either professional *or* personal because it is less than clear, at least in Ryan’s case, that he chooses his lifestyle than has his lifestyle choose his philosophy.

Alex is the only one who does not seem cornered in choosing between love and money and not because she has found happiness but because her version of happiness occurs ancillary to the pursuit of capital. Her marriage, even if not unhappy (we have not the ability to judge), clearly does not provide her with the improvisatory energy she requires to keep her dream of happiness alive. She may be unwilling to throw everything away, like Natalie, for love. In order to avoid the charge of being childish, of wanting play at the expense of responsibility, she keeps her family around and nominates this part of her life—the part she, at least at times, finds stifling—her “real” one. If she also finds work stifling (at times), only work affords her the opportunity not for education (this is not what she craves) but transgression. Ryan makes her no happier than her husband. Alex has judged the world, judged it to contain no man capable of teaching her. This is her state of convalescence, what Cavell might call her “glamorous joylessness.”¹⁴

That Alex is uninterested in education is evident when she invades Ryan’s elementary school, which is ostensibly an invasion of his childhood, the definitive sharing of which is amongst the key criteria for the successful operation and happy resolution of Cavell’s comedies of remarriage. Rather than sharing or acknowledging Ryan’s childhood with him, however, Alex is more interested in “grown-up” affairs, in proving she has crossed the Rubicon of childhood. When Ryan tells her, “I took geography in here,” she replies with, “You ever fool around with one of your teachers?” If this constitutes a form of play, it is the sort meant to make life more trivial, not less, though somehow, more “grown-up.” But to invade a grown man’s childhood, inadvertently or not, is

an invitation to seriousness rather than frivolousness. Alex has misjudged the ground of conversation.

This “invasion” of Ryan’s childhood by Alex may be a misjudgment on my part as well, in my own search for criteria to account for my feelings of loss and separateness with the film’s final *anagnorisis*—I mean the discovery of Alex’s “real” life. I also understand how the discovery of Alex’s betrayal gives the film its particular resonance. Part of saying that *Up in the Air* is a landmark in the genre of American romantic comedies comes in asking ourselves what manner of ending we have, whether happy or sad.

The generic classification of *Up in the Air* as “romantic comedy” seems to necessitate a happy conclusion, and I have touched on how we can read this ending as happy in that the possibility for further conversation, however strained, exists. (“If you would like to see me again, then give me a call.” Both Alex and Ryan forgo retribution of any sort.) Yet because the movie does not end in any traditional “I do’s,” we cannot easily imagine *how* conversation could continue, nor can we imagine any reconstituted or “newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride,”¹⁵ a characteristic, for Northrop Frye, key to the comedic genre. Elsewhere, Frye says that the comedic ending is “generally manipulated by a twist in the plot” hence “do[es] not impress us as true.”¹⁶ What I want to say is that while *Up in the Air* offers us up a radical twist in plot, the ending *does* impress us as true. But how?

I mentioned Alex’s invasion of Ryan’s childhood, a convention that, coming out of Cavell’s discussions of Hollywood romances, seems to entail a happier resolution than the one Jason Reitman gives us. If he provides us with a radical twist in plot, offering up something we do not expect, why do we not feel blindsided enough to take issue with his sleight of hand, as though he has manipulated our understanding and trust of Hollywood filmic conventions? It is one thing to force the moment to its “happy” conclusion. But can we forgive a director for forcing a moment to its unhappy crisis instead?

One way to respond to this would be to say that we should hardly be scandalized by the ending we have. What do we know after said *anagnorisis* anyhow?—that a woman was having an affair with a man. Big deal. When Aristotle says that a plot’s “revolutions and discoveries” are the means by which a tragedy (in particular) becomes “most interesting,”¹⁷ he seems to be talking about said discoveries in the manner of a caper, so that in moving from the unknown to the known, the

knowledge we are suddenly privy to seems out of the ordinary so as to elicit awe and wonder. Yet the reason *Up in the Air* works as a comedy and not a tragedy is because however devastating we take Alex's betrayal of Ryan to be, we can hardly quip that it is out of the ordinary. We may be caught, for whatever reason, as flat-footed as Ryan, but this may be to say simply that Ryan too, despite being *in* the film we have the pleasure of watching from without, is taken in by the same generic conventions we are, which is to say, further, that the language America speaks leads him to believe that union with Alex is possible. He chooses, in the end, not to be scandalized by his own expectations, the surest sign of his humanity. That is, if we are often betrayed or hoodwinked by love, to retaliate by denying our need for spiritual bare necessities, pursuing instead disinterested commercial gain, removes from America, or jeopardizes, one of her astonishing cultural achievements: the invention of a new consciousness, a new woman (and hence man) contingent on a pursuit of happiness occurring outside of bare economic considerations. To those who do not have a choice, that is, to those who *must* pursue money for a chance at happiness, something of the promise of America, of her ability to provide her citizens with the freedom to decide what a true "pursuit of happiness" ought to be, begins to diminish especially when those who have the opportunity begin to abandon the dream in droves because they are too afraid of being perceived as childish, of being hoodwinked by the language they speak. At stake is nothing less than the story of America, or the history of America, wedged as it is between competing claims to its greatness, as testament either to its commercial or cultural dominance.

So what are we afraid of discovering exactly? That more often than not we covet wealth and not love? Or perhaps that we covet wealth because we find love inaccessible to us, that the "romantic" conversation America demands does not suit us? The disinterested pursuit of capital then becomes *the* story of America because no other can be found. If this is the sort of discovery the film makes, the ending we require could only be unhappy, not to flaunt convention but to move us to ask what we are reasonably allowed to expect—from a movie and hence, from our own lives—when we suddenly discover the language we speak to be inadequate to our experience or want of the world. That is, neither Alex nor Ryan nor Natalie can be accused, in the end, of being childish. They are all grown-ups. All of them have grown up. Are any of them happy?

In winding down, let us turn to one of the seven movies Cavell discusses in *Pursuits of Happiness*, and that is *The Philadelphia Story* (1940),¹⁸ the movie that, to my mind, speaks most to *Up in the Air* because where Katherine Hepburn is surrounded and pursued by two leading men in the former, George Clooney is surrounded by two leading women in the latter. If *The Philadelphia Story* is about Tracy Lord's (Katharine Hepburn) conversion or achievement of said new consciousness, I take *Up in the Air* to be about reclaiming such consciousness after, somehow, competing claims of commerce and culture risk making the noted achievement seem trivial, as though the story of America could never be about anything other than the rabid pursuit of wealth.

The first item on our agenda is to ask whether, or why, the achieved new consciousness of American cinema must now pass through the mind of a man, in this case, Ryan Bingham. One answer could be that the pacification or feminization of the American male in Hollywood has achieved, or demands, an apotheosis. Who better to take up the role more convincingly than George Clooney? The increasing polarization of America, between its commerce and culture, its active and passive elements, its masculine and feminine registers, its reality and fictions, courts madness. For America to survive, conversation between opposing poles must always be possible. If the truth of America is housed somewhere in the extraordinary truth of union (of man and woman, i.e., of male and female), itself to be taken up by the ordinary act of holy matrimony, in whatever (formal or informal) capacity, what America requires is ground for conversation.

The Philadelphia Story, which ends with at least one pair of "I do's," affords us the happy resolution we expect, that of C.K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) and Tracy Lord. Yet the surrounding contingencies that allow their matrimony to happen are worth scrutinizing if only because it seems the ending we are given *is* restrained by generic conventions; the ending of *Up in the Air*, on the other hand, grossly transgresses such conventions. Each, however, makes use of a dramatic "twist in plot."

First, *The Philadelphia Story*. The scene of interest is the final one, when all parties have had their say and we are left with two men, two women, but three possible pairings. That is, both C.K. Dexter Haven and Macaulay Connor (James Stewart) have designs on marrying Tracy. Macaulay Connor says as much despite the presence of his longtime partner, Liz:

MACAULAY CONNOR: Will you marry me, Tracy?
 TRACY LORD: No, Mike. Thanks, but hmm-mm. Nope.
 MACAULAY CONNOR: I've never asked a girl to marry me. I've avoided it. But you've got me all confused now. Why not?
 TRACY LORD: Because I don't think Liz would like it. And I'm not sure you would. And I'm even a little doubtful about myself. But I am beholden to you, Mike. I'm most beholden.

Say what you want about the cruelty or courage of Macaulay Connor, but in the aftermath of his professed desire to marry Tracy, we have no reason to believe that Liz *ought* to accept the outcome as Tracy has dictated, as though Macaulay only sees her (Liz's) worth after Tracy has pointed him in the right direction. This is a cynical reading and a misreading too, the sort that denies the exchange between competing claims to significance. If Tracy is desirable to Macaulay because she is of a higher social class, does this a priori deny the possibility of her happy union with Macaulay? If we say class considerations (on the part of Macaulay anyhow) should have *nothing* to do with the possibility, then we are denying that people from different social classes ought to talk to one another. This is far more dangerous to me—leads to more stratification, not less—than forgiving Macaulay for his transgression, which Liz is (happily) willing to do.

Macaulay's failure to value Liz outside of, or prior to, Tracy's mediation is not a failure at all if we expect further dialogue between Macaulay and Liz anyhow. Generic constraints may prevent any immediate dialogue (between Liz and Macaulay) because the happy resolution we want, within the temporal constraints we are under, necessitates Liz's immediate compliance rather than a prolonged one. Certainly we want Liz to accept Macaulay, but perhaps not without a fight; there is room in the world for childishness and play.

So George Cukor, for expediency's sake, reins in Liz's (legitimate) childishness, twisting his plot to get the ending both he and we want. Jason Reitman, on the other hand, twists the plot to get an ending we could never want in a million years. In doing so, he is speaking to *The Philadelphia Story*, particularly if we take that movie to be doing what Cavell takes it to be doing:

For *The Philadelphia Story*, I am about to claim that its conversation more narrowly focuses...on the question of America, on whether America has achieved its new human being, its more perfect union and its domestic tranquility, its new birth of freedom, whether it has been successful in securing the pursuit of happiness, whether it is earning the conversation it demands.¹⁹

I do not say that these questions are being posed directly in *Up in the Air*, even if the answers are entirely obvious. What *Up in the Air* asks is—lacking the answers we want, or faced with ones we cannot bear—can America survive?

A final quotation here from Cavell, discussing *The Philadelphia Story* and Matthew Arnold's influence on America's notions of "pursuits of happiness," the achievement of her "best self," and the civilizational ramifications of the project (continually) at hand:

The rule of the best self is the source of the new authority for which Arnold is seeking, the authority of what he calls culture, of what another might call religion, the answer to our narcissism and anarchy....He distinguishes two forms of culture or authority, the two historical forces still impelling us on the quest for perfection or salvation; he names them Hebraism and Hellenism. "The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*." The world "ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them."...The more one ponders what Arnold is driving at, the more one will be willing to say, I claim, that Dexter Hellenizes...while Tracy Hebraizes....Now here is what the marriage in *The Philadelphia Story* comes to, I mean what it fantasizes. It is a proposed marriage or balance between Western culture's two forces of authority, so that American mankind can refine its object, the dedication to a more perfect union, toward the perfected human community, its right to the pursuit of happiness.²⁰

The neat stratification of historical forces in respective characters is a luxury that *The Philadelphia Story* can afford but one that has no business in *Up in the Air*. If Tracy clearly Hebraizes, and Dexter Hellenizes, what can we say about their twenty-first century stand-ins, if we take Vera Farmiga as stand-in for Katharine Hepburn and George Clooney as stand-in for Cary Grant? The only one in *Up in the Air* who most clearly Hellenizes is Alex, largely unencumbered by any "philosophy" or deductive claim to authority. But her trivializing of life is not quite what Arnold

has in mind when he lauds the “spontaneity of consciousness.” The key is in discussion between the two types, something Alex is uninterested in; while open to conversation, strictness of conscience does not appeal to her in the least. So despite his philosophy, George Clooney (Ryan Bingham) is the only one straddling the two worlds of Hebraism and Hellenism, which is a greater claim to the title of philosopher than Cary Grant (C.K. Dexter Haven) can command and a suitable point of departure to begin to think of George Clooney as America’s true leading man.

Ryan’s straddling of worlds begins not when he meets Alex but when his sister Kara asks him to take photos of a cutout of his other sister and her fiancée in front of so-called American monuments. Specifically, he is to travel to Las Vegas to take a shot of the Luxor hotel, a structure meant to mirror the architectural characteristics of the Great Pyramid at Giza hence symbolizing an Americanized version of Hebraism, though one mediated more by the strictness and discipline of commerce than conscience. Also significant might be when Ryan asks Kara about the relevance of the task (of taking said photographs in front of said monuments—“Why?” he asks), his sister responds by saying, “Because it’s Julie’s wedding and she thinks it would be fun, does it matter why?” Before this explicit appeal to improvisation, Kara also qualifies the task by appealing to “that gnome in the French movie.”

The film in question, Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Amélie* (2001), set in Paris, may be reinforcing claims that Paris, and not Athens, is the new centre for spontaneity while New York stands as the new centre of Hebraism. The gnome in *that* film clearly travels to America (to New York, actually), and then to the Acropolis in Greece. The film, a validation of improvisation and introspection, ends with a happy union, conspicuously lacking, however, any formal “I do’s.” This may be because formal vows do not suit the improvisational atmosphere of certain Parisian quarters. But if *Amélie* is speaking to *Up in the Air*, the former could only serve as reminder that the pursuit of a certain kind of happiness (commercial happiness) risks stifling the spontaneity of consciousness upon which a more perfect union depends, though Alex’s nihilistic Hellenizing is not much better. What is the danger here? The danger is in her compartmentalizing of each.

Moreover, the grotesqueness of Natalie Keener’s workflow (which Ryan asks her about on the plane ride to St. Louis just before offering up his version of their job description)—designed, of course, to compartmentalize human communication—carries the suggestion that a business

model can, or ought to, negotiate our day-to-day dealings with one another. This represents a dangerous slide towards a stifling Hebraism, as though *all* human transgressions can be accounted for and acknowledged simply by following the steps of some standard operating procedure. Is this the best possible way to deal with human resentment—to farm them off to disinterested market specialists whom we pay to make up for our moral shortcomings? Is it better to be beholden to other forces or other people? What *Up in the Air* compels us to ask is whether commercial pursuits can shield us from the direct sunlight of our real resentments, whether or not we can risk conversation with one another without installing the complex apparatus of economic exchange and technology in the interstice. If we cannot, then clearly the only story of America that matters is the one that describes her rise to commercial dominance. If we can (i.e., *must*), we are saying that culture and improvisation matter in the fight against anarchy and that American movies may be far more sensitive, straddled as they are between outer commercial restraints and their own inner aesthetic concerns, to issues concerning not only the nature of the American dream, but also, of America's current dire reality.

NOTES

1. Despite a lack of any technological capability, the possible human encroachment upon the skies is explored in the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel. The moral urgency of such an encroachment is discussed in James Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 121–130. Kugel notes that the construction was seen by God as the human “storming of heaven.” Once again, this film depicts similar moral concerns, construed not as a “storming of heaven,” but as asking what business we have “up in the air”?—which is to ask what business we have pursuing the technological capabilities we do.
2. René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996), 108–109.
3. The seven films Cavell discusses are *The Lady Eve* (1941), *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *His Girl Friday* (1940), *Adam's Rib* (1949), and *The Awful Truth* (1937).
4. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 5.
5. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 5.

6. "All the things you probably hate about travelling—the recycled air, the artificial lighting, the digital juice dispensers, and mini pizzas stacked to their heat lamps, are the warm reminders that I am home."
7. Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 98.
8. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 17.
9. George Grant, "The Computer does not Impose on us the Way it should be Used," in *The Collected Works of George Grant*, vol. 4, edited by Arthur Davis and Henry Roper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 283.
10. Grant, "Computer," 283.
11. Grant, "Computer," 284.
12. Samuel P. Huntington, "Dead Souls: The Denationalization of the American Elite," *The National Interest*, no. 75 (2004): 5–18.
13. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 2.
14. Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Belknap Press, 2005), 126.
15. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 192.
16. Frye, *Anatomy*, 170.
17. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, edited by T.A. Moxon (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1943), 16.
19. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 152–153.
20. Arnold's emphasis, quoted in Cavell, *Pursuits*, 158–159.

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