



We're waltzing in the wonder of why we're here
Time hurries by, we're here, and gone.
'Dancing in the Dark' (Howard Dietz)

Is it possible to be a movie lover while maintaining an adversarial view toward cinematic images of luxury? Is this not the essence of bad faith: to greet the glittering spoils that await us at every turn in movie narratives with a displeased, repudiating eye? The light of film seems a light most propitious for materially enhanced dreams of life, dreams of splendor through which one can unfretfully navigate. The possibilities for having in abundance are always near at hand on-screen. In a recent hymn to unthinking luxury, *It's Complicated* (Nancy Meyers, 2009), the most pressing complication is whether Meryl Streep's character will get the gigantic kitchen renovation to which her hard work and stoically graceful aging entitle her. The promise of replenishment of temporarily threatened material benefits, so that a character's final state exceeds in good fortune all previous ones, is a primary engine of film (as well as literary) narrative. Even destitution can readily acquire a gemlike sparkle in the edifice of cinema illusion. Opulence is so much the natural fabric of screened events that even its stark absence carries with it a suggestion of hidden presence. The word film quite literally indicates a veiling, and what is veiled is a treasure house of marvels. At any moment the 'open sesame' may be whispered and visible phenomena, however humble the particulars, made to shine like a pearl without price.

The privations of poverty, such as those, early on in film history, of Chaplin's beloved tramp, carry their own secure signs of adventurer's luck and the hospitality of

circumstance. We can see a disguised luxury in the tramp's fated convergence with waif princesses, whose romantic perfection is unnoticed by others, in need of the assistance he is magically capable of providing. The lonely, uncertain roads down which the tramp so often jauntily sets off point always in the direction of a gracious openness, endless adaptability in response to whatever may transpire, and a removal of all the encumbrances that impede free-spirited living. Millionaires as well as tramps are identically concerned with the artful lifting of life's burdens. Comic mis-haps for Chaplin become a function of grace, and the tramp's expressive gaze appears at once plaintively anonymous and so rich and 'well-connected' that (through the camera's collaborative sorcery) it can enter with one stroke into the souls of a multitude of beholders.

Guy Debord, no lover of cinema, sees its surfeit of lures as nothing more than a cunning trap, that we dare not embrace or mistake for authentic, edifying pleasure. The signs of luxury do not promote genuine connection but rather servitude to a much larger 'spectacle', a machinery of pernicious deceptions which impoverish and negate 'real life'. 'Materially', he writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the spectacle is as dead as the flow of money which turns 'need against life' ([1967] 1995: 151). What is most worth finding at the movies, Debord's fiery prophetic voice informs us, is how the medium functions as part of the vast monolith of spectacle. Spectacle is an interlocking system without seam or chink which devours all capacity to respond unpathologically to the real. Apparently, the real was long ago a human birthright and some sort of 'unity'; it was a ground we might actually occupy in good faith with a 'common language' before the mediation of images displaced it. He

posits a lost realm of community existing prior to the triumph of exchange value, commodity abundance and mechanical accumulation of goods, a community that has many affinities with the Eden of Genesis. (Maybe alcohol, for Debord, was the sacred water of this past age.) Spectacle

erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the *real presence* of the falsehood of appearances. The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality, is thus drawn into a form of madness in which by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate. The recognition and consumption of commodities are at the core of this pseudo-response to a communication to which no response is possible (153).

We are fundamentally 'dispossessed', according to Debord, thrust by the magical devices of spectacle which own us (and thereby disown us) to the threadbare 'margins of existence'. In Debord's unappeasable lament, we can detect the beginning of apparatus theory and all the subsequent suspicion-fuelled renunciations of taking pleasure in the film image. Who would wish, after all, to fall prey (blindly) to all the siren-songs of commodity worship, and the mesmerisingly false organization of appearances that turns us, stupefied dupes, away from our real needs? Those needs have been so obscured by the 'alien powers' of representation that we can no longer recognise, much less freely imagine, them. Debord declares that madness is our lot, but speaks of forms of madness so loosely and abstractly that any kind of adjustment to the demands of spectacle will qualify.

A great many theories owe their initially revelatory force and their later staying power to their apocalyptic finality – a totalising negation that eschews loopholes or practical remedies. There is a religious dimension and, of course, an ethical underlay to Debord's tormented diagnosis. It is as though all the magical devices that hold our minds and senses captive occupy not only a deeper level of Plato's cave, but also precisely adhere to the ancient logic of Satanic temptation. The more we trust to pleasing appearances and acquiesce to their glistening wiles, the more we recapitulate Adam's curse. Pleasures supplied by spectacle poison the remnants of our humanness, and strengthen our affiliation with the commodity-fetishist damned. Debord's perspective suggests that there is, or might be (if we were Guy Debord) a lingering value in 'seeing through', 'seeing past' the totalitarian lie that constitutes all visual representations under the regime of spectacle. But the 'seeing through' can only be attained by those who have, by some sort of ideological purifying grace, utterly disengaged, like ascetic saints in desert caves, from any emotional commitment to the various optical treacheries of visual representation. Debord's faith is in 'lost communities', not in individuals appraising what is on offer in art experience for themselves. The individual imagination has no capacity that Debord acknowledges for putting the things it apprehends to potentially enriching use. (I have deliberately chosen a luxury adjective.) Debord is persuaded that he can see what is *there* on-screen in advance (because he knows how the spectacle operates in relation to movie images), with no need to concern himself with particular instances. His freedom from the delusive mists of particularity comes from his secure grasp of the overall logic of spectacle. The imagination – even of the skillful, canny anarchist – cannot trust the image to

benefit him, to show him anything worth cultivating. The best that can be hoped for is a successful unearthing of more clues about how the reality-devouring spectacle tyrannises or stifles perception.



Guy Debord would not tarry over the swank, transparently hollow mystery of Marlene Dietrich, near the beginning of Frank Borzage's *Desire* (1936) posing as a wealthy woman, admiring a string of pearls that the owner of a high end Paris jewellery business, brings out from its case for her consideration. ('The tears of mermaids', the owner exclaims, in an effort to characterise their beauty.) It would not matter in the least to Debord that the woman Dietrich plays is a thief who will soon steal it for as yet undivulged narrative purposes. But perhaps we can afford to be intrigued ourselves by her knowing half-smiles, her playful collusion with the language, so easily sexualised, of wanting something expensive, and the manner in which she expertly extricates herself from the wary, bamboozled owner, making her exit – purloined necklace in hand – with a natural aristocrat's authority. When she next appears, she is driving a large open-to-the-air vehicle, already embarked on a carefree getaway. Why should our gaze not be entranced by Dietrich's confidence at the wheel and her reckless high spirits? What might we be missing if our curiosity fails to be ignited by what she is up to? What values might be drawn into play in the process of finding out? The pearls are unarguably a component of spectacle – whether of Debord's sort or the less immediately sinister spectacle of a familiar kind of movie adventure. What they aren't, however, is an object with a fixed meaning or a settled narrative function.

However stubbornly one seeks to dwell on issues of rightful or wrongful possession, vanity, waste, and the false system (let's call it capitalism) which spawns all manner of inequities and thrives on carefully nurtured oppressive longings, the pearls will not stand still. They are an object that circulates in Borzage's movie space and time with a hide-and-seek elusiveness. The pearls are repeatedly subjected to metaphoric conversion (and an even wider play of analogy) as the self-possessed thief becomes vulnerable to other claims and interests and forms of sympathy and love. (Surely not all forms of sympathy that develop in the wake of covetousness are automatically 'forms of madness'.) We are immediately asked, after being led into the story's jewellery establishment, to form an idea of what pearls of various kinds are worth, as well as to differentiate between the idea of assigned value and the seemingly separate idea of the pearls themselves. What are these pearls really all about? What is the range of responses and associations that



can be fitted to them as we sense they are about to be pressed into service as a thief's toy? Dietrich insists to the store's proprietor that she can skip over considerations of price and concentrate instead on a child's headstrong wanting. 'I want them and I mean to have them. I want to wear them tonight.' In fact, she wants to make off with them and sell them as quickly as possible. The viewer is caught up (or invited to be) in the ingenious machinations by which Dietrich deceives a not easily deceived store owner and robs him with silken discretion. Dietrich's persuasive impersonation of a woman of means and distinctive aristocratic clout show how arbitrary and capable of slippage the signs of such a position are. Throughout her scenes of playacting the role of an idle shopper, with unlimited resources, she moves in and out of assumptions and attitudes that have little to do with her motives or character as a thief. She exhibits these faked assumptions to us playfully, and they parallel the exhibition of the pearls alongside them.



What counts for me as a necessary value in watching the many images of pearls being handled, worn, desired, passed, with admirable deceit, from one figure's keeping to another, is our fluid imagination of them. We can pick up and let go of these phantom pearls in a variety of ways, as do the characters with whom they come in contact. They can seem momentous and trivial, an item worth holding onto or losing, bargaining over, or voluntarily surrendering. Movies are as adept at varying the emotional size of objects as they are the size of faces and gestures. If one refuses a movie's invitation to let an object become mobile and fluid, and instead holds onto a settled in advance view of what it *must* stand for, one may well be imprisoned in a needlessly self-limiting mode of thought. There are affinities between a



hoarded determination to negate before actually looking at something (or allowing oneself to be shown what it might, under these imagined conditions, express) and the fixed stare of the miser. No one's sense of the heaped coins is more intractable or less able to be loosened up than his.

In a famous passage from the opening paragraph of the 'Where I Lived, and What I Lived For' chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau invokes the season of life when we consider every spot we pass as a suitable site for our dwelling.

I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price on it, – took everything but a deed of it – took his word for his deed, for I dearly love to talk, – cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. [...]. Wherever I sat, there might I live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly ([1854] 1984: 125).

In this fantasia of punning and metaphoric conversions (what are deeds, after all, or a farmer's premises, or kinds of cultivation, or surveying or radiating?) Thoreau demonstrates his enormous skill at outwitting thoughts of property and ownership. Above all, perhaps, he asserts his freedom to walk away from all his pleasurable transactions empty handed. Yet equally crucial to the passage's power is Thoreau's boundless trust in his imagination. It allows him to occupy any state of mind he chooses, without real dangers of getting stuck or contaminated by the possibilities that briefly entrance him. He inwardly situates himself within a place he both borrows and lays claim to. From that assumed position he measures the relation of this new holding to who he is. He may find that it is 'dear' in two senses at once: precious and too costly to maintain for more than a short stay. A thing can be imaginatively within easy reach while still too exorbitant for his abiding needs. He mentally goes through the process of purchasing each farm that he 'surveys' in his general neighborhood, leading his readers to wonder afresh what it means to acquire things on friendly spiritual terms. Thoreau estimates future payments that a rambling speculator such as himself would have to keep making were he to hold fast to ownership, and 'settle in' to fixed arrangements. How easily a farmer's acres shade into

the premises by which he lives. Thoreau loosely commits himself to the sort of quicksilver deeds that a farmer and he can fashion in the midst of conversation. Such deeds are valuable but in no sense binding on either party. Mild inquiries result in a sufficient yield for the visitor, Thoreau, who readily owns up to whatever exerts an appeal. A connection is cultivated, then broken off, with the farmer free to carry on with his own stake in property confirmed, and Thoreau content to harvest the landscape that always 'radiates' from his gaze and free standing position. Thoreau can taste the 'wild apples' contentedly while traversing the farmer's premises. He believes he has metaphors that, if taken in, can overturn others' settled thoughts, but at the same time is eager to extend his separate perceptions in a neighborly spirit. There is no discomfort in being refused, or misunderstood. Thoreau's deed to the place he occupies is ceded at the moment of leave-taking, once he has had enough 'stimulation' from others' claims and company.

We seem to have drifted far afield from luxury and cinema spectacle here, but perhaps we can return to these matters swiftly if we consider Thoreau's stance as that of an ideal movie spectator. He has counsel for those who worry about a movie's temptations to indulge excessively, say, in fantasies of belonging and ownership. And while we're at it let's blithely remove some of the facile negative weight of Debord's picture of the movie image. Instead of conceiving the image as freighted with meretricious, ill-gotten goods, I would like to propose a counter-image of cinema largesse. Largesse implies magnanimous giving, a plentiful outpour. And if we ask who is the beneficiary of the sumptuous dispensation of moving pictures (and their accompanying sounds) one could proclaim, with Emersonian extravagance, each potential viewer as the beneficiary on a potentially equal footing. The things that the camera registers and transmits, shot by shot, are not available somewhere off-screen in an equivalent form; they do not correspond to a possessable, material reality that matches up to it and can be 'had' on decisively different terms. The contents of filmed reality are chiefly of interest because they *become* something different in acquiring narrative function and narrative expressiveness. What one is concerned with, therefore, is, in Stanley Cavell's memorable phrase, 'what becomes of things on film' (1978). The screened result of the camera's beholding (after much additional layering and arrangement) exchanges the solidity and thereness of phenomena for a dreamlike archipelago of appearances, trustworthy and deceptive in equal measure. The sense of *having* the screen image before us involves the recognition of its purely conditional presence: one absorbs and then lets go. One can't put things to the test of touch or perceptual constancy. Things don't remain where we last saw them. One withdraws from the force of movie images, usually, with Thoreauvian ease, as though we have stayed in their presence long enough. At times, of course, parting company is a little harder, accompanied by ruefulness, a lingering trance, or even a need to be cleansed of something repugnant. But suppose the seeming largesse is but an outpouring of garbage, synthetic salesmanship for the eyes, a glowing feast of falsehood. Stanley Cavell offers the strongest succinct answer to this recurring worry and the skepticism it fosters. There is, in his judgment, no sure knowing ahead of time what a movie experience has to offer us in the way of value. Until we have submitted ourselves to a film experience we cannot know what we might be led, imaginatively, to make of it. There is quite simply no *telling* without a willingness to risk engagement, to open one's eyes to an untried experience. Images of wealth, like any other sort of images, can 'bear

interest' and bring returns of an unforeseeable, incalculable nature. The challenge is to recognise that the form of film, which nearly always entails a continual changing of views, is the guide to how a spectator's involvement ideally might work.

The metaphoric flow of things in a good film experience allows our own 'too settled' relation to the world of appearances to be productively blurred, and, if understanding is to occur, steadily revised. Things keep returning to us in movies, demanding further consideration. It is about opening ourselves up repeatedly to objects and their associations that we think we have already seen and worked through. Movie largesse is worth receiving only if we recognise that every gift that comes our way may have to be opened many times. The difficulty of this process arises when the conversion of images 'out there' seems to require some comparable conversion in our relation to ourselves. We want to move in movies, and expect the vitality of movement to bear us along, but where our ideas and habits of mind are concerned we are more inclined to resist flux. There is a comfort in firm, fixed positions: a stable perspective is often confused with a mature one. We are drawn to movement – outside as well as within – and we are attracted to conversions (the heady promise of change) though we avoid those that make us suffer. Could our trust of images that flow and dissolve be extended in such a way that a shift or shattering of some portion of our internal edifice might be not only conceivable, but sought after? It may be a matter of discovering more of ourselves than we hitherto acknowledged *in* what we see. Sometimes we have the sense of moving past ourselves, and feeling a distance – troubling, possibly, as much as welcome – between where we have started and where, confusingly, we have arrived. Yet perhaps we resist any such disruptive alteration. Yes, we flow along in a film, but we are sure we can collect ourselves afterwards just as we were, like an amnesiac restored to memory and resuming his former life on the old basis.

'Ho', we read in the book of Isaiah, 'every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price' (55:1). These are spiritual waters to be sure, where if the 'one who thirsts' is to heed the summons, he must first acknowledge himself as a poor man or woman, someone in need of what is freely offered. Acknowledging that one's standing is no different from those who have nothing can be a difficult shift for a so-called 'person of means'. Such a person might need to distinguish himself from the beggar even on pain of exclusion from bounty. Replenishment of a self-surpassing sort awaits him who acknowledges his thirst and allows it to be quenched. He must believe that the waters are there, and that he requires them as much as anyone else who 'thirsteth'. And that the 'water' will raise him above no beggar who comes to drink beside him. Thoreau composes a secular Bible in *Walden*, filled with sacred remnants in its ceaseless tropes, its overarching injunction that conversion can happen whenever one sees or truly imagines or acts. True acting entails dissolving one's action immediately, leaving it behind rather than making it into a monument, an expression of will. When Thoreau 'surveys' the surrounding landscape, he is trusting to a more profitable merger between what is outside and what is inside. In his own mind, he can drink his fill at every moment of perception, and thereby renew himself. The landscape to which he holds permanent deed is the one that radiates from his consciousness wherever his eye alights. He quickens to a fresh state of internal possession, of flowing outward to find himself in a 'rich and



strange' relation to where he is right now. Soon he will stand elsewhere. Whatever is taken up can be returned – and once relinquished it can be happily left behind, left to its own devices. And we can shed ourselves, like an old skin, as readily as we move from one state of chimerical possessing to another.

The film I previously cited for its combination of Marlene Dietrich and pearls and thieving is fittingly called, for our present purposes, *Desire*. Behind the title and credits of this 1930s romantic comedy we are shown a partial figure of a woman, visible from her neck to just below her breasts, who seems in the final stages of dressing herself for a formal occasion. She wears a spaghetti-strapped evening gown, so airy and diaphanous it might be mistaken for a slip. Initially a black gauze veil or wrap appears part of her finery, but it disappears from view in the first of a series of almost imperceptible dissolves. The printed credits themselves offer a second level of covering. Were they not present, we would have an even keener impression of the woman's near nakedness. The posed figure has a pre-Production Code audacity. The main action of this teasing curtain raiser is the woman's handling of her elaborate string of shimmering pearls as she delays the decision of fastening them to her neck and thus completing the process of getting ready. We watch as the pearls move from one of her hands to the other, and she often looks as though she is feeling the delicious weight of the treasure as it pours down slowly into her open palm. One suspects that the woman is facing a mirror, which doubles as the movie screen. As the dissolves continue – always at a fixed camera distance – we become more mindful of the woman's heavy, matching jeweled bracelets, which resemble manacles, on her wrists, and the rings adorning the fingers of one hand.

One of Simone Weil's best known, pithily trenchant formulations is that 'two forces rule the world: light and gravity' ([1947] 2004: 1). In combination the two words can hardly avoid taking on contrasting moods and ethical weights. The light in this pairing might initially suggest an airy festiveness, accompanied perhaps by fragility, a soap bubble iridescence and fleetingness. Weil, of course, has in mind (additionally and preeminently) the light of grace operating in mysterious concert with the light of the sun,

which invisibly insures – through quiet ministration – that things buried in the ground will rise toward light. The word gravity, when sounded after light, instantly sinks away from it, positioning itself well below brightness: the effortless, tranquil billowing, say, of laundry in the wind. It carries us, with remarkable swiftness, to the immovable precincts of death, to burdens that can't be lifted, to the brute strength and staying power of tragedy.

Desire's title sequence, in keeping with the ever-gathering energy and attractively insatiable yearning of the word desire, seems to create a space of transition between Weil's two ruling forces, light and gravity. If we elect to set aside (with Guy Debord rigor) the film's advertised promise of comedy and the sometimes plush, bauble-filled security that goes with it, we might be tempted to say that the opening images offer a barbed critique of opulence. Or if we credit Hollywood productions with very little self-awareness in these matters, we might argue for an *unwitting* critique, that our commendable suspicion can expose. The woman, after all, is headless, making her upper torso into an impersonal display case for suffocatingly excessive expenditure. There are simply too many adornments in view, and the jeweled manacles, in particular, weigh down the hands that aspire to express casual lightness and grace. The playing with the pearls before donning them can readily convey a hypnotic faith in their supreme value, to which the effaced human stands in the servant's role, becoming present to herself, as an object, only when the pearls are affixed to her neck. Once fastened they supply a face of their own, more real than the withheld person presumably gazing at her own spectacle and the *effect* it produces.

Yet flowing alongside this not quite coalesced critique is a playful mystery, properly attuned to the veilings and unveilings of desire itself. We are invited to form impressions – in a sunny, even frivolous spirit – of value, use, postponement, gratification, indecision, suffering, and surrender. By removing the woman's head from view, the framed image transfers the work of deliberation and feeling to the hands, which not only have the ability to hold the pearls, weigh them up and shift them from one side to the other, but also to evaluate the risks and liabilities of giving in to them. As the woman delays attaching the pearls, fondles them,



and by implication regards them, we feel a mental struggle taking shape. She seems to be inquiring what the pearls mean to her and what she may have to forego if she keeps them and overcomes her hesitation and wears them. The hands manage to transcend the weight of their bracelets and delectably prolong the fantasy of playing with the beads and watching them shimmer. At one point the woman raises the pearls in a clump toward her face and the closing fist seems arrested and pierced by a memory. This brief, implicitly painful recollection likely involves loss and leads her to recognise – for at least a moment or two – the encumbrances of her present masquerade. The pearls, as the briefly free agent of desire, appear to be arguing with the rest of her costume, challenging (if you like) the intention to disguise something that might better be left ‘out in the open’. The pearls appear to say, in their own right, that they prefer to remain a toy, preserving their natural link with a *child’s* desire for beads on a string that somehow glow. They are pretty and they yield a simple, basic pleasure while they are being played with. As long as they are in transit, hand to hand, they oppose, to a palpable degree, the fixity of the woman’s other adornments. The woman could even deserve to have them as long as she resists their more serious temptations. As she finally resigns herself to restoring them to their expected place on her neck, they convert to the language of fixity. We can feel, glancingly rather than oppressively, the trap of completion. Her hands move down between her breasts to somehow reinforce the pearls’ hoped-for, settled meaning as a sign of desire. This woman, of arguably too weighty and glacial substance, imprisons herself in the act of finishing dressing – making herself presentable, but on dubious terms. This masquerade may no longer speak to her authentic needs, if in fact it ever did. The spirit of fun curdles at the prospect of propriety enforced. She becomes an effigy for others, and vanquishes her doubts that there is any other way open to her.

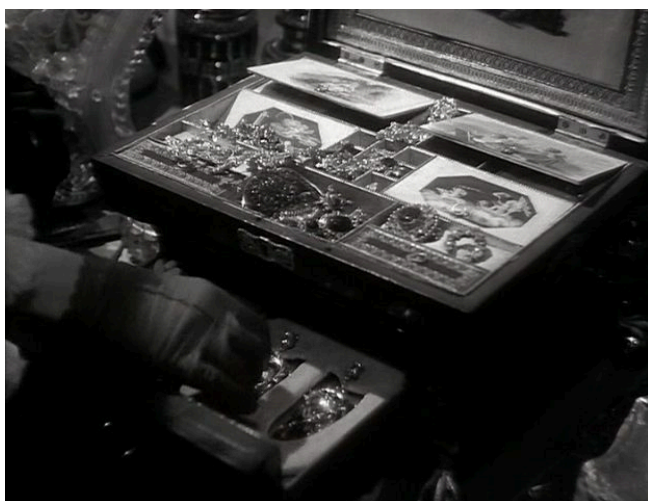
The very fluidity of the presentation doesn’t allow for our grasping what we are shown in a manner that certifies the force of gravity over lightness. We have no firm purchase here on conclusiveness, in spite of the pearl necklace coming to rest. The stream of metaphor works more like a hand placed in a running brook in order to feel the current. There is a nice disjunction between the eye’s field of action and the hand’s in this stream testing. The mind must make its own effort to unite the two fields into a unified ‘picture’. Throughout the *Desire* title sequence, the musical accompaniment remains serene: a jaunty waltz that encircles us while all the fancy handwork with the pearls transpires. We emerge from this teaser episode slightly dizzy, with incomplete rumination and no pearls of our own. Spectator desire persists in keeping alive the sense of incompleteness. We have not solved the mystery of the woman’s narrative. It lingers in the air after her finalising gesture. We desire a narrative in which phantom pearls will take us, and the characters who are attached to them, to surprising places. And the pearls belong to no character in the narrative more fully, or more legitimately, than they belong to each individual spectator. The pearls are there mainly for viewers to try out, to put on (if we wish to possess them, imaginatively) and take off. They are whatever our imagination ultimately makes of them – through their successive appearances and disappearances. And when we are done with what we have surveyed, we walk away like Thoreau, unencumbered. We are at leisure to let our mind play further with any images and patterns we will. Our fingers, Thoreau assures us, need not be ‘burned by actual possession’ ([1854] 1984: 126). Inward conversion might happen if we rejoice in our

lack of encumbrance. The pearls dissolve. We have no further need of them. Our imaginations can carry us very far without our being bound by the *gravity* of inescapable facts.

To stay a while longer with the plight and emotionally shifting weight of jewels, let us turn our attention to the celebrated earrings of Mme. De., from Max Ophuls’ 1953 masterpiece. Certainly there is no more famous luxury item in film history than these costly trinkets. Ophuls creates an intricate moral itinerary for them that commences with the expansive travelling shot of his opening, and ends, in death and commemoration arrest, with their stark, under glass preservation in a Church. We are introduced to the earrings in a jewellery box viewed at close range, before we meet



their owner. A preliminary title card informs us that Louise, a woman comfortably ensconced in a life of upper class leisure, was someone who might have been destined for a ‘simple, uncomplicated existence. Probably nothing would have happened to her were it not for these jewels.’ We will soon learn that ‘these jewels’ were given to her as a wedding present by her husband, and that from the beginning they were not valued by her. We catch our first glimpse of Louise (Danielle Darrieux) just at the moment when she is deciding whether she should part with these earrings to pay some pressing debts she has accumulated without her husband Andre’s (Charles Boyer) knowledge. We witness hands again, as we did in *Desire*, for some time before we are granted access to Louise’s face. Her hands are gloved, which neatly accentuates her overall insulation from care. Much is made in Ophuls’s near but not exact point-of-view travelling shot of how Louise’s presence, in its unself-conscious, tune humming nonchalance, is not quite real, or





centered. She seems somehow displaced from her own actions, as though she were walking slightly to one side of or behind them while they are performed. We observe her shadow, portions of her dress, her hair, her face (in quick, sidelong glimpses) as she surveys, with mild frustration, all of the possessions in her extensive wardrobe that she is free to sell. We pass several mirrors in our little tour of Mme.'s valuables, without any of them managing to catch or hold her image. At last she settles herself in front of a table mirror and beholds her image with lighthearted, 'but I really must rush' approval. This is where the spectator achieves her first stable, though still reflected, contact with Louise's face. We pause with her as she puts on a favorite hat she has chosen to wear, and lowers a veil fetchingly over her eyes.



The banked up withholding of Louise's presence from the camera eye, combined with the framed, mirror view 'reward' for our patient attention, immediately complicates our sense of her relation to her surroundings and her own life within them. She is restless without being anxious, poised for flight, as though readiness to flee were her habitual attitude. Her time in front of the mirror is not devoted to self-questioning; she simply monitors, confidently, how her image will 'come across' to others. Her glance returns to the earrings at last, as though her inspection of alternative items to part with had been a mere going through the motions, for the sake of form. The earrings are clearly the object of value that mean least to her. She can be rid of them without a pang, as long as Andre, her husband, can be kept in the dark. As the shadow of the General's disapproval and hurt cross her mind, she banishes it with the salutary reminder



that the earrings belong to her and that she has the *right* to do with them as she pleases. As she tucks them into her purse and prepares to go out and complete the embarrassing transaction expeditiously, she appears wholly relieved of any prior mental burden. Though we have been warned, before the narrative begins, that the earrings spell trouble, and to be alert to choices involving them, we have no serious concern about this impulsive act, or the carelessness of her feelings. She strikes us as a triumphantly superficial creature, plucking randomly from the tree of opulence to solve a problem that looms large for her but that is almost non-existent for us. That is to say, we are not yet emotionally involved with her or apprehensive on her behalf. We welcome, as always, the prospect of an adventure set in motion by a character acting without forethought, and welcome even more the prospect of Louise soon to be punished for her material excess. This excess is not *ours*, of course, but we can freely indulge in its pleasurable textures and sensations, from our marginally less culpable corner in the 'enclave of luxury'.

In her gently disconcerting book of questions and speculations, *Ethics of Luxury*, Jeanne Randolph reminds us that

Nothing about ethics has been proven. Ethics then might be a way of talking about an aspect of human relatedness when proof can't be expected. Ethics, like poetry, is in between what is certain (recognition of the words in which it is written) and what is contributed by the reader's knowledge, memories, language, and interpretations. The reader is also going to contribute skepticism and refutation of course. Ethical imaginings rely, just as poetry does, on the readers' experience (2007: 103).

She goes on to say that ethical imagining is not 'a priori constrained by one's conscience or censored by one's guile' (107). We do not by any means know immediately, in the majority of human situations, where exactly 'an ethics might be'. It is usually not a matter of simply adjudicating on 'what decisive action or thought to promote or avoid' (107). The sort of ethical imagining she delineates and advocates entails 'envisioning any situation as if there might be an ethical interpretation of it, and then pondering which details sparkle in the foreground [e.g., Mme. de.. 's earrings] as emanations of ethical clues' (107). She cites a Wittgenstein aphorism as a help in foregoing what is premature in ethical imagining: 'All is in flux. Perhaps this is the very place to start' (110). Wittgenstein leads us right back to

the energising tumult of Thoreau's metaphors in *Walden*. We take our orientation not from what is most firm in our convictions, rather than from what is still up in the air – part of what Randolph describes as the psyche's 'moral uproar'. To put her attractively fractious phrase just a bit differently, let us not disregard or override the commendably persistent unruliness of moral reflection.

Mme. de...s earrings begin their life in narrative as a corollary of their present owner's 'lightness of being'. That phrase, of course, is powerfully linked to a novel by Milan Kundera, but we seem a long way as yet from 'unbearable-ness'. The earrings also partake of all the light-sensitive reflecting surfaces in this gathering place of Louise's possessions. This is a seemingly stable, warmly enfolding community of things, from which one unexceptional, uncherished member is about to be banished, sent into exile. Isn't it for many of us a reasonable starting point for luxury debate that those of us with 'too much' (implicitly, almost everyone we know) should begin to divest themselves of unnecessary things? And what could be a more perfect starting point for such clearing away and questioning than an oppressively costly gift of earrings, a gift moreover that never kindled true feeling in its recipient? The earrings are diminished light sources – light as a spirit-augmenting power, in Simone Weil's sense, opposed to the force of gravity. But if they are linked to gravity, they do not yet bear down. They can be scooped up idly and hidden away in a fancy purse for a surreptitious display of wifely insurrection and independence. Why, after all, should she let her husband (who is a General, as we soon find out, with all of that rank's ready-to-hand connections to overbearing rigidity and heaviness) dictate her sense of what his wedding gift should mean to her? If she is honest with herself – and why should she not try to be? – they have ceased to matter to her at all. To hold on to them is merely another instance of formal obligation, of being honorable for the sake of show.

It is the film's sense of its own destiny to continually enhance the value – both the attendant light and gravity – of these earrings. The trajectory is quite the opposite of what we might expect in a tale devoted to the comeuppance of a pampered society woman. Surely, we might assume early on, the earrings' value will come to seem increasingly arbitrary, and the earrings themselves a mordantly empty signifier as they circulate – in a measured dance – from one owner's hand to another in a closed narrative system. Yet, contrary to expectation, the trinkets move from the realm of onerous, gaudy commodity, through a surpassingly delicate network of feelings and end (out of circulation) in a space of spiritual enigma. From their miniature, easily overlooked (were it not for the camera) final resting place near a Church altar, they mutely acknowledge and embody the immensity of everything that the lives brushing against them have ventured and lost, including the silent cancellation of death. But they are not death-dealing, these earrings – they are life-testing conduits of ethical imagining.

Once Louise has sold the earrings back to their original owner (an exchange accompanied by what looks like a theatrical swoon on her part to strengthen her bargaining position), we next are made aware of them in their absence, during an opera performance. Louise informs her husband, Andre, with feigned distress, that she has lost them somewhere en route to their private box, where she now sits in regal dejection. Even though Andre is reasonably certain she has not worn them that evening, for her sake he conducts an amazingly thorough search on his own, including a minute examination of the carriage in which they rode, the steps of the opera house and of their home and all the



intervening spaces (retracing their movements) which they have passed through in the course of the evening. Andre exhibits a touching diligence, meticulousness and lack of frustration – or suspicion – throughout this wasted effort. (We watch him at every moment with a complete awareness that his actions are futile and will yield no tangible result.) We become convinced that the qualities revealed in his manner of conducting himself have little to do with his attachment to the earrings themselves – *except* as they relate to his wife's feelings for him. The gift he gave her at the time of their marriage still has a large symbolic value for him as a symbol of his original ardent attachment and enduring love. We quickly conclude that Andre has a stronger tie to his wife than she has to him (she has successfully negotiated for a private bedroom), in spite of his involvement in occasional affairs. When Andre is notified by the owner of the earrings that he has repurchased them from his wife, Andre assumes (correctly) that he has foolishly overestimated their emotional worth to her. Veiling his disappointment behind a façade of genial, courtly indifference, he presents them to a mistress he has grown tired of as part of a polite, but perfunctory railway station farewell. She, in turn, almost instantly (in film time, only the briefest of intervals since we are in her presence only to observe the next movement of the earrings) parts with them, a bit sadly, to pay off a gambling debt in Constantinople.

By another deft, neatly fated turn of fortune's wheel, the jewels are promptly acquired by a foreign diplomat, Baron Donati (Vittorio De Sica), and return to Paris with him, where he is thrown together (via a carriage collision worthy of gossamer-light farce) with Louise. Once he has fallen in



The journey of the earrings away from Louise and back again.

love with her, he presents her with the earrings as a romantic pledge (entirely unmindful of their previous history). This gift attests once again to the depth of a man's attachment to Louise, and perhaps we think that the earrings are being degraded as an expression of real connection by the mere fact of blind repetition. On the present occasion, however, the giver's feelings are fully reciprocated. Louise concocts a ruse to deceive her husband yet again (another repetition), showing him that the earrings had somehow worked their way inside her gloves without her knowing it. As she performs her theatrical magic trick and pours the now much travelled earrings out from her gloves on a table, the sharpness of the sound they make striking the surface coincides with the depth of the husband's astonishment and sense of emotional betrayal. From this juncture the earrings are imbued with the terrible weight of Simone Weil's gravity. Light, however, is also available to them in their subsequent exchanges. They have become the locus of the immovable constancy of Louise's love for Donati. But suffering does 'bear down' on Louise from this point forward. The weight of the love – and the earrings, both in their absence and eventually restored presence – becomes exorbitant and excruciating. Donati revokes his own romantic pledge, once he is informed of the earrings' careless, promiscuous ill-use, and his rival's humiliation. For him, the earrings embody Louise's lies, dangerous allure, and everlasting flightiness. He can forget about them as something expressive of misplaced infatuation. It is easy for him to annul the gift, and declare it of no further consequence. Ironically, his judgment of Louise as frivolous and deceitful comes at precisely the point where she is divesting herself of these attributes. Henceforth, the circulation of the earrings slows almost to a freeze, and each of the few remaining turns and returns involves a wrenching shift for the one who holds or withholds them. For the General they become an instrument of revenge, though he is scalded by the realisation that he can get rid of Donati and retrieve the earrings but can't reduce Louise's love for his rival by one jot. For Louise, when she spends all she has to buy them back (even though she knows it will alter nothing in her situation) they become a spiritual talisman, a sign of all that was and of her unworthiness of the man she venerates. What Donati saw in her – through the earrings – made it impossible for him to stay, or to keep his feelings alive. In her isolation, she must preserve feelings enough for both of them. The condition of all three characters becomes ever more immobile: none remains capable of further quicksilver shifts and graceful escapes. The earrings mirror this immobility, and seem to purify through a process of hardening.

The previously fluid exchanges in the marketplace of desire fade away. Accompanying the slow dissolve of purchasing power, gratifying public displays, and feasible trade-offs, the earrings transmute into an immaterial entity. Louise, for her part, becomes an ascetic of love: Donati has left her, she has no further secrets to keep from her husband or the world, and no compensatory needs within her power to satisfy. The gift of the earrings may have turned to poison – and in Germanic languages the word 'gift' means poison, effacing the linkage with presents. But the jewels also are a consecrated absence. They confirm her punishment, and they demand, inexorably, her continuing fidelity. At the beginning of the film, Louise had no further use for the earrings and no wish to wear them. As she approaches her end, she has them back again: she can no longer wear them outwardly in public (in effect, the public has disappeared, become immaterial as well), but inwardly she seems to wear nothing else. And in wearing them, she is worn away. The earrings speak what is left of her, in a world increasingly dominated by silence. Fewer and fewer appeals can be made to anyone's ear, that odd appendage which the jewels once so lightly adorned (and, of course, were designed to obscure). Louise holds onto the earrings, until desperation at the prospect of a duel where Donati may be killed by her husband, causes her to sacrifice them for the last time in Church. They are turned into a silent prayer, which only God can hear: a prayer to spare another's life, but not to save her own. The duel puts an end to both Louise and the Baron. In the progressively severe economy of the narrative, they both appear to have been felled by a single shot from General Andre's pistol.



The forlorn remainder of the human narrative – Madame’s earrings – gleam obscurely and discordantly in a Church better suited to other forms of luxury. The gift to the Church is anonymous, and the earrings have not been converted into money that can ‘go anywhere’. It is as termination and unanswered prayer that they last appear to us – a closing appeal from the object, which meets our gaze in the depths of solitude. The sparkling trinkets from a nameless donor can naturally form no idea of the imaginative destination that each separate viewer of the film reserves for them. What my lengthy summary of the jewels’ itinerary is meant to demonstrate is that we cannot see them fully (and cannot answer the question, ‘What do they signify?’) without taking part in each metamorphosis that they undergo. We must weigh up the cost and freshly accrued emotional / ethical value of the earrings at each point in their journey, while attending to the film’s many interlocking economies. If we confidently spy censurable excess in the earrings’ first nesting place in Louise’s teeming closets, we can recognise, with equal clarity, privation, a chastening sacrifice, and self-annulment when we take our leave of them in the final image. These stray bits of eye-catching matter are all that mark the passage of hidden, lost, vanquished lives. What good will a return to our initial disposition to judge do the earrings, their vanished owners, or us?

On what terms do we enter into film’s wealthy pleasure grounds, and to what extent is the condition of being unself-consciously inside that pleasure worrisome? What do we require before we can trust a film’s sense of proportion and try out the various places envisioned for us in its narrative and visual scheme? What imaginative demands and possibilities are there in film’s alternations between an efficacious lightness (the kind that lightly illuminates motions of the spirit) and experiential gravity? Too often what passes for gravity is mere self-importance, causing narrative to be overrun by what Samuel Beckett once termed ‘the wild beast of earnestness’. And misplaced earnestness can be as heavy as a luxury that can’t think its way past money and the ‘exclusions’ that money so readily sanctions. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers are nearly always in the vicinity of luxury in their film collaborations as ‘a dance couple’, but they are not bound to its trappings in any real or damaging way. It is because a musical escape route – call it the summons of syncopation – always lies open to them. They are capable instructors in how not to be trapped in or conditioned by the wrong influences (at least not decisively), even when these influences pervade the whole insulated world around them. Considered from the vantage point of their thin, mistaken identity plots, Astaire and Rogers seem to be sealed in to Art Deco artifice, indulging their Depression-weary audience with a nostalgic dream of 1920s leisure, a dream filled with idle travel and party-going, affected mischief, amusing foreigners and cutely exasperated servants. It is worth stressing that there are different ways of occupying ground in these deluxe settings, where all of the furnishings are dipped in glamour, and where the social atmosphere is unchangeably devoted to breezy nonchalance. The ground is trivial, at times maddeningly so, when given over to plotted action and dialogue. As mere background to the story, the costly artifice of the settings can only present itself on terms divorced from any claim of meaning. The actors are obliged to keep a pointless, coyly weightless reality afloat. Everything conspires to speak the language of ‘flimsy veneers’. There is nothing to object to in the look of this world other than its estrangement from an interesting purpose. But whenever a musical number arrives, we find ourselves instantly on a different ground, a

ground of true consequence. The numbers allow inner and outer things to converge in a three minute burst of perfectly focused clarity. Whether the dances are giddily playful or romantically charged, they usher in a new reality sense. What they release to the viewer is a vision that transforms external conditions. Astaire and Rogers find a way to make gifts of themselves to one another and to the spectator, and the giving feels unconditional. The luxury surrounding them becomes equated with the ‘heaven’ Astaire calls into being with song in ‘Cheek to Cheek’. The landscape radiates from the pair as they remember how to communicate in the better language of song and to move in a unison that feels both natural and ecstatic. The dances are urgent and irresistible because they involve a manifest shedding of false relations to things. The luxury stands back, then rearranges itself as lightness and light, as though a canopy of stars had suddenly moved indoors; the scintillation of wealth is a fairy tale bounty that rewards beings who have earned their contentment by extending themselves in the direction of their highest, most authentic feelings. No material dross intrudes on or contaminates this flawless coordination of selves, this discovery of a music that loosens all restraints, including that of gravity itself. As the couple joins together, what is vindicated is a sharable (rather than isolated) capacity to imagine and then actualise a world apart, a world of two in complete, unstriving accord. But this world is also here in our midst: they sweep us into it with them.

Astaire and Rogers escape the impediments of mere privilege, and dissolve through dance the awkward mimicry of mistaken identity and curdled social forms. When they dance together we lose (along with them) the encumbering weight of self-consciousness and fortified separateness. This pair discovers a means of removing the all too powerful barriers that drive people apart, that hold us hostage in brittle, isolated spheres. As viewers we partake, in a manner that seems astonishingly easy, like a forgotten knack, of the energy that makes joyous togetherness visible and palpably real. We enter into it, in the words of one of the songs of *Swing Time* (George Stevens, 1936), as though we are ‘picking ourselves up’ and achieving a new standing as free persons. The dance is a ‘starting all over again’ capability, which leaps over barriers effortlessly in reclaiming the basic skills of walking, touching, raising a voice till it catches a pure line of feeling, being in rhythm. I think of the two of them clearing without any appeal to intention the little railing that bounds the dance floor in ‘Pick Yourself Up’. No physical or mind-forged obstacles stand in their way, while they are possessed of this kind of knowing. When their dances conclude, Astaire and Rogers often whirl out of frame, taking everything they have discovered from each other – and shown us – along with them. Or they softly flow to a graceful arrest or seated position, conveying that they know just where they have arrived in relation to each other. The moment holds for a few tender beats of silence, for both of them. And then life, in the form of a taxing, synthetic story, reasserts its claims. We are back in the grip of needless misunderstanding and tedious stratagems for undoing it. After punishing confinement on the ground of story, Fred and Ginger will eventually find another opportunity to reclaim the magic ground of consequence. The only significant issue in the musical’s plots is how Astaire and Rogers, having once danced together, can forget so rapidly and thoroughly what they have understood while dwelling, passionately connected, in this sphere. They topple back abruptly into the unworthy rhetoric (for them) of social codes, sarcasm, retraction of what they have unmistakably avowed, and elaborate pretence. Physically they regress as well, re-

claiming their clumsiness, hesitancy, reserve, hiddenness. The settings return to a condition of decorative inertness. And then, after a time of distracted wandering, they find their way back to poetry and heightened being. Astaire suddenly speaks of emotions in a manner that exposes the poverty of his customary utterances. His speaking voice shades imperceptibly into a 'lightened' but aspiring singing voice, and he is able to say: 'Someday / When I'm awfully low / And the world is cold / I will feel a glow just thinking / Of you / And the way you look tonight'. The Astaire character cannot acknowledge loneliness or glow or the mysterious swerves of temporality except through the dispensation, the miraculous beneficence of song. He can sing precisely to this moment of living, and fulfill its demands. 'Someday' he declares, my emotional resources will be dim and depleted, but I know I have it within my power to restore myself if I can recall just one image, the image of how you appear in this room, and in my imagination of you, tonight. Language is now luxurious. Or on the dance floor, when neither Astaire nor Rogers can deny the dance imperative any longer, the gift of movement comes back to them, enhanced by the strange hindrances and inhibitions they have succumbed to in their time away. They venture a few experimental moves, and in the blink of an eye they have secured the love they had lost, this pledge of free and ever-expanding union. They often arrive in their dances, after preliminary flirtations with the pleasures of difference, at a stage where they mirror one another exactly, with no loss of substance or personal expressiveness.

The 'Pick Yourself Up' number in *Swing Time* may be the strongest instance in film for me of pure largesse. The edifices of bogus, grandstanding luxury in this film's story rest on gambling and other will o' the wisp marks of ownership. Even orchestras change hands in an atmosphere of floating exchange. Those who try to hold on to or expand what they own at the gaming tables of commerce are undone by the higher, spendthrift laws of the dance, where nothing vital is held back or held in. The invitation to the dance is the sole gamble that counts, finally. Astaire's character is named Lucky and Rogers's is named Penny.

Together their names form a 'lucky penny', a coin of minimal official value which is converted into untold sums as they recognise the right gambling moments to 'imitate the gods'. In the dance studio where they take turns teaching and being taught, they strew countless coins of mutual sharing. 'Whence', in the words of Seneca, 'come the countless things that delight your eyes, your ears, your mind?' He movingly asks, 'Was it too small a thing that Nature gave when she gave to us herself? ... Yet do you say that you have received no benefit?' (1958: 211-215). The improvident excess of Lucky and Penny's elatedness in finding each other (again, and always for the first time) in 'Pick Yourself Up' and building a world of meaning out of three simple steps, with variations, makes an experience that fuses luxury and largesse. They make enough jubilant flow to fill a world, and the 'small thing' that they begin with becomes inexhaustible, like Fortunato's purse.

To close our discussion of viewer placement in relation to images and ideas of luxury, I will look at a tiny episode in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978). Bill (Richard Gere), an ex-factory worker and now migrant worker who is afraid he will never make 'the big score', believes that he possesses only one luxury item whose market value is beyond question – his lover, Abby (Brooke Adams). He knows that she is desired by the wealthy farmer (Sam Shepard) who owns the vast Texas Panhandle property where Bill and Abby both labor during the harvest. The farmer has been diagnosed with an inoperable disease and has been told that he has only a short time to live. Bill is apprised of this condition. He has deceived the farmer into thinking that he and Abby are brother and sister. He carries the deception much further by attempting to persuade Abby to make the farmer think she returns his affection, and is willing to be courted seriously. Bill's plan is to have Abby secure a marriage proposal and once she is legally the farmer's wife, she (and, by extension, Bill) will stand to inherit all his holdings. His illness will require only a short interval of waiting, which Bill is confident that he and Abby will be able to manage without undue hardship or emotional pain. Their life experience, after all, has toughened them;



they are well-versed in the demands of expedient trade-offs. As soon as the farmer is dead, the two lovers can be reunited and seize their happiness.

Malick sets up the farmer's home (for the bulk of the narrative) as the only visible dwelling in the film's world. Every form of home yearning and every restorative thought of belonging accrue to this graceful building (teeming with valuables) as it stands in beautiful, dream-like isolation behind the farmer's massive acres, overlooking them with a sort of God-like solicitude. Moreover, whatever counts as inside space in *Days of Heaven* (space that lies open to the light of the title's heavenly days) is reserved for the house and its nearby barn and gazebo. When Abby and the farmer have married, they leave for their honeymoon, driving away from the front of their home on a scarcely formed road, their grand vehicle raising plumes of dust. A young girl (Bill's sister, Linda) follows behind the vehicle excitedly as it passes into the distance, hopping playfully in its wake. Since she has no part in the conspiracy, she gives them a

appraise the things displayed, and to violate the privacy that they mildly assert, within this inner sanctum of privilege. He also strives to imagine the possessions he sees as material he can soon claim for himself: a reasonable exchange for the woman whose closeness and sense of 'belonging with him' he has temporarily relinquished.

Bill hopes to have the gratifying experience of a surreptitious insider, asserting his prerogatives – in advance of any legal entitlement – to *be* there. But he fails utterly to experience the inside position that he so desperately seeks. He has never felt further away, more of an intruder, an alien, a man presenting himself under false pretenses, than in this solitary tour of his imagined (imaginary) home. He cannot shake off the unwanted role of the guest who is being appraised himself, and not measuring up. The spectator's placement is no more securely attained than Bill's. We too are outsiders trying to break in to a coveted dream of material and emotional belonging. But the furnishings in their mute impassivity afford no bridge, no welcome. The photo-



proper send-off, wishing them well. Bill watches the car disappear with unexpectedly harsh pangs of misgiving and exclusion. He is additionally resentful of the farmer's invitation, before he departs, to move his things into the house while he and Abby are gone. Bill accepts the offer, but decides to enter the house not as a guest, but as a self-appointed future owner. But, try as he may, he can't venture into the home with confidence. Even opening the door causes him to quail; he is involuntarily timid rather than forceful in enacting his fantasy. He enters the front hall carrying his Gladstone travelling bag, in which his few earthly possessions are easily fitted. After setting the bag down on a chair that is too elegant and clean for it, he moves through the downstairs rooms and corridors. Bill glances at an assortment of paintings and family photos on the walls, as well as taking note of the drapes, the tastefully chosen and arranged furniture, the harmonious stir of light and shadow, and a decanter set on a small table with two delicate glasses beside it. (These glasses evoke the just departed couple, the 'we-ness' they have just achieved.) Bill is attempting to

graphs include faces of unknown family relatives, and their very unknownness intensifies their shared expression of indifference, quiet refusal. One woman's face is viewed in close-up, and her attitude speaks for all of the farmer's ghostly kin. She is looking out toward someone, with an air of expectancy, but that someone is not you. Pausing, caught in transition in this house that has never been more the farmer's place than now, Bill's nervous, inquisitive, beseeching presence is suddenly lost to us. He is replaced through a dissolve with a view of freely coursing water, pouring over steep, lofty rocks and improvising (so it seems) a waterfall. Abby and her husband, discovering what they might mean to one another on their first journey as a married couple, stand and look at it together, though they stand a short distance apart. They actually see it, sensing perhaps that its bursting emergence and unpredictable flow corresponds to something quietly shifting, deepening in themselves. The sight immediately confers intimacy, an achieved relationship with what is observed. Such intimate connection lessens distance and rewards patience. Abby and



the farmer are relaxed enough in their new togetherness to give this piece of the natural world their unforced, spontaneous attention. We are once more inside the film, seeing *with* this pair as we couldn't quite see with Bill, whose efforts were stymied, his vision thrown back at him without taking hold. Our sense of shared perception with the couple, in contrast, entails a momentary avowal of presence and relatedness. The moment is all we have to show for the experience – so fleeting, but sufficient nonetheless.

Days of Heaven does not repudiate Bill for his desire to 'make up for lost time', to strike a desperate bargain which will render his future less precarious. Nor does the film take sides with the farmer against him. It merely acknowledges the difficulties of fully recognising what one may be giving up, and that the place one needs to get to may not exist in the form one expects to find it. Getting inside a place – since every place, whatever else it is, may also be a place in oneself – is often a metaphysical proposition. Bill's state, as he stands on the threshold of a potential new identity he can't yet quite feel or claim, is very often just where movies, at their best, place us. But film also conveys so powerfully what it is like to lay hold of connection and moments of expansion, as Abby and the farmer do. 'What do we live for, and where do we live?', as Thoreau so movingly inquires. The certainty of impending dispossession is the cost of any surfeit movie image wealth we may secure. We can trust to this largesse, on condition we are always prepared to let it go.

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