

Intoxicating stagecraft: Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* and the mysteries of film in theatre

Siegfried Kracauer has famously argued, in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, that the theatrical story, whose prototype is the theatrical play, presents a continual threat to film's highest mandate: to let material reality enter the film frame in its own right, that is, open-endedly. Theatre's 'contrived intrigues' ([1960] 1997: 223), evident in even the most extraordinary dramas, represent a 'crude abbreviation' (219) of camera-life potential, proceeding conceptually by way of 'long shots' which align themselves automatically with the stage proscenium. 'The stage universe is a shadowy replica of the world we live in' (218), and thus exerts, when imitated, a 'restrictive effect on film'. Camera life, as opposed to theatre life, favors the wonderful indeterminacy of 'physical existence'. The types of narrative that cinema should develop are those that honor the camera's search for unresolved, contingent details from a reality that is not subjected to 'false theatrical unity'. Such narratives will deliberately leave 'gaps into which environmental life may stream' (255-56). The pre-determined design of theatre-based thinking and representation stand in the way of film's power to engage an unregulated sensory experience which productively blurs the boundaries of space and time. Kracauer would agree with Franz Kafka's disparagement of the film medium aping theatre's 'containment of

vision'. Kafka 'pulls away from cinema as surface continuity of images, urg[ing] an excess in seeing, a more-visual of vision' (Heath, 31. Citation in Trahair, 237).

Kracauer, as Miriam Hansen has stressed in her account of his obsession with film's 'photographic nature', conceived the ideal film spectator as one not constrained by narrative conventions or character behavior or story directives. The psychic disposition that the camera promotes is one which advances 'identification with all kinds of objects' ([1960] 1997: 17): 'it makes the individual lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences' (xxv). Kracauer advocates a spectator mind that meanders, plays with danger, makes its own arbitrary connections en route to revelation, rather than following theatre's pre-ordained narrative path.

Kracauer, like Rudolf Arnheim, perhaps never wholly recovered from cinema's too hasty abandonment of a silent film aesthetic. The difficult transition period from silent to 'early talkie' film could easily be read as a repudiation of the medium's birthright, and a regression to a slavish imitation of theatre practice. Screen time in movies was obliged for several years (1928-1931) to move much closer to stage time, with a resulting sacrifice of film rhythm and pace. And stagebound compositions seemed to paralyze the camera's quest for living fragments, what Béla Balázs once praised in an American silent film as 'a thin hail of small moments...of material life' which an environment releases to a genuinely exploratory camera eye (qtd in Kracauer, 225). Kracauer saw theatre space in film as a permanent barrier to a 'photographic approach' to the real. The cinematic spirit must defy the convention-bound ways of perceiving that theatre, with its mania for narrative order, cause-and-effect dynamics, and lucid character intention, has implanted in us. Theatre can creep into the filmmaking process anywhere – as Robert Bresson later contended, in his own Kracauer-like polemics against stage influence ([1975] 1997) – and its effect is usually a *contamination*, a thinning out of reality's mystery.

These old arguments seem to have lost much of their manifesto urgency and point in a world where theatre's status has so radically diminished. Whatever power theatre once

possessed to challenge film's new dispensation and different kinship with material phenomena has become invisible – and largely irrelevant – to contemporary filmgoers. Theatre's territory appears to have been completely assimilated by cinema and other media. It has no distinct domain – apart from the still valued possibilities of the live event – to declare as its inherent attribute and continuing advantage in the struggle for aesthetic sovereignty. Theatre has become, of course, an eager, creative host for elements from other art forms, including film and television, and it is worth noting that the version of theatre that film theorists and practitioners were most eager to discredit had to do with the proscenium arch tradition, with its elaborate sets, heavy dependence on speech, and dogmatic conception of realism.

I began with Kracauer's anxiety about theatre's insidious undermining of true film space (and time) to reanimate a once widespread debate about theatre's deficient attachment to the visible world, which it is film's mission to reveal and rescue. According to Kracauer, Bresson, Arnheim, and others, theatre is 'excessively' aligned, by its very nature, with artifice, with the imaginary, with the unnatural, with fixed categories, with seductive surfaces, with condensation, with appearances wedded to deception and displacement. It is, in short, a negative force, which is dangerous precisely because it can skillfully manipulate film reality for its own purposes. It can confuse the eye of the beholder, as well as the eye of the camera, so that they settle for less than the depth and weight of the real – that is to say, settling for facades and synthetic (as opposed to organic) arrangements.

I think there is a much more fruitful way to approach the problem of theatre space in film. I shall begin by discussing a number of attempts in the early sound era to fuse theatre and film technique so that what Kracauer terms authentic camera-life is discovered at the very heart of theatricality. I shall go on to provide a close reading of a relatively obscure theatrical set piece in Billy Wilder's purportedly realist film, *The Lost Weekend* (1945). This immensely popular and critically acclaimed movie appeared at the watershed moment when Hollywood began to question whether actual locations were aesthetically preferable to 'theatrical' studio settings, in keeping with a renewed post-war quest for the unadorned

documentation of ordinary lives. Wilder's narrative offers a remarkable example of how the presence of theatre lends a vital indeterminacy, flexibility of tone, and open-endedness to an otherwise too schematic and mechanised naturalism.

Let me begin my response to Kracauer's many-pronged attack on the theatrical by pointing out how invincibly metaphorical his employment of stage rhetoric is. 'Theatre space', as I understand the concept, becomes visible and viable as soon as it is named or pointed to or recognised as a frame that stands somewhat apart from the rest of a film's world. If, for example, characters encounter a theatre setting in the course of their narrative activities, and witness a performance there, we have an instant division of the film world into a stage realm and a realm outside it, whose reality (however stylised in its own right) asks to be thought about in somewhat different terms. Life as it unfolds cinematically on studio streets or 'real' urban neighborhoods, in an authentic barbershop or bar or constructed simulations of these settings, pose certain claims and demands for acceptance that a declared theatre episode is not obliged to take on. Theatre space may, of course, comment on the dramatic circumstances beyond its frame, and indeed, in countless ingenious ways, expose the seams and rifts in the outside narrative's hitherto taken for granted solidity. But theatre still is recognisably separate from the film reality beyond its borders.

In Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939), to cite a very famous instance, we are allowed to watch Berthelin (Antoine Corteggiani), in a designated backstage area, as he dons a skeleton costume for an impromptu stage performance, set to the music of Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*. There is a full acknowledgment of artifice here. The participants in this piece seem to be self-conscious, at first, and to be hampered by a lack of rehearsal. Three figures in addition to Berthelin's skeleton arrive on a narrow, makeshift stage, costumed in white bed-sheets with crudely drawn eye sockets. They are meant to be ghosts, and initially carry skeletal umbrellas shorn of covering fabric. As a player piano performs the *Danse* in its own ghostly fashion, we observe as something close to a child's version of Grand Guignol acquires steadily more eeriness and disturbing power. As the skeleton continues to caper about onstage, presiding as a kind of diabolic ringmaster, his ghostly cohorts,

now holding paraffin lamps, move from the pasteboard stage graveyard out into the audience gathered to watch their antics. The seated chateau guests at first seem to react with mock consternation to the spectral invasion. But with no lessening of the sense of theatrical make-believe, something more than a stage boundary has been crossed. We suddenly feel the presence of death itself accosting the increasingly uncertain crowd of spectators. The ghosts swinging of the censer-like lamps, the shimmering white of the phantoms moving about in the half-light, strikingly alter our perception of the entertainment. In a trice, we are led to feel that the lives of this elegantly dressed group of watching guests are more fragile, and exposed. Their proximity to these silent attackers render them desolate, unaware of what transpires, momentarily bereft of social identity and purpose. The disguised actors shed their affiliations with an amusing spook show, and become harbingers of a destruction that they themselves are not cognisant of. The reality that erupts from their pantomime seems to release the horrors of the coming War into this drawing room. The theatre elements, in other words, achieve a camera-truth that vastly exceeds the collective social appearances and arrangements around them. Paradoxically, pure dramatic artifice releases 'the thin hail of moments...of material life' which Kracauer contends can be attained in film only when theatrical perception is overcome. In spite of our precise sense of the stage frame at all times, and our awareness of the player piano churning out the anxious rippling chords of the dance accompaniment, the sequence is imbued with one of Kracauer's most prized cinema goals: the loose, disorganised experiential flow that 'dissociates rather than integrates the spectatorial self' ([1960] 1997: xxviii).

Film representation generally aspires to make us forget that what is treated as real and natural in a screened world is in fact a waking dream. We give ourselves up for the time being to viewing conditions that seem 'more natural than reality'. Perhaps we don't completely lose sight of the fantasy dimension of a film, but it is not difficult to lighten our tenuous reality grounding, because so much of our perceptions and how we partake of them is, in Stanley Cavell's phrase, 'already drawn by fantasy' (1979: 102). A film fantasy can be a welcome relief from the burdens of those fantasies that so readily structure our lives outside the movie theatre. Film



fantasy is also a waking replenishment of the language of dreams, which nightly override the monitoring consciousness. Kracauer overestimates our hunger for a reality in film unhindered by fantasies of connection, or by the freedom of viewer invisibility, or by the pleasure of owning what we view, without the claims of other persons challenging our sense of sole and sovereign possession.

I would argue that theatre's interruption of a movie narrative's version of the real is a salutary reminder, to borrow Wendell Berry's frame of reference, that a film is 'an ecosystem full of dependencies, and nothing in it knows what it is dependent on' (qtd in Vaughan 2015). Theatre effects a temporary viewer estrangement from a movie's confidence in its own grounding. Theatre is an organised dream which suddenly faces off with the larger dream that encloses it, thereby calling film's own taken for granted phenomena (continuity, stable appearances, unmediated experience, angle of vision, etc.) into question. Theatre's often unanticipated division of film reality into two territories obliges the territory assigned to film to confront the assumptions that permit its representations to count more fully than theatre's as 'lived experience'. The result of such splitting is a bout of metaphysical viewer dizziness, in which the underpinnings of film reality loosen. It is akin to the interval of morning dream uncertainty (when we are still only half-awake), before we have quite restored our faith in the solidity of our everyday surroundings. Our conscious life is not instantly secure: we feel off-balance. Film's dependency on hidden theatrical components in its ecosystem is something that is frequently *suppressed*. When theatre declares its presence it is not imposing elements on film that are alien to it, or even separate from it. Theatre is inherently, inescapably part of cinema's identity.

The stage can, of course, easily be conceptualised as a distinct, confined domain, a set of attitudes and imaginary circumstances more static and posed than those of film, the entire entity lying in wait, as it were, behind a curtain. But such an idea is false. Suppose the curtain in question is on a stage containing a Busby Berkeley production number. At first we think we know where we are. The familiar stage-audience boundaries and orientation are firmly established. The number begins to unfold on what feels like an appropriate,

constructed setting, a place more stylised, diaphanous and hermetically sealed than the space the audience occupies. The spectators appear to have entered the auditorium from a world outside. But as the musical number proceeds, space continues to expand with a dreamlike largesse, and the perspectives we are granted on the ever-deepening spectacle seem more prodigiously mobile and untrammelled than anything presented in the film's grounded life-world. The stage picture in its exorbitant, near-limitless reach dwarfs the counter-claims of the film's prior, convention-suffused reality.

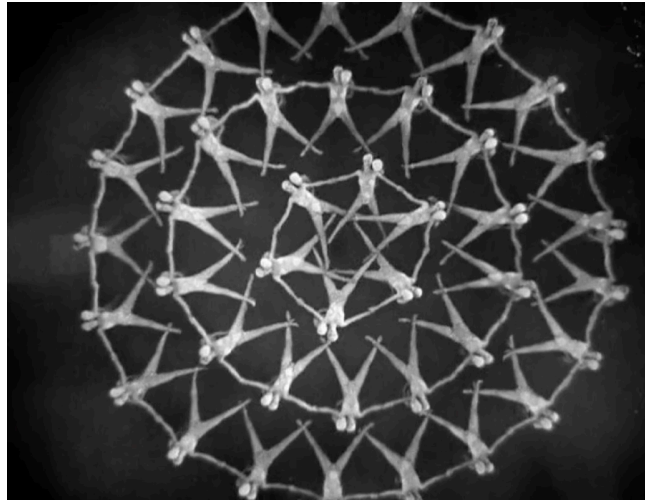
Kracauer's ideal of identification with all manner of unlikely objects, and the productive 'losing oneself' immersion in the 'incidental, contingent details of a physical environment' is achieved by Berkeley's flamboyant cinematising of stage illusion. Berkeley spectacles pass through a forcefully delineated theatrical mode of seeing to what I will term purely cinematic vision, without leaving the raw materials of staged artifice behind. Berkeley (a name he shares with a wonderfully compatible philosopher, Bishop Berkeley) conceives of a grand film synthesis. It is attained by a bold superimposition of two large interrelated planes: one, manifestly theatrical, and the other, from a higher angle, cinematic. Berkeley sees no point in denying film's intimate ties with theatre, ties which reach back to cinema's origins. As soon as the film frame was deemed suitable for storytelling of any sort, the theatrical tradition, vast and diverse in its relation to framing action for spectators, was naturally, inexorably brought into play. For Berkeley, cinema's most enticing route to expressive freedom lay in feats of transcendent theatricality.

Theatre's restrictions can be most fully surmounted by a frank disclosure of film's elective affinities with stage territory. The camera eye merges with theatrical perception, then takes flight from this perch to something beyond the bounds of stage rhythm, stage distance, stage hearing and visual perspectives. Kracauer might offer some objection to the machine-like character of Berkeley spectacle – female bodies as the living cogs of mechanised stage confections – as well as his mania for order and rigorously deployed symmetry. But machine analogies hardly constitute a disavowal of cinema's foundational properties. Rather, Berkeley's heavenly human contraptions pointedly acknowledge the camera and



projector as mechanical instruments, which somehow engender séances, resurrecting dead time, with its glistening light and bustling spaces, for our delectation. The spectator is also reanimated in relation to these dream environments, as David Trotter phrases it, 'thanks to the surrogacy of a machine's eye view' (2015: 21) but Berkeley extravaganzas do not settle for mechanical perception as their end point. Machine energy and dynamism combine with an intimate camera address that wavers excitingly between fugitive personal glimpses and a nearly uniform sense of the mass. Interconnectedness as a necessary component of the (usually) blonde chorine ensemble leads both to a suppression of the individual, in favor of a Soviet-style glamour collective, and to vagrant, unforeseeable eruptions of startling human presence. (We move at a leisurely pace down a magical assembly line through a stream of images of greeting, each performer gazing into the camera and smiling as a close-up finds her. The effect of these volatile moments of release are not so different from Dziga Vertov's mad pursuit of contingency in *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), where a vast montage harmony is the putative goal.)

Berkeley treats us to a dizzying multiplication of vantage points on his unbounded stage pictures, breaking up our sense of the whole at unpredictable intervals, then reinstating it with an equally arbitrary montage rhythm. In the course of the number's layered unfolding, there is a slipping away of interpretive grids. The song lyric, which was our initial guide to understanding the number's theme and progression, seems to give way to increasingly unanchored dream embellishments. We are neither sure of what we are looking at nor how to process it correctly. This wandering away from a rational frame of reference is comparable to Kracauer's desire for a cinema perception that feels non-prescriptive and uncoded. Berkeley's transcendent theatre is a machinery of the irrational, whose orderly elements become agents of wildness, and a giddy chaos of vision. Because the meaning of this destabilising profusion eludes familiar categories, we are at liberty to read the extravagant details paraded before us playfully, salaciously, or – better still – with a mixture of awe and delirium. But theatre is the catalyst for all transformations. We pass through the theatrical medium in the way that Alice passes through the looking glass. Cinematic freedom depends



on the arrangement of objects set up on the other side of the mirror, in the adjoining room, as it were. On the cinema side of the mirror, we contemplate the overdetermined building blocks of each production number: a cascade of Ruby Keeler eyes; swirling white pianos or glowing, electric violins; waterfalls; human coins; a face transforming into a city skyline, which then opens up for us, yielding as we descend inward a multitude of city dwellers racing through their everyday work schedule so they can wind up at a massive nightclub, performing a frenzied dance of fate. It is as if we are dreaming our way back to a kindergarten of perception, where any image, devoutly attended to, can be a potential world unto itself.

The time inside a Berkeley number is visionary time, which seems unconcerned about endings. It does not feel accountable to the labored tick of a clock notching off the seconds. It is the time of rabbit holes and brief spells of nodding off to a surrealist elsewhere. When Berkeley has spent a sufficient amount of dream time synthesising order and chaos, the machine and the ecstatic garden of earthly delights, he invariably returns to theatre's normal scale and more home-made artifice. We recover the proscenium frame, a shallow stage, and a seated audience whose viewing, presumably, has been confined throughout to a single angle and distance. Whatever these spectators have witnessed, they have not been endowed with our heightened, intimate, and mobile form of imaginative perception. The return to the film's version of actuality feels like a sharp diminishing of sensory possibilities, a circumscribing of ordinary experience rather than a re-engagement with life on more refined terms. The camera seems abruptly shorn of its wings, and the politely clapping audience within the film manifests no further need for 'breaking bounds': propitious violations of common (perhaps too common) sense. These spectators have 'gotten their money's worth', and dutifully resume contact with normative reality conventions. The everyday comes back into focus as a realm untouched by the exotic abundance that has been poured out unstintingly on the magic cinema stage. The audience members are almost relieved to bid farewell to dreamy unsettledness – an instant unlearning – as though the wonders they beheld had not amplified or enriched them.

Instead of the uncontrolled life of the drives, with its murky, licentious ambiguity, the spectators seek surface coherence and the anchor of familiarity. They shrug off the luminous flow of transcendent theatre. Where do we, as spectators of the same-but-different events, position ourselves? We are not encouraged to attach ourselves to the mindset of the confined audience within the movie. Berkeley has untwisted the chains that tie us to a movie life where everything is 'at hand', subject to the control and calculation of our habitual designs. The gaps that the enigmatic spectacle has rashly opened up supply a critique of the rules of 'reality' participation on the other side of the footlights. The production numbers are almost invariably the climax of the often dime store narratives in which they have so disproportionately lodged themselves. Almost no narrative time is allocated to the final acknowledgment of the characters' situation within the offstage world. What has previously counted as the realm of the real, and the arena of human conflict, is swiftly vanquished by the 'anti-field' of make-believe, whose fullness, aliveness, and freedom from regulation grant it more truth-telling power. Cinema as a medium of untrammelled expression and disarray is unleashed in a Berkeley number only when the stage is set before us and the houselights begin to dim. For Berkeley, as I noted earlier, theatre is the necessary portal to film's visionary power.

In the early years of the sound era, when so many ideas about talking pictures and the qualities they should aspire to were drawn from the stage, the more gifted filmmakers regarded theatre's prior, and perhaps higher, cultural status as more of an albatross than a horn of plenty. The conversational rhythms suitable for theatrical productions and the weight of the static frame were a displacement not only of silent film's visual tempo, but of the fluidity of film environments, and the swift, easy, back and forth passage from one to another. Interior and exterior spaces, in silent films, were in constant, unstrained communion. The expectation of dynamic film terrain was natural among movie spectators, in whatever location the dramatic action was set. Any environment designed for film inspection contains a variety of expressive vantage points which allow social performance and private reaction to it to intermingle and separate, at the director's discretion.

The stage world and the camera frame had not seemed irreconcilable in the silent era, but the subtraction of audible speech from the visual scheme allowed for a marked disparity in the delineation of character action. Sound's arrival and rapid entrenchment intensified the border wars between cinematic and theatrical space. The new centrality of utterance seemed to call for overtly theatrical personages, who brought with them an elaborate repertoire of gestures, verbal styles, and physicalisation strategies that differed from silent film performance but retained (very often) their distance from what we might now term conventions of naturalness. Stage performers prided themselves on a combination of precision, subtlety, and a heroic scale of behavior, the latter demanding larger than life presence and vitality. Film took possession of what the studio heads regarded as efficacious theatrical staging techniques, with the accompanying conventions of dialogue exchange, stage business, and the 'unfolding' of character through revelations in speech. In spite of the rather quick recovery of silent cinema resourcefulness in camera movement, montage, lighting, and compositional variety (and the addition of experiments in scoring and sound editing), filmmakers and the public at large preserved a large respect, bordering on reverence, for theatrical tradition and the mystique of theatre.

It was by no means Berkeley alone, in the early sound era, who explored the possibilities of transcendent theatricality. The most talented directors of the 1930s nearly all found ways to use the theatrical milieu, theatre metaphors, and conspicuous stage devices as a means of extending film reality, as well as wittily interrogating its own procedures. Rouben Mamoulian's extraordinary *Love Me Tonight* (1932), for example, opens with four Atget-influenced compositions of an actual contemporary Paris in the light of dawn, each of them silent except for the intermittent sound of a tolling cathedral bell, rousing the dormant city to life. When the real Paris is seamlessly matched with a studio version of a Paris neighborhood (convincing enough to be employed as an authentic urban landscape in a studio drama), Mamoulian views from a height the operations of a solitary street-repair worker, trundling a wheelbarrow that holds his tools onto the avenue, and pausing to commence work. As the laborer begins to



empty his wheelbarrow, we hear the rattling sounds of items hitting the cobblestone pavement. We are then permitted to view the man at closer, ground level range as he wields his pickaxe. Mamoulian makes the sound of the axe striking against cobblestone the primary shot emphasis, which sets up a logic in which the diverse street sounds begin to disengage from their visual sources and create rhythmic, synchronised patterns. The sound of the pickaxe is answered in the very next shot by the sound of a snoring tramp, who is curled up beside two massive barrels. Pickaxe and snore become alternating instruments, joined in the next shot by the sound and sight of a woman plying her audibly whisking broom in front of her doorway.

The camera then races upward to take notice of rooftop chimneys releasing early morning smoke rhythmically, accompanied by metal tapping, as other sounds find their place in the ever-complicating tempo. We shift with remarkable montage speed between high and low perspectives. Shutters open in upper stories; a baby's cry is heard; a knife-grinder audibly sharpens his blade on a frame in the courtyard; cobblers hammer nails in front of their business; the metal curtains covering the display window and door of a grocery are raised; a woman flaps towels near a wash line in an upper story; another woman in a separate window beats a rug; a cart is wheeled out of a doorway as a sudden stream of pedestrians add a volume of their own to the syncopated tumult of the district. The synchronised sound rhythms and their manner of sequential revelation lend a decisive theatrical overlay to all our visual impressions. The convincing urban setting is unmasked to exhibit a theatre setting sharing the same ground. The theatre elements emerge through the massive, artful integration of percussive effects. The uncanny reality of an inclusive, steadily enlarging stage works its way into every nook and cranny of a richly textured, atmospheric movie environment. Yet while there is no attempt to reduce the conspicuousness of theatrical devices once they have been brought into play, a stunning defamiliarisation effect that seems emphatically cinematic emerges in the midst of all the overt playful contrivance.

The sound display sharpens our sight, as it were, making us apprehend more fully the beauty of work gestures and

commonplace urban activities. Mamoulian reveals a festive dimension in the world of repetitive daily routines that outshines their drudgery dimension. Instead of monotony and confining tasks we observe a network of small, meaningful events that mysteriously compose a credible living environment. Material existence is redeemed, in Kracauer's sense of the word, by objects being lifted from the shadows to which distracted seeing and hearing have consigned them. In a manner not unlike that of De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951), or even his *Bicycle Thieves* (1947), the bits and pieces of observed phenomena that the camera serendipitously fastens on are 'lit up from within,' to use a famous phrase of André Bazin's, by the rapt delicacy of the visual treatment and the love the director feels for them ([1971] 2005: 62). We are not obliged to 'escape theatre' to achieve the impact of the reality effect. Theatrical hearing and the 'musical' editing rhythm are precisely the catalyst by which our hunger for marginal details is activated. A theatrical perspective enables us to penetrate more deeply the 'overlooked' ephemera of the agreeably dense, tactile surroundings. The overwhelming excess of visual and auditory stimuli, akin to that confronting us in any real street environment becomes, in Mamoulian's visionary transcription, a fresh spur to imaginative engagement with the world beyond the frame.

So there is indeed no telling, no way of knowing in advance what becomes of theatre when it is inserted into film. Theatre can align itself with film's deepest efforts to mirror choice fragments of 'reality' and equally with its deepest doubts about any such enterprise. (One thinks of Bazin's suggestive formulation: 'realism is more a reaction than a truth' [[1971] 2005: 64].) Theatre can serve as a safe refuge from trying life circumstances outside its orbit, or a realm where experience and understanding become more perilous and painful. Theatre can enshrine artifice or be the most efficacious instrument for breaking it down. It can legitimate the kinds of role playing that transpire throughout a film narrative or expose their evasions and fraudulence. It can mingle happily with cinema's other modes of representation or be forcefully confined to one clearly demarcated domain. The boundaries, when insisted upon, may exist for the purpose of elevating or denigrating the stage's gifts of flight and transformation. A



film setting can be reclaimed at any point as a stage setting, a film character as one who is temporarily or permanently dwelling in theatrical space. Theatre can seek out the extravagant fullness of spectacle or divulge an extreme of bareness, a ground zero space where all material accoutrements and delusive appearances have been removed. One thinks of Beckett's stage or the 'empty stage' so brilliantly theorised by Peter Brook ([1968] 1996). Theatre can seek out the shimmering, but also diamond-hard opulence of an Ophuls' opera house, or the strangely poignant simple machinery scrolling drawn landscapes of foreign lands behind the windows of a fairground railway compartment in Ophuls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). (The acknowledgement of the artifice in the latter scene offers no impediment to our belief in a romantic journey of large consequence.) Theatre can blossom in a cramped fortune teller's tent at a carnival or claim a vast outdoor vista, as when the circus wagons depart on a dusty dawn at the end of Chaplin's *The Circus* (1928). In the Chaplin scene, the tramp sits in a vanished big top ring, holding a torn paper decoration inscribed with a star. The star is associated both with his lost love and all the melted away illusion and pageantry of the circus life. Chaplin crumples the star wistfully and kicks it away behind him with a dancer's aplomb. He does not look back before wandering off across the wide, abandoned field. Is the tramp in search of another theatrical space to replace the circus ring, or does he seek a freedom beyond theatre's reach? The film leaves the question open, as does the mingled stage-film medium Chaplin self-consciously probes. His perspective is fittingly that of one always somewhat outside and at variance with whatever theatre-in-flected realm he stumbles into, yet whose dream, by turns fearful and yearning, is to be taken inside and made whole.

The rest of this essay will present an extensive analysis of the *La Traviata* theatre sequence in Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend*. I've selected this episode, in part, because it has received almost no critical attention as a theatre-in-film set piece. It is the only sustained section of the narrative in which Don Birnam's (Ray Milland) alcoholic predicament is viewed from a somewhat distanced comic perspective. This flashback interlude almost breaks the established form of the film in the course of altering its relentlessly somber tone. Don's brief

stay at the opera performance introduces a rush of surrealist mischief and libation-fuelled stage harmony in a stark, step-by-poisoned step chronicle of Don Birnam's disintegration during a five day bender. The theatre segment also coincides with Don's decision to tell the story of his unwritten novel to his bartender, Nat (Howard da Silva). Don uses his arrival at the opera house as his memory portal, which opens up an alternative beginning to his narrative, one that interrupts the determinist flow of his weekend, and gives him some room to maneuver as a fantasist, playing with serendipitous chances.

The *La Traviata* sequence and Don's follow-up enforced wait in the theatre lobby after he flees from the performance in progress, create an atmosphere of expectation which makes possible the magically theatrical first meeting of Don and Helen St. James (Jane Wyman). Helen materialises as a kind of apparition, a protective spirit drawn to the aspects of Don that are worth loving, and who believes he can be saved. We have already been introduced to Helen earlier in the film proper, as someone nervously appraising Don's performance of unper-turbed self-possession, as she debates whether she can leave him for a short while on his own. Every move of his she has contemplated thus far – in *The Lost Weekend's* present tense – has been part of a complicated masquerade, Don's desperation transmuted by a feat of actor bravado into seeming ease.

By 1945, the meeting points between stage and film could be arranged in movie narratives without the same air of competitive challenge so pronounced in the early 1930s. As I've argued, in the beginning of the sound era, much experimentation was lavished on the ways in which theatre and film could be explosively fused. The sense of stage reality was often that of a testing or proving ground for a film reality claiming its own nature through the fantastic metamorphosis of theatrical elements. By the mid-1940s, the stage seldom provoked so intensively film's efforts to disclose its own ground of being, its visionary and materialist prerogatives. But by 1945, we find another significant threshold moment, as the hermetic studio worlds of Hollywood scenarios begin to mix more freely with actual locations. There was a new reality hunger at the end of the war, driven in part by the 'documentary feel' of the first Italian neo-realist films, which seemed like a natural continuation and extension of the documentary still

photograph tradition of the American Depression. The studio-built settings not only in run-of-the-mill features but in high-budgeted films revealed, unwittingly, a more troubling connection to fabrication, and the sequestered-from-life frivolity of mere playacting. Prior to the end-of-war enticements of more authentic-seeming urban images, the atmosphere of reality in film was achieved without a strong audience awareness of what was, by design, omitted. There was not a felt division for regular moviegoers between 'actuality' as a possible starting point for film storytelling and the cunningly engineered environments of the studio-made counterfeits. Perhaps the vast number of war films which attempted to create visually persuasive renderings of 'fresh from the headlines' American military campaigns in Europe and Asia generated a demand for greater external verisimilitude in other kinds of film drama. One must also factor in the collective civilian response in the United States to the spectacular range and depth of war carnage – cities turned to ruins from carpet bombing, concentration camps, inconceivable death tolls, the loss of any sense of civilised order and proportion. The world suddenly needed to be apprehended at closer range, with a kind of amazement at the sheer fact of surviving presence: the raw, intimate texture of a place's *thereness*, or more aptly, *still-thereness*. As found rather than built locales became a new Hollywood convention, previously 'good enough' representations of crowded thoroughfares and rented apartments, urban parks, offices and taverns became suspect, as though a recreation bore the stigma of fantasy. If real places were sought out rather than vaguely approximated through stage-like facsimiles, spectator belief and full emotional engagement with movie stories – maintaining at least intermittent contact with the real – would be enhanced. James Agee's film criticism of the period is filled with exhortations to filmmakers to locate shards of 'uninvented' or 'unaltered' reality in their work, and Agee was profusely grateful for every image in touch with 'the cruel radiance of what is' ([1941] 1974: 11). In summary, glossy representations of the pseudo-real became the new index of objectionable theatricality, a limiting connection with fanciful, too overt 'imitations' of life.

The Lost Weekend, as part of this new wave of gritty, urban investigations, promoted its unusually extensive employment

of New York locations to certify the seriousness of its attempt to move beyond Hollywood tricks and softening (Sikov 1998: 220–221). It would strive to depict an alcoholic's milieu without the stratagems so customary in *false* environments. The stage metaphor in 1945 might readily be invoked to explain a thinning out of perceptual challenge, a preference for selective, shallow focusing rather than the tumultuous brouhaha of the urban wilderness. 'Setting in depth', not merely a technique but an ideal, comprehensive vantage point, permits movies to uncover areas of their subject matter which backdrops, landscapes smelling of paint, and tidy arrangements of action on one or two planes would stylise or suppress. The look of film noir, as opposed to social problem realism, was, of course, theatrically stylised, but the Expressionist dimension seemed a fitting metaphysical wardrobe for the haunted, dislocated scavengers of lost memory moving through noir's dream-like, chiaroscuro mazes.

The *La Traviata* drinking scene in *The Lost Weekend* is not merely a stage interlude (opera no less) in an ambitious urban melodrama, but a distillation of everything that theatre signifies in 1945 as a sanctuary from the real, and a bulwark set against the search for a new vocabulary of photographic expression. The theatre is under pressure to reveal all the ways in which it is blind to (and utterly remote from) the perceptual exigencies and anxiety of Don Birnam's plight. Intriguingly, however, theatre also serves as a means of replenishment for a range of human attitudes and values that the doom-laden scenario that briefly intersects with it feels cut off from.

The sequence begins at Nat's Bar around noon, when Don, already inebriated, is flirting with Gloria, a call girl, and teasing her with the possibility of a theatre date that evening. He mentions a production of the uncut *Hamlet* that is currently running nearby (the five acts of the tragedy subtly linked to the five days of his epic debauch), and suggests that it might be a lark to see it together. He invites Gloria to speculate on Hamlet's character, perhaps mindful of the parallels with his own abiding weaknesses: a paralyzed will, and an incapacity to be forthright with the women who are drawn to him. When Gloria leaves the bar, elated that sophisticated Don has agreed to have a 'dress up' evening out with her, Nat – the bar's owner – reacts angrily, accusing Don of treating Gloria and his more





serious 'high class' love interest, Helen, with deceit and contempt. He toys with the possibility of expelling Don from the tavern. To reingratiate himself, Don decides to share with Nat some unsavory, self-flagellating highlights from his still unwritten autobiographical novel, *The Bottle*. Its plot will presumably supply answers to the questions Nat has raised. Why is Don's relationship with the admirable Helen so vexed and punishing, and why is he unable to stop drinking? He promises Nat that it will be a horror story, and, as if to make good on his claim, commences his flashback telling at a point three years ago, when his alcoholic identity is already well-established. He announces 'Chapter One', but it is not a hopeful narrative beginning, suggesting that he cannot retrieve a separate meaning or alternative path for his character from a time before the onset of his addiction.

The tale starts in medias res, with the fateful decisions already made, and Don's prospects already dim. We discover Don, in the visual staging of the transition to flashback time, as part of a crowd of theatregoers, perceived first in what seems the blurry mist of what Don recalls as a 'wet afternoon'. As the image gains sobriety focus, we are able to pick out Don sporting a derby, an anonymous member of the pressing throng in the lobby of the Met. He makes his first distinguishing gesture in the act of covertly transferring a pint of rye whiskey from his suit coat pocket to the pocket of his raincoat. Within moments, a young man has collected Don's raincoat and derby and given him a coat-check claim ticket. The sounds of *La Traviata* are already audible in the lobby. We hear the jaunty strain of the champagne song, 'Libiamo ne lieti calici' (Let's drink from the joyful chalices) as Don watches his coat and its precious contents being carried away. Wilder adroitly establishes the claim ticket as having an importance at least equivalent to the unseen opera ticket. Catching up with the opera in progress, we track forward in the next shot to locate Don's position in the theatre audience as the drinking song, still unseen, is getting underway. Don is still reading his program while everyone around him attends to Alfredo's onstage acceptance of the invitation to sing.

Alfredo is showing off his vocal prowess in an 18th century Parisian salon, a more refined version of what Nat in the tavern referred to as Don's 'making with the mouth' as he

holds court on his barstool, garrulously confiding to anyone willing to pay heed to his drunken rigmarole. The informal action of the barroom performance space has been cleverly transposed to the opera stage. Gloria, the good-hearted call girl enamoured of Don's air of worldly charm and breeding, is analogous to Violetta, la dame aux camellias, in *La Traviata*, a renowned courtesan whose tragedy will in part be caused by her being lured, despite her accumulated cynicism, into a serious love relationship with Alfredo. The shapelessness of Don's unwritten 'Gothic novel', which he says is 'all in his mind' and will, when he finds the resolve to commit it to paper, probe the unchangeable malady that consumes him, is in marked contrast with the perfect form of Violetta's descent to death. Her narrative is driven by the twin agents of love and an equally incurable illness.

The magic lightness, cordiality, and seeming harmony of the Act One champagne song is a powerful temporary structure of feeling which will, in the way of opera, be raised high as a musical act of faith only to be shattered into heaps by later eruptions of contingency and misunderstanding. This portion of the opera, in other words, brings a realm of perfect fellowship into being as a dazzling apparition, which the audience is encouraged to escape into, with no sense of burden. While the song lasts, we can luxuriate in forgetfulness. The future consequence of sportive revelry and tipsy elated pledges are well-hidden. What we behold onstage is a beautiful picture of order, where voices join as one, and every cup is refilled as soon as it is emptied. Violetta and the chorus enjoin us to become live-for-the-moment hedonists: 'Let's enjoy the wine and the singing, the beautiful night and the laughter. Let the new day find us in paradise.' The opera spectator takes his strongest cue from Alfredo, still blooming with youthful idealism, who finds his full, ardent voice as he urges everyone present to 'drink from the joyful chalices that beauty so truly enhances'. The spectator is allowed a prolonged view of an ambrosial heaven, which music lends solidity by transfiguring physical life.

It should be noted that the drinking song, while presenting plentiful impressions of gratifying concord, contains an undercurrent of disconnection. Alfredo and Violetta have different conceptions of pleasure and love at this point, which

do not come into open conflict, but are not reconciled either. They offer opposing assumptions in a festive mood that makes them sound the same, as though the gap is being overcome. Alfredo believes that the fleeting pleasures of the bacchanalia attain value when they serve as a prelude to enduring love. Violetta argues that carnal delights are like all other 'foolish pleasures'. Passion's quest is but one more frivolous pursuit, which quickly runs its course. To complicate matters further, Violetta's amused detachment masks an extraordinarily deep capacity for romantic subjection. Alfredo's faith in beauty and the truth of 'ecstatic feeling', in contrast, is pure, but untested. He has been in love with Violetta for months, a commitment she does not yet take seriously. Alfredo is also, however, very much ruled by social convention, and this is something that neither of them knows at this juncture. Violetta may well suspect that he is an 'excitable' youthful type that she has often encountered, but love, when it takes hold of her in a final fierce contest with the hold of her illness, will make her indifferent to all her sensible early intuitions. The push for a unified vision of celebration in the drinking song is, in part, designed to move Violetta's urbane perspective closer to Alfredo's fervid, trusting utopianism. The tilt toward persuasion and harmonious convergence ironically sets the tragedy of the opera in motion. Agreement about the value of love has a price. Violetta's enviable sense of freedom and self-possession will soon be gone.

What would audiences of *The Lost Weekend* in 1945 be likely to project onto the meticulously recreated stage world of *La Traviata*? Spectators could not easily forget the recent wholesale destruction of Italian cities and the disintegration of civilised values in Europe (order certainly among them). The Italy of Verdi must have seemed irretrievable. Paris, where *La Traviata* is set, had just been liberated from four years of Nazi occupation, with a shameful shadow history of collaboration. An exuberant Alfredo, in a light suit with a flowing cravat, stands on a stage filled with candle lit chandeliers, candles in sconces and on tables in candelabra – war's fires, moderated and contained. The banks of candle light create a protective circle of radiance for a serene assemblage of party guests to inhabit. Behind a row of tables, whose white coverings match the frilly gowns of the female salon guests,

is a massive Rococo painting in the style of Fragonard, and on either side of it high, double-sided windows, a lustrous fragility backed by darkness. The scene has a quality of spectral emanation from an era doubly extinguished, first by time's ordinary passage, second by the just completed catastrophe, which mocks and mourns such oblivious gaiety. By now the skeleton and ghosts from the theatricals in *La Regle du jeu* have become massive and inescapable, and are putting the finishing touches on their dreadful, long harvest. The crowd in this ancient drawing room cannot reckon with the darkness behind their glass-paned sanctuary. They seem bewitched, held in an amnesia spell which will be kept alive by their solidarity, and the bravura force of their choral singing. Their island is safe from the future's invasion, but the ground of *La Traviata* is less firm than it used to be. The entire apparatus is kept alive by a war-weary opera audience's willingness to animate the spectacle with an act of self-conscious, perhaps excessively taxing belief. The Verdi fantasy requires mental reinforcement and a selective blotting out of 'too immediate' woes. This forgetting intriguingly mirrors that of the onstage choristers, in their elaborate wigs, frock coats, and gowns.

Don Birnam's spectator challenge is, from the outset, notably at odds with that of the audience surrounding him. In a sense, his involuntary level of assent to the 'truth' being represented exceeds everyone else's. He is completely caught up in the action onstage. His connection with the stage illusion grows steadily more binding as the song proceeds. Yet he is rewriting the narrative as he watches, pointing it in a viscerally more desperate direction. Don bypasses the genial argument of the singing lovers-to-be, and in fact can scarcely attend to their central position onstage. He decomposes the official proscenium picture designed by the opera's director, and in its place conducts a private visual pursuit of overdetermined objects – champagne bottles and brimming, stemware glasses transported on trays. The stage is entirely commandeered, Hitchcock-style, by point-of-view shots from Don's (implied) perspective. His single-minded concern with drinking leads us from one upraised glass to another across the entire playing area. The singers are reduced to chalice bearers. The silent, bewigged servants in tailcoats, on the other hand, who carry the champagne in bottles or on drink-laden trays

become the dominant personages, transforming inconspicuous background action into arrestingly dramatic foreground. Their back and forth movements are closely monitored because they are in control of the treasured alcohol, and determine its trajectory. Don watches Alfredo and Violetta drink (in close-up) from their glasses as they pause from singing, as though the music were a mere tease leading to the suspenseful culmination of ecstatic tasting. Behind this couple, other drinkers begin to sway in a trance-like manner, their glasses functioning like a hypnotist's twirling watch, inducing a spell in Don. As these men and women move off to the left, they create a human curtain, which parts to disclose a large ornate champagne bucket against the rear wall of the set, stocked with seven bottles thrusting outward from a bed of ice. Two more servants stand motionless on either side of the bucket, like an honor guard, holding open champagne bottles in their hands with a reverence befitting spiritual artifacts.

Alfred Hitchcock no doubt drew upon this episode for the famous Sebastian party sequence in *Notorious* (1946) the following year. Concurrent with spying activity centered on keys and a dangerous planned visit to a wine cellar, the viewer of *Notorious* is made to feel uneasy about the dwindling stock of champagne at the party itself. Hitchcock highlights trays of champagne glasses, party guests' hands eagerly taking them, and bottles on ice being opened by a servant behind a lengthy impromptu bar, as the available stock rapidly thins out. A comparison of the overt stage activity in *The Lost Weekend* with the party events in *Notorious* makes it clear that Hitchcock conceived of his charged social gathering as clandestine theatre. The stage is fully operational, but not explicitly declared. The point of view of the hostess, Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) – herself a reformed drunkard – who fears the guests will consume the champagne too plentifully, thus causing her husband to need the wine cellar key she has stolen from his keyring, transforms the entire meaning of the party into one woman's mounting anxiety: a private stage performance choreographed entirely by her fearful, roving gaze.

In Wilder's *La Traviata* sequence, the vision of liquid abundance is not (as in Hitchcock) about a hidden agenda. For the characters onstage, everything having to do with drink is out in the open, frankly declared and tenaciously indulged.



The open stage world powerfully contrasts with Don's shameful alcoholic secrecy. Drinking and more drinking is the only activity that links all the choristers together. A perfect drinkers' temple temporarily comes into being before Don's swimming senses that has but one purpose: merry, harmless, in fact irreproachable, intoxication. Don is emotionally united with the staged tipsy assemblage. He is at one, he imagines, with the values being celebrated. But his intense involvement with onstage gestures and signifiers missed by the audience at large – indeed, the force of his imaginative collaboration – ironically reactivates the sense of exclusion that he experiences in all the socially normative spaces of his own life. The logic of social integration presented in the *La Traviata* scene implies that to *belong*, one must have a literal drink in one's hand. The possession of one's own filled glass is what permits you to be inside rather than outside the spectacle.



The comedy of the sequence is built on the tension between an invitation to pleasure and excess, offered at increasingly close range by a subjective camera fused with Don's desired objects, and the stubborn fact of spectator distance. The feeling of 'film vision' proximity is continually enhanced, in tandem with the *gap* of theatrical separation. Film seeing is so often predicated on our being so 'incorporated' in what we are looking at that we forget that we don't actually possess it. Seeing and hearing can often weave us into a fantasy space that abolishes alienation. What we behold – once we have entered the mindset of the film's world – appears to be ours for the taking. Don's theatre perception, for that reason, is sharply at variance with normal film perception. The rules of theatre spectatorship within film is that theatre viewers generally know their place, which is to say their bodily placement, more clearly. They retain the awareness of the stage as a material medium, located at a fixed distance from their seat.

The movie spectator's sense of distance from the cinema screen is one that film is at great pains to dissolve. The stream of film images, as many theorists have noted, has much in common with the language of dream and daydream, both of which have an immense ongoing role to play in our inner life. If the boundary between screen and inner life is blurred, the spectator will receive cinematic experience in a less consciously mediated fashion, as though it were transpiring not

externally but within the spectator, in a manner analogous to dream, memory, fantasy. The seat one occupies at a movie theatre is no barrier to a more intricate sustained placement within the film frame. Theatre, though associated with 'live experience' rather than manufactured simulation, maintains the consciousness of physical separation from the stage as part of its reality effect. One can become deeply involved in theatre performance without losing the awareness of viewing and hearing from a certain remove. The audience space divides us from the performed action. Cinema preserves this condition of intervening space and spectator distance when depicting stage events on film. The audience space is always dramatically in play, communing in its own theatrical manner with the events onstage.

Movie characters watching a stage are rendered more dynamic if the emotional impact and challenge of distance – a systole-diastole of distance dwindling, then being reasserted – are made an integral part of the presentation. The auditorium is a second stage space, as it were. Billy Wilder's *Love in the Afternoon* (1957) provides a brilliant demonstration of the audience as a distinct performance domain, where the fact of distance is the substance of the drama. While the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is playing in a sumptuous opera house, Ariane Chavasse (Audrey Hepburn) is seated in high balcony, distracted and daydreaming, while her date listens enraptured to every phrase, conducting with his hands as he follows along in his own copy of the score. All at once, Ariane's attention is caught by the arrival, far below her, of Frank Flannagan (Gary Cooper), the millionaire playboy with whom she is romantically obsessed. Frank's seat is in the front row, at ground level, very close to the orchestra. Ariane seizes her date's opera glasses and tries to bring Frank into sharper focus, and nearer to her. He is seated next to his own date, with his back turned. Equally unmindful of Wagner's seductive musical force, Frank flips through his program, then rolls it up and converts it into a makeshift telescope. He randomly directs his spyglass to other sections of the audience. A visual comic love duet is superimposed on Wagner's majestically yearning, doleful overture as Ariane – in close-up – remains riveted on Flannagan's activities in the theatre's cavernous



depths, while his blithe, womaniser's scan of the crowd for more engaging prospects fails to locate her.

I have stressed this issue of the spectator 'playing area' and the awareness of distance from the actual stage because they figure decisively in the last phase of Don's viewing of the drinking song. As I previously observed, Don's cheated point-of-view shots move us extremely close to the opera action, though his seat is separated by many rows from the stage. His perception has the camera's freedom to magnify and hyperbolise whatever drink-related details intrigue him. The framing and cutting align with (and give full license to) Don's revision of the dramatic meaning and flow of Violetta and Alfredo's musical exchange. However, the freedom to reconstitute the operatic performance, according to his private needs, coexists with the necessity of banishment from the festivities. He is trapped in a seat at the remote outskirts of the bacchanal, where deprivation is absolute. He suffers (comically) for being utterly cut off from the filmic line of action he discerns and orchestrates. Don is, in one sense, integrated into the drinking scene in precisely the same fashion that the film viewer is. This level one union is in sync with the effortless sharing and fellowship of pleasure that is everywhere ratified onstage. But Don's literal spectator detachment from the very spectacle his imagination narrates, ironically turns all the signs of onstage togetherness into repudiation. It is as though the smiling choristers with their lifted champagne glasses are conspiring to ignore him, to deny him the hospitality available to all the other guests, to render him invisible. No servant will catch his eye and either acknowledge him or carry the drink tray in his direction. So, from the position of theater viewer disenfranchisement, Don feels compelled to launch an even more subjective assault on the staged proceedings.

In a comic prefiguring of *The Lost Weekend's* climactic, harrowing delirium tremens episode, Don suddenly converts (by hallucination) the actual swaying dancers onstage into a row of disembodied cloakroom raincoats. A chorus line of mackintoshes, extending from stage foreground to background, gently swings in time with the song's rhythm. The rhythm itself, though not audibly distorted, comes to seem more plaintively clock-bound, as though passing moments were insistently marked, signaling the loss or draining away

of our too brief time on earth. Don is extending the prerogatives of point-of-view camera authorship here still further, bringing the stage picture into fuller harmony with himself. He translates, by hallucinatory fiat, whatever is alien and separate in the celebration into images of belonging. One of the swaying coats teasingly discloses a bulging pocket, which Don is able to see through, as though a final manifestation of theatrical illusion were being offered for his gratification. Inside the pocket a whiskey pint materialises. The bottle, in effect, breaks the fourth wall, casting an anthropomorphic glance outward into the audience and finding Don, meeting his gaze, as the joyfully inebriated salon guests declined to do. Don's self-made cinematic environment onstage becomes a prison-house of subjectivity. He dispatches, first, the logic of the opera, then its material conditions in exchange for the dream of a coat (a means of covering up). The bottle within the coat seems to take possession of Don in the act of unveiling and sighting him. It defines him unnervingly as an appendage of itself. The bottle is hidden in this fantasy projection to every spectator but Don. Hiddenness in relation to alcohol (covering up) displaces a ghostly social world in which drinking is hyper-visible, the lynchpin of all positive human connection.

Another surprising metamorphosis, which is crucial to our understanding of the *La Traviata* scene, takes place in Ray Milland, the actor. He briefly sheds his affiliation with Don's desolate estrangement, and reconnects with the romantic comedy persona familiar to film audiences from his previous ten years as both contract player and star at Paramount. The beginning of the 'going to the theatre' flashback interrupts the steady downward movement of *The Lost Weekend* narrative and implies – in spite of Don's preliminary insistence that he was already a drunk *then* – that we will be granted a reprieve, as Don recalls the initial phase of his relationship with Helen. Milland's series of reaction shots to the *La Traviata* libation orgy are all keyed in to the comic notion that he has made a disastrous choice of escapist fare. The internal burden appears to lighten for Milland's character even as his desire to obtain a drink escalates. Milland does not overplay his responses, but we are meant to recognise a kinship at this point between the face of discomfiture Don displays and the faces of the many hapless characters Milland has previously played who all at

once find themselves, like Don Birnam at the 'wrong' opera, in an amusing fix.

The proximity of an artificial stage milieu, in combination with the memory of Don (just before) initiating a tavern yarn which he hopes will garner some sympathy from his bartender audience, create a protective aura around the figure at the center of the story 're-enactment'. This nattier dressed and less hardened Don is no longer adrift in an oppressively real urban environment. He has stepped – like a fictive personage – into a stylised sanctuary where the drinks are 'pretend' champagne and the performers follow a pattern of merrymaking that is securely choreographed and without any hint of strain. Milland's demeanour is free to shift over to a mode of response that invites pleasurable viewer complicity. Confronted with overtly theatrical difficulties, Milland is temporarily released from the duties of full-scale anxiety. Wilder uses Milland's *other* face strategically in this interlude. It provides the viewer with sudden reassuring access to the dominant convention of lighthearted intoxication scenes in Hollywood film.

The vast majority of scenes portraying drunkenness in American movies made prior to 1945 are playful and mischievous. They promote a much-valued loosening of constraint – a welcome surrender to giddiness and irresponsibility. Nick Charles, of *The Thin Man* series, was the representative alcoholic of 1930s Hollywood cinema – usually soused, but never to the point where his wit and charm founder, and whose only drink-related problem was a bad hangover. One-night benders were sometimes viewed in a melancholy light, but the excess was seldom linked to addiction. *The Lost Weekend's* pointed determination to oppose this convention – to overthrow the regime of droll inebriation – naturally creates a countervailing pressure to return to familiar territory. The suppression of comedy in the rendering of Don's binge heightens the desire for an acknowledgment of laughter's cleansing force. Comic freedom is a sphere of knowledge (and expectation) that lies adjacent to the newly cold and dreary nightspots of the *authentic* 'naked city'. Wilder employs theatre then as a cunning passageway back to the traditional wisdom of what spirited revelry can accomplish. Milland's mask of sodden cynicism – within the confines of the 'horror story' he claims

to be telling – briefly comes loose, and Milland the genial comic actor is permitted to stare hungrily at a staged version of the lost frivolous pleasures that his current role, and the imprisoning world that go with it, have cut him off from. It is not merely a drink that Milland craves, but the cost-free brio that is one of its reliable cinematic privileges.

As the drinking song concludes and the audience within the film greets it with enthusiastic applause, Milland feels obliged to abandon his theatre seat and turn his back on the stage spectacle. Though his squirming overinvestment in the champagne utopia (a utopia itself cut off from the Violetta tragedy that has not yet found its footing) unleashes laughter of the old-fashioned, gladdening sort, the flashback episode's linkage with Milland's star persona remains precarious. The fact of Milland's lack of fit in *this* story with the maze of artifice set before him, causes the actor to flee, perhaps reluctantly, back to the weightier reality Don Birnam's desperate condition has called into being. But in fact Milland cannot shake off his old persona just yet, nor can Don Birnam achieve an easy escape from the space of theatre.

With the music of Verdi still audible on the soundtrack, we watch Don move briskly down a hallway leading to the cloak room. Don presents the attendant (Frank Orth) stationed there with a second ticket of admission – his claim check ticket – which promises to afford him more reliable, tangible entertainment than *La Traviata*. The cloak room, however, does not stand separate from the theatre he has just vacated. It is rather a continuation of the stage realm, part of the building devoted to theatrical exhibitions. The desk where the attendant is roused by Don's early 'exit' and demand for his coat forms a smaller version of the opera stage, with an equally untraversable barrier. The attendant is, in effect, a comic surrogate for the bartenders such as Nat whom Don regularly confronts, with a similar power to bestow or withhold the 'relief' that Don longs for. Don's departure from the theatre is significantly delayed by a confusion over ticket and coat match-up. Instead of his own raincoat (with its secret stash of rye) Don's ticket obtains – through a mistaken identity imbroglio – a woman's leopard skin jacket. Don's coat is hidden away somewhere in the mass of other opera patrons' apparel, over which the attendant stands watch. The attendant

refuses Don's demand to enter this second stage area and conduct a search for his missing coat.

As with his viewing of the opening aria of Verdi, Don's spectator position is rife with vexation and a sense of exclusion. The opera stage and cloak room both initially promise an easy route to felicity, in one case, a musical respite from pressing worries, in the second, the retrieval of his property through a reliable social form of exchange. The opera stage presentation, after bombarding Don with taunting images of 'not having', is overthrown by Don's fantasy of bobbing raincoats, one of which contains a reminder that real (not make-believe) liquid salvation lies within his reach. When Don arrives at the second, cloak room proscenium, where the 'real thing' presumably awaits him, he is presented with an exotic, faintly absurd 'female' substitute for the coat he naturally expects – a theatrical prop coat, as it were.

The comic tone established in Don's emotional ambush by the Verdi drinking song is strategically extended by Wilder in the cloak room dispute. The attendant regards himself as a theatrical personage – the Guardian of Order – and fends off Don's surly, loud protests with the sturdy aplomb of a man who has served a long apprenticeship in farce. Ray Milland's full return to the identity of 'Don Birnam' is delayed by this somewhat stylised, histrionic encounter. Don's agitation is dramatically softened by a deliberately highlighted plot contrivance. The world where dispiriting accidents occur is the real world, but accidents of *this* sort (the timely arrival of a mysterious coat belonging, we have no doubt, to a beautiful woman and a prospective partner in love) are bright confectations, infused with the airy determinism of romantic comedy. The coat offers a secure basis for 'meeting cute'. The more galling determinism of Don Birnam's falling again and again into the throes of his addiction is temporarily offset by the lighter fatedness of fairy tale romance. Perhaps we recall Don, at this point, in his role of barstool raconteur, concocting a fable for Nat that will make him a sympathetic ally. Moviegoers of 1945 might well be reminded of Ray Milland's first romantic comedy hit, *Easy Living* (1937), whose plot is set in motion by a costly woman's fur coat being tossed out of a penthouse window, and landing – oh propitious accident – on Jean Arthur

(Milland's soon-to-be love interest) as she rides atop an open air double decker bus.

While Don is forced to sit disconsolately on the opera house stairway – awaiting the end of *La Traviata* and the sorting out of the coat muddle – he settles still further into the recognisable manner of Milland's star persona. He stylishly renders his impatience. Within the context of *The Lost Weekend*, this former, less shackled version of the actor [the star the audience knows] is strongly associated with the values of theatricality and its gallant propensities, rather than the stern strictures of film realism. We hear snatches of the opera as Milland sits, bemused and frustrated, on the carpeted lower steps. The music behind the wall marches Violetta inexorably toward her doom, but on our side of the theatrical partition, comedy has bought itself some time to play out a less drastic scenario. The neighbouring orchestral sounds emphasise Don's separation from grandiose moods: a reprieve from the grip of compulsion. Compulsion, of course, frequently unfolds in the language of melodrama. Don / Milland is, after all, merely waiting, resignedly wagging the umbrella (which came with the leopard jacket at the coat check counter) as though it were a conductor's baton, rather than frantically seeking a drink. Wilder creates an emotional polarisation between vying forms of theatrical activity. The storm and stress of not to be deterred opera misfortune contrasts with a man holding himself in readiness for a possible shift in circumstance, a meeting that is likely to supply a different kind of rescue than he anticipates. As Milland submits to the changing demands of his theatre environment, it seems as though the film narrative itself is opening up to a new tone and fresh possibilities of development. The theatre space becomes a useful arena of indecision and tantalising wavering for Wilder the director.

Films with a too controlling thesis, and accompanying pedagogic baggage, often face the problem of appearing too intent and clear about what needs to be communicated. A film, especially one with polemical urges, can know too well what it's about, and make that very fullness of purpose a route to falsehood. Theatre offers a space that registers doubt about the necessity of a fixed tone, and of a too narrative conception of the reality principle. In Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), one

of Barton Keyes's (Edward G. Robinson) most important narrative responsibilities is to be comic playwright-in-residence in the Insurance Company claims office. He keeps *Double Indemnity* from getting locked in a somber melodramatic mode by reimagining one crime after another in exuberantly comic terms. He uses the various spaces of the insurance company that he pops up in as ready-to-hand stages for his impromptu performances. He enthralls his listeners by exposing the 'bad plotting' of his greedy criminal adversaries. He offers bravura reconstructions of their sordid schemes once he has seen through their defective story construction. By conceiving, with Olympian detachment, all crimes as failed theatrical ventures, Keyes creates vital counterpoint for the increasingly grim writhings of Neff and Dietrichson in their loveless entanglement. They achieve a greater measure of realism in their sustained conflict and double-cross because of Keyes' antic effrontery, his ceaseless theatrical testing of every character's angle. Keyes's dramatist presence gives the world of *Double Indemnity* a plurality of available tones, and its reality principle a renewable comic dynamism.

The trip to the theatre in *The Lost Weekend* does not, of course, remove or even reduce Don's resolve to obtain alcohol, but it provides a different lens for contemplating it. His drive is relaxed through a disproportionate fantasy interruption. He is stymied, here as elsewhere, by conditions blocking his gratification, but in the little drama with the amusingly stubborn master of cloak room protocol, he is assigned a task to perform that involves another person's well-being. In place of his own pint to hold, he is given a coat, and the mere act of holding it for a length of time, however grudgingly, establishes a connection with its undisclosed owner. When Don finally discovers her – they are the last two occupants of a hallway that moments before had been teeming with patrons eager to reclaim their coats and depart – they are alone together, on a markedly silent stage. In addition to the folded coats they carry, Helen raises a comically forlorn derby as 'identifier' and Don still clutches a woman's umbrella. In the foreground is a pillared, sand-filled, standing ashtray, in which Don has wittily stubbed out his rolled up opera program.

Once the coats have been traded and Don has made sure that that his bottle remains safely stowed in the pocket, he





reveals that he has had 'three long acts to work you out from that coat of yours'. He has built up a picture of Helen's likely name and type from the owner's initials on a sewn tag and the Toledo location of the furrier. Prior to the commencement of articulate flirtation banter, Don roughly responds to her request for her umbrella. After snarling 'Catch', he tosses it haphazardly in her direction. Her retrieving gesture is mistimed, and the umbrella makes a jarring noise resembling a gunshot as it strikes the bare floor. This graceless toss and drop literally restore gravity to the proceedings. The unexpected violation of a smooth, precise stage rhythm in their opening exchange throws us back, sharply, to the dominant *Lost Weekend* tone of despondent harshness. Wilder choreographs this crucial 'break' as though it were an onstage blunder during a performance. An intended action is spoiled by a performer fumbling or mistiming her response. Reality suddenly seeps into dramatic artifice through the gap created by an accident. Milland promptly recovers his grace and self-possession after Helen describes him as 'the rudest person I've ever met', which is equivalent to an actor cleverly repairing the breach. The umbrella 'detonation' as it hits the floor inside the opera house serves an even more important function by preparing us for a rhyming action that will come soon afterward. As Don and Helen leave the theatre and encounter a still-in-progress rainstorm, Don's whiskey bottle slips from his pocket and shatters on the sidewalk, in full view of Helen. The humiliating exposure of Don's hidden object / vice, conjoined with the bottle smashing and thus emptying its precious contents, breaks the spell of the comedy and romance interlude that the theatre sanctuary had made possible. It's noteworthy that Don and Helen's delight in sparkling give-and-take precisely coincides with their lengthy traversal of corridors and stairways as they slowly depart the theatre building. Once they arrive outside – a threshold crossing forcefully marked by the appearance of gusting rain and early evening darkness – the weight of the conversation grows notably heavier. Don reverts to calculation and subterfuge, and Helen's impulsive invitation to join her at a New York party is seized upon by Don because it affords a solution to the problem of the lost pint of rye. Alcohol counts for

more than Helen's own presence in his swift decision to accept her offer.

Almost immediately Don's flashback story is replaced by an image of Don still glibly holding forth in Nat's bar as Nat cleans up. The chance of an auspicious start to a meaningful love story must be evaluated entirely by reference to the theatrical frame within which all the events we have witnessed transpired. We are led from a positive to a negative reading of theatre's implications by the jolting reminder of Don as self-pitying tale spinner. Don misrepresenting himself to Helen out in the rain, followed by his failure to make good on the initial favorable impression he has made, decisively undermines Milland's fleeting retrieval of his insouciant star persona. The theatre excursion now may strike us as a retreat from self-awareness, a journey into illusion akin to Don's bouts of drunkenness.

Surprisingly, however, as *The Lost Weekend* nears its ending and the narrative attempts to give Don a credible hope of self-reclamation, theatre is once again called upon to provide 'reality' with an adjoining space of possibility. The coat mix-up so central to the theatre episode is recapitulated after Don touches bottom. That nadir point arrives with his DTs hallucination of a bat fiercely attacking a mouse that peeps out of a hole in the wall of his room. The mouse's lifeblood streaming down the wall subtly resembles the spreading stain of whiskey, and the mingled association conveys the draining away of Don's will to survive. It is intriguing that as we arrive at the culmination of the film's realist excavation of alcoholic experience, we shift to mental theatre, a fantasy of horror played out on Don's mindscreen. The problem Wilder faces in his closing scenes is how to introduce the rhetoric of redemption in such a way that it does not betray the film's reality effect – its essential grounding in a starkly authentic, inhospitable urban milieu.

His Lubitsch-inspired tactic is to make the crucial moments in Don's metamorphosis play out through our engagement with objects. Wilder selects Helen's and Don's coats for further dramatic attention precisely because they are imbued with a kind of magic and power, derived from our first encounter with them in the cloak room playlet. Don and Helen both make reference to the coats as linked

to the beginning of their *story*, a narrative they believe is, to some degree, distinguishable from the counter-story of Don's addiction. Don and Helen's fairy tale challenge is to interpret accurately the concealed meaning of the other's 'performative utterance' with Helen's coat, which, in effect, turns into Don's coat once it is stolen and pawned for a hidden object. Helen is reunited with Don in a nursing capacity at the end of his 'lost weekend', though his mood remains hopeless. When she falls asleep at his place, Don steals her leopard skin jacket and takes it to a pawnbroker. Initially misconstruing his gesture as a total repudiation of their relationship, and a callous betrayal, Helen locates the pawnshop and arrives there without any coat in spite of a rainstorm, which echoes Don and Helen's first post-theatre contact with the world outside as a newly formed romantic pair.

She discovers at the pawnshop that Don has not pawned the jacket for drink money, as she feared, but has swapped it for a gun, with which he intends to kill himself. The decision to trade the coat for a gun reconstitutes the jacket as an emblem of value. Don is not contemptuous or unmindful of the coat's prior significance. Rather, because he can no longer conceive of himself as a person worthy of it, believing he can do nothing for its owner but further augment her pain, he severs their tie by choosing to give up booze and life with one stroke. He imagines that his theft of the coat will prove to Helen that he cares nothing for her, and thus set her free, when in fact it convinces her that she is the only living figure who has not emotionally dissolved for him. Helen fathoms the mystery of the theft correctly, and leaves the coat with the pawnbroker, running back to Don's apartment while getting soaked to the skin (in a manner that anticipates Shirley MacLaine's New Year's Eve run at the end of Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960), also linked to a pending threat of suicide). Helen's abandonment of any thought of protective covering for herself gives the viewer a visceral sense that she is attuned to Don's degree of 'exposure', and is prepared to meet him in that spiritual place. Back at Don's apartment, his willingness to open the door and let her in, which pulls him away from his inspection of himself in the bathroom mirror, on the verge of his contemplated shooting, suggests that he has been drawn, at least for the moment, out of his trance of utter estrangement.

His ability to respond to her restores a sense of otherness to his shrunken world. As he urges her to leave, he is conscious of her sopping wet state and offers her his raincoat so that her return to the streets will be less punishing.

As she stands near the doorway, Helen is granted a propitious, almost supernatural view of Don's revolver in the bathroom, through an oval mirror reflection. This sighting is meant as a corrective to the language of hallucination earlier in the narrative, including both the DTs segment and Don's opera fantasy of the dancing raincoat, when the pint of rye materialises, through a blend of stage and cinema sorcery, within the coat pocket. After spotting the gun's reflection, Helen retrieves a half empty liquor bottle that she has concealed in an umbrella stand (and in so doing, harkens back to the umbrella from the theatre scene, in another instance of sleight-of-hand transformation). She urges Don to choose the glass of whiskey she pours for him over the gun, and offers to drink with him.

Helen's last theatrical action is to take over Don's previous role of barroom storyteller, pleading with him to conceive a new life narrative in which his drinker and writer selves are no longer regarded as separate beings, but aspects of a single person. Don gradually enters into the spirit of her reworking of his story, and demonstrates his resolve to start afresh as writer by dropping a lit cigarette into his beckoning whiskey glass, thus converting the Traviata 'chalice of joy' into an ashtray. This action is linked to a recurring Milland gag – highlighting his comedy persona – of him turning his cigarette around in his mouth so he doesn't try to light the filter. Usually this action is performed in Wyman's presence, and is another Lubitsch-inflected idea for releasing wit from sodden helplessness. As Don begins to re-tell his story of the weekend, gaining some authority over it by taking on – as the film concludes – the responsibility of film narrator, we are led back to the film's opening theatrical image of a bottle suspended by a cord outside Don's apartment window, hidden from every perspective but the one we share with the camera. The privacy of this revelation is, in Kracauer's terms, theatrical. The sighting has a pre-ordained air, a quality of contrivance. The bottle looks back at the viewer, in much the same fashion that the fantasy pint flask on the opera stage seeks out Don and, in





effect, winks at him. We discover Don once again through his window, in the same position he occupied at the beginning of the film. He stands above his bottle, with his back turned to it, but in full knowledge of its whereabouts. The bottle still dangles as a prospective outcome within Don's accompanying narration. Don, as storyteller, 'writes' his ending in advance of living it, as a decisive turning away from his series of ruinous failures. But the air of the undisclosed secret knowledge, the lingering tie with his compulsion, visually persists.

The reality principle conspires with theatrical dream-work in the concluding phase of *The Lost Weekend* to create a delicate balance. Wilder stays in touch with the obdurate city chill, present not only in the sleeting rain but in the grungy rooms of Don's apartment. The rooms, with their unrelenting subdued light, a light of metaphysical grayness, are a strong indicator of how things presently stand for Don Birnam. The resigned helplessness that these spaces steadily project is not vanquished. Yet, as I have argued, the objects that are brought into play in this drab arena are steeped in theatrical color, possessing what one might call the power of theatrical suggestion, and destabilising the naturalist propensities of the plot. Theatre does not assume full control of the proceedings, but it manages to impart a certain elasticity to Don's character and predicament. The objects that he perceives, handles, comments on possess a transformative power of their own, established in the orbit of *La Traviata's* stage world, and Don borrows some of their 'converting' strength by association. Helen's continuing faith in Don – visualised through her coat-mediated recognition moments – depends for its persuasiveness on the mythic force of the theatrical gaze, which is anchored to her first appearance in the film. A woman appears on a bare stage, holding Don's coat and mournful, bereft derby, awaiting discovery and connection. Before Don can see himself in the finale, he must see her, shorn of more than her coat, as though for the first time, thereby closing a circle. The objects that carry forward from the fiercely festive and harmonious spectacle of *La Traviata*, bloom afresh in the sodden aftermath of Don Birnam's weekend, and provide viable experiential openings for him. Theatre is the spell-weaving, Ariel emissary from another world – undefeated even by the Second World War's banquet of horrors.

Ariel's world rests inside film's dream of the real, and is consecrated to shape-shifting, marvels, unlikely restitution, and a higher, more flexible causality.

GEORGE TOLES

George Toles is a Distinguished Professor of Film and Literature at the University of Manitoba. He is the author of *Paul Thomas Anderson for the University of Illinois Press Contemporary Film Directors Series*, and *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of Film*. For twenty five years, George was the screenwriting collaborator for many of the feature films of Guy Maddin. He is currently working on a monograph having to do with Theatre in Film issues.

Works cited

- Agee, James and Evans, Walker ([1941] 1974) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bazin, Andre ([1971] 2005) *What is Cinema?*, volume 2, translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bresson, Robert ([1975] 1997) *Notes on the Cinematographer*, translated by Jonathan Griffin. Kobenhavn: Green Integer 2.
- Brook, Peter ([1968] 1996) *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone.
- Cavell, Stanley (1979) *The World Viewed: Enlarged Edition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Jacobs, Lea (2015) *Film Rhythm After Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Kracauer, Siegfried ([1960] 1997) *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, with an Introduction by Miriam Bratu Hansen. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Moretti, Franco (2000) *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, translated by Albert Sbragia. New York: Verso.
- Sikov, Ed (1998) *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder*. New York: Hyperion.
- Trahair, Lisa (2007) *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick*. Albany: State University of New York Press.