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Moonstruck, or How to Ruin Everything

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There are any number of reasons for taking an interest in popular films, but what gets us thinking about them, now or ever? That question, however presumptuous, comes easily, thinking of *Moonstruck* (1987; written by John Patrick Shanley and directed by Norman Jewison), not only because of the striking absence of thoughtful writing about it since its initial, generally favorable reviews¹ but because *Moonstruck* itself seems to raise the question: What gets us thinking about a film? Or more simply: What gets us thinking, and what keeps us from thinking? My aim in what follows is to show that *Moonstruck* raises some such question. It is not a question every film will raise. That may seem obviously true about what you might call a bad film; it may be equally true about a film that wears its greatness on its sleeve, so that it prompts thought about itself but not yet about the question of what gets thinking going. Consider Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), like *Moonstruck* a dark romantic comedy inspired by an idea of the opera. There is no mystery to why we begin thinking about *Fitzcarraldo*; it is enough to be reminded of its central visual metaphor (art exacts from the artist an exertion as momentous as carrying a ship over a mountain). Herzog's film contains scenes of dialogue that address explicitly philosophical themes, as well as moments of sublimity—thinking for example of the moment we learn why the aborigines have cut the boat loose—that are nothing if not philosophically sublime.

It is not my intention to compare *Fitzcarraldo* and its relation to opera to *Moonstruck* and *Moonstruck's*. But to see how *Moonstruck* could be an instance of superior filmmaking, it helps to see how a film can have depth without making the explicit concerns of its characters serve (as they do in *Fitzcarraldo*) as a conduit for the audience to descend to those depths. *Moonstruck* prompts thinking much the way dreams do, through a structure that conceals as much as it reveals and by a peculiar juxtaposition of the familiar and the bizarre. In this more or less familiar tale of romance, what can strike one as bizarre is, for beginners, the slightly echoing repetition of some of the words ("death," "luck," "cold," "snow," and the question "How long must I wait?") and the offbeat cadence of parts of the dialogue (for instance: "Rose. Rose. Rose. Rose."—"Who's dead?"). There are also certain visual repetitions: the recurring full moon, naturally, and the gloved hands

reaching for and taking hold of one another, first shown on stage at the Met, in the snow scene from *La Bohème*, and repeated in the cold outside Ronny's apartment, where Ronny offers the warmth of his wooden hand to Loretta. And there are the musical repetitions, from Puccini's opera ("Che gelida manina," "Donde lieta uscì," "O soave fanciulla," "Quando m'en vo") and from American popular music ("It Must Be Him," "That's Amore"), each heard more than once over the course of the film. Perhaps one does not make anything of these repetitions initially, but one does notice them eventually. They function much the way that repetitions and variations in music do, initiating and advancing their own discourse, establishing their own logic. It is the logic and the attractiveness or attraction of this film, an attraction that we will see is not unlike the gravitational pull of the moon.

First, though, here is a review of the story line of *Moonstruck*. Loretta (Cher), an Italian-American widow from Brooklyn in her late thirties, is engaged to marry Johnny (Danny Aiello), an Italian-American man in his midforties who is not, we sense, a serious candidate for marriage because of his continuing devotion to his mother. When he calls Loretta from his mother's deathbed in Palermo, he reminds her to call and invite his brother Ronny (Nicolas Cage) to the wedding. Johnny and Ronny have not spoken to each other for five years. Loretta calls Ronny, but he hangs up on her, so she goes to his bakery. There she learns about the accident that maimed him five years ago: he lost his hand in a bread slicer while he was cutting up some bread for Johnny, and shortly thereafter Ronny's fiancée left him. Loretta asks Ronny if she can talk with him alone. Up in his apartment she makes him some coffee, cooks him a steak, and (as she puts it) tells him his life—in particular that he is a wolf and that he is afraid of that part of himself now. He responds by overturning the kitchen table in a fury, kissing her passionately, and taking her to his bed; she yields in a mixture of resignation and desire.

The next morning, awakened by the light of day and still in Ronny's bed, Loretta blames "bad luck" for her succumbing to him and says that they must never see each other again. He tells her that he loves her but that he will leave her alone forever if she will go with him that night to the opera. It is a surprising invitation coming from a large, young, tattooed baker, and we are only a little less surprised that Loretta accepts. She goes off to church and the confessional, but then she finds herself walking into the Cinderella Beauty Salon to get her hair done, the gray taken out, nails manicured, eyebrows plucked . . . and she buys herself a new evening dress and accoutrements. That evening Loretta and Ronny meet outside the Metropolitan Opera House. They go in and take their seats, and the opera begins. We are shown the moment in act 3 of *La Bohème* when Mimi and Rodolpho agree to part. It is winter, and they have met outside the tavern. We see Mimi offer her gloved hand to Rodolpho as she sings, "Goodbye, Goodbye—no bitterness!"; here Rodolpho takes her hand and squeezes it. We are shown Loretta moved to tears.

Walking home, Loretta tells Ronny that they are both guilty for what has happened between them; she then finds to her surprise that they have arrived at his apartment. Loretta makes a speech about how she is able now to take control of her life. She tells him that she is going to go home—she says she is freezing to death. Ronny counters with a speech about how love ruins everything, including our ability to take control of our lives. He tells her that he wants her to come upstairs and get in his bed. We see Ronny offer his wooden, gloved hand to Loretta as he says "Come on! Come on"; here Loretta takes his hand and squeezes it. She then follows him into his apartment.

Loretta arrives home the next morning. Shortly thereafter, Ronny arrives—to meet the family. The family and Ronny are seated at the kitchen table when Johnny, who returned from Palermo the night before, comes to call on Loretta. Johnny tells Loretta and everyone assembled two things: (1) His dying mother recovered right after he told her that he was getting married; (2) he cannot marry Loretta because then his mother would die. Ronny then asks Loretta to marry him, and she says yes, whereupon everyone drinks a toast to the family.

My outline takes the repetition of the clasped hands as the film's central moment, tied as it is to the scene that Loretta and Ronny saw on stage at the opera and framed, there as here, by the snow and the cold of winter. Immediately the scene outside Ronny's apartment raises several questions: What is wrong with Loretta's speech about taking control of her life? What is right about Ronny's speech? Why is Loretta freezing to death? Whose hand gets warmed by whose? How are the speeches and the freezing cold and the warming of hands understandable as the consummation of a night at the opera? And how do we understand our position as witness both to that scene from the opera and to this consummation of it? In the course of answering these questions I want to align *Moonstruck* with certain Hollywood film comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, those Stanley Cavell calls comedies of remarriage.² So I begin by saying a word or two about those comedies in order to explain and motivate the reading of *Moonstruck* that is developed in the first half of the essay. The second half turns to some aspects of Emerson's writing, in particular his interest in our relation to heroes, or to human greatness generally, and his coinciding interest in our relation to the words of a text. My intent is then to show how the procedures of *Moonstruck* inherit these Emersonian interests.

1

The Hollywood films Cavell identifies as comedies of remarriage (including *His Girl Friday* [1940], *The Philadelphia Story* [1940], and *Adam's Rib* [1949]) bear comparison to Shakespearean romantic comedy in their emphasis on the heroine over the hero, particularly in showing her somehow transformed or restored. But these films

follow a different track from Shakespeare's comedies in taking as their romantic concern not the joining of a young couple in the first throes of love but the rejoining of a somewhat older couple who find their familiar love threatened from within, despite themselves. Their problem is not that they have grown apart so much as that their marriage has led them to discover marriage's age-old limitation: its inability, as Cavell says, to ratify its pairing of the sexual and the social,³ what could also be called the crossing of nature and convention. To restore the couple's marriage turns out to require conversation, or to require what conversation requires: a willingness (typically the woman's) to be instructed, a willingness (typically the man's) to be seen as a fool, a willingness to exchange active and passive roles, the ability to yield to another without betraying yourself, the ability to make a claim on another without demanding acquiescence. There are other features of the genre's overarching mythos that are either features of these films or in some way compensated for in each film's particular realization of the mythos, features such as the sympathetic, midwifish role of the woman's father, the marked absence of the woman's mother, and the presence and nature of the romantic couple's romantic rivals.

Moonstruck can be located, and in some ways locates itself, as a descendant of these film comedies, meaning first and foremost that it is concerned with the form of conversation that characterizes them—a conversation such as Ronny and Loretta have outside Ronny's apartment, which could be seen as the culmination of Loretta's instruction at Ronny's hands, or hand. But it would be a large undertaking to consider all of the points of similarity and contrast between *Moonstruck* and these earlier films, as for example (to note a point of similarity) how Johnny, the romantic hero's brother and rival, matches the rival figures in the earlier films by satisfying the woman's half-conscious wish to put her sexual desire to sleep. Or to note a point of contrast, how the not-to-be-expected presence of the woman's mother, Rose (Olympia Dukakis), is compensated for by her showing herself to be still subject to the threats and joys of marriage, which suggests that she is still justified in imagining she knows what her daughter desires and so still qualified to serve as a model for her daughter of how best to preserve that desire. We see Rose's vitality in her unwillingness to acquiesce to her husband's avoidance of her and in her brief but promising flirtation with Perry, the professor she encounters in the restaurant and converses with over dinner and a walk home.

There is, however, one point of comparison that cannot be overlooked if we wish to align *Moonstruck* with the films of this genre. We can name it by asking why we ought to think of Loretta and Ronny as seeking or requiring remarriage. If we want to claim that the mythos of remarriage offers the best picture of Loretta's and Ronny's relation to each other and to their desire, then we are obligated to show how they already share a life, or that they somehow share a past, as the film begins. There are at least intimations that they do. Parts of the dialogue seem to identify

Ronny with Loretta's first husband, as when Ronny asks Loretta why she didn't wait for the right man again, since she waited for him the first time. Loretta answers, "You're late," thereby conceding that she was waiting for him, as if in anticipation of his return, but at last could wait no longer. There is also the apparent visual identification of Ronny and Loretta's first husband by means of a bus: the bus that ran over the husband (that he was hit by a bus is virtually all we know of him) with the bus that twice appears in the orientation shot of Ronny's bakery and apartment. One can notice this detail without imagining that the bus counts as an element of this film in the same sense that, for example, Ronny's wooden hand does however we come to read the latter's significance. But once you notice it, it is hard not to imagine that the bus is an element of that shot.

More immediately, however, the compensation which the genre predicts, given that Loretta and Ronny begin as strangers, is provided through their alarming, almost clairvoyant knowledge of each other's deepest secrets—the knowledge each expresses by claiming that, at bottom, the other is "a wolf" (or as Ronny says to Loretta, "You run to the wolf in me, that don't make you no lamb"). Any reading of this film must take on itself the task of spelling out what that accusation, both titillating and frightening, amounts to. We begin by recalling, apropos of our thinking of Ronny and Loretta as working through a marriage rather than toward one, that we first hear the accusation (that so-and-so is a wolf) entered against an older, married man by his wife. This is the couple who run the Sweetheart Liquor Store where Loretta stops on her way home from the airport, near the beginning of the film. Further, it seems fair to say that we understand that accusation, which we overhear with Loretta as if by chance, to be part of an ageless quarrel, part of the universal but private conversation of marriage.

When the accusation is remembered and repeated by Loretta up in Ronny's apartment, it punctuates an exchange strewn with sexual imagery, specifically with two or three figures for genitalia that the film borrows from Freud, or perhaps from Howard Hawks.⁴ I mean the head and the hand (or foot). *Moonstruck's* play with these associations comes to a head at the culmination of that scene, in the final exchange between Ronny and Loretta before they go off to make love:

- Ronny: Why are you marrying Johnny? He's a fool!
 Loretta: Because I have no luck.
 Ronny: He . . . he made me look the wrong way and I cut off my hand. He could make you look the wrong way, you could lose your whole head!
 Loretta: I'm looking where I have to to become a bride.
 Ronny: A bride without a head!
 Loretta: A wolf without a foot!

Are we to hear these as warnings or as allegations? Perhaps as both warnings and allegations. But of what? *Must* we say "castration"? And having said it, is it obvious what we are to make of it? One way to pursue this is to ask how we should read Ronny's wooden hand when he first reveals it to Loretta and to us (in the bakery oven room scene). It appears to be wooden, but it is nonetheless a hand—he uses it in some of the ways that a hand is usually used. That is why its unveiling, to return to words used earlier, is both frightening and titillating. This is how the scene in the oven room unfolds: Ronny asks Loretta, "Do you know about me?" A young woman who works at the bakery interrupts him in shock or embarrassment, as if she knows what he is about to reveal or expose. He silences her and says, "Nothing is anybody's fault, but things happen. *Look.*" Then he peels off his white work glove finger by finger, as if doing a striptease. What is he revealing—that he lacks a male organ or that he has one? (What fact about a man is not anybody's fault exactly? What does he think a woman who would get engaged to his brother Johnny might not know about someone like him—that is, about a man?)

What Ronny is revealing is that he has a wooden hand: his organ is petrified. After he unveils it he says, "It's wood. It's fake." But if a hand is wooden, which already tells us there is no blood coursing through it, what does saying "It's fake" add, and about what? It tells us, it would seem, that the look of wood is deceptive. Ronny is fixated on the moment of his parting from his bride-to-be, a moment he represents to himself as the parting of his male part, which in turn is represented by the severed hand, as when he exclaims, "I lost my hand! I lost my bride!"—the one following the other in accordance with some familiar bit of logic. We see him reliving the moment of parting when he plays a recording for Loretta of the act 3 parting scene from *La Bohème*—the very scene Ronny lends further weight to later on at the Met, when he kisses Loretta's hand at the scene's climax. Why is he showing Loretta all this? In order to reveal something and conceal something. What he means to reveal to her, as suggested before, is that his organ is petrified—that is, he has a male organ, but since losing his bride he has become afraid to use it. Loretta interprets what he shows her as an attempt at concealment, reversing his logic when she tells him that *first* he wished to escape his bride, *therefore* he dismembered himself—which suggests that his fear of using his male part is as old as the having of it. (Perhaps this is the quintessentially modern male fear, perhaps it is the old fear of forming attachments.) What Ronny attempts to conceal from himself as well as from her, Loretta says, is that he is a wolf. ("You don't see what you are, and I see everything. You're a wolf.") So we ask again: What does that accusation amount to?

There is the suggestion, first of all, that being a wolf is something one tries to conceal from oneself and from others, or pretends not to know—something that shuns publicity. But in fear of what? Dismemberment? And yet here with Ronny we see that the willingness to dismember oneself can be taken as *evidence*

that one is a wolf. Shunning publicity and prompting concealment might suggest that being a wolf is unnatural—something either beyond or below the human. Yet the wife behind the counter in the Sweetheart Liquor Store says, "I seen a wolf in everybody I ever met." So Ronny's concealment is meant to represent a more widespread suppression. Why hesitate to identify being a wolf with having a libido, and the domestication of our wolfishness with the institution of marriage, so that Loretta's picking up the charge and accusing Ronny with it is no more than her expressing her insight into his unnaturally dormant sexual life, as well as an indirect invitation to revive her own, which leads eventually to their finding in one another a fit partner for marriage? It is because that line of thinking, however true it may be to facts about us, seems to me false to an experience of the film. That is not to deny that *Moonstruck* is about a romantic couple who are at first intent on repressing the sexual—as in Ronny's pretty clear sublimation, and therefore expression, of his sexual desire by (as he says) "shovel[ing] this stinking [bread] dough in and out of this hot hole in the wall." But *Moonstruck* treats the repression of sexual desire as itself an expression or image for something else, for the suppression of something buried no less deeply in the human, like a potential we have but fail to realize.

2

Here it will prove helpful to turn to the thought of Emerson, which Cavell locates behind the genre of remarriage comedy and which I find especially pertinent to the experience of *Moonstruck*. It is a familiar fact that Emerson's writing is guided by an interest in self-trust or self-reliance, where the self in question is not myself as I now stand but the one in trusting which, or by trusting which, I remain true to myself. Emerson speaks of this as my next self, my higher self, and my unattained but attainable self. One image for it is as something to be discovered, like a new world, whose paradigm is an idea of America—what Emerson in "Experience" calls "this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West."⁵ A complementary image is as something to be recovered, like a primal memory, modeled for Emerson in Plato's myths of the netherworld and the soul's recollections, modeled for us perhaps in the practice of psychoanalysis. But it might be more helpful, rather than multiply images, to place Emersonian self-trust in opposition to some of its natural and commercial debasements—which urge me, for example, to be all that I can be or to heed my inner child. Emersonian self-trust, in contrast to these, is not a state I might occupy or an attitude I arrive at, as if once and for all; nothing, at least nothing of interest, is to be perfected or settled. "I unsettle all things" is how Emerson says this in the essay "Circles" (*CW*, 2:188). Nor does self-trust involve a course of action I map out for myself, as if in readiness to take control of my life. That understanding of relying on the self, to anticipate, is one which Loretta

in *Moonstruck* finds she must unlearn. And critically, Emersonian self-trust does not preclude trust in others, at least so long as trusting others means something short of conforming to them. While Emerson recognizes with Thoreau, and with Plato and Nietzsche, that one's progress away from one's disappointment with oneself may generate a critique of society as it stands, and while that may leave one at a distance from society (as if to get a better look), it does not entail one's withdrawal from society. For Emerson, the way to the next self communicates with the selves of others. Ideally this means all others; practically, or for now, it means one's friends, those Aristotle first called another self.

The importance to Emersonian self-trust of friendship for mutual guidance or instruction⁶ is reflected in Emerson's nearly lifelong preoccupation with prompting his readers to a next self by inviting them to work through their relation to their mentors or teachers, a relation he pictures sometimes as friendship's double, sometimes as its antithesis. Emerson's name for these teachers, who may be living or dead, or texts, or works of art, is typically, "great men." Here are two familiar Emersonian remarks on the relation of humans to human greatness:

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. ("Self-Reliance," *CW*, 2:27)

It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings. ("History," *CW*, 2:4–5)

Notice that between these two sentences the ascription of our attitude or mood toward the greatness of others gets inverted. The sentence from "Self-Reliance" says that the thoughts of genius are no more than our (supposedly common) thoughts estranged and raised; to paraphrase Emerson's conclusion, we read in shame. The sentence from "History" says that the (supposedly superior) thoughts we read, certainly no less here than before our rejected thoughts, raise us and ours. It may not be news to suggest, as I take this pairing of remarks to suggest, that our relation to our mentors or teachers is best characterized as one of ambivalence. Here the ambivalence is between exhilaration and depression; more generally it will be an ambivalence between attraction and repulsion, love and hate. An ambivalence between reverence and fear is at work in that section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* called "Lordship and Bondage," in the internal struggle of the bondsman that follows his life-and-death struggle with the one who in winning becomes his master.⁷ It is this internal battle between reverence and fear of the master, which gets worked out in the bondsman's work, that finally prompts his nascent self-consciousness, what Hegel also calls his independence. Ambivalence, of course, characterizes the patient's relation to the psychoanalyst, an ambivalence which gets worked out in the revelation and acknowledgment of the analyzed

transference. Cavell argues that the structure of transference is the best image for or picture of the redemptive powers of reading⁸—as if reading were its own therapy, provoking readers at its best to think through their attitude toward the text, meaning here especially their dependence on it. In a moment we will see that a redemptive or transfigurative reading is the aim of Emerson's prose, as it is of certain other exemplary philosophical writing, and that it is in sharing this aim that *Moonstruck* claims the interest of philosophy. But the moral I wish to draw from the present line of thought, which has traveled from ambivalence through work and transference to reading, is this: although an Emersonian self-trust recognizes the dangers of overinfluence and the need to recover oneself from the sway of others, it sees equally the need to recover oneself in, or to lose oneself in, others. In his essay "Uses of Great Men," Emerson warns of the threat of overinfluence and yet is able to conclude: "A more generous trust is permitted. Serve the great" (*CW*, 4:17). This is not an endorsement of self-enslavement but a call for self-abandonment. If we are bound, our bond is our abandon.

Emerson's trust in the moment of abandonment, when one gives oneself over to the one who reveals one's aspirations, is pertinent to both the explicit and implicit intentions of *Moonstruck*. Explicitly, we can identify what *Moonstruck* calls our wolflike nature with the human capacity to ravage and abandon one's present self—or as Ronny says, to ruin ourselves, to make of our present selves ruins, the first task in remaking or upbuilding ourselves. That is what Ronny, struggling to find words, is able to recall to Loretta in his speech about how "love ruins everything." Thinking back to the scene in the Sweetheart Liquor Store, where a wife accuses her husband of being a wolf, we might recall that that scene's sinister aspect is dissolved only when the woman's husband says to her, "You know what I see in you, Lotte? The girl I married." He does not deny that he is a wolf. On the contrary, by suggesting that the eyes with which he looks at other women are the eyes with which he looks at her, and that this look has not changed, that it is in fact the same look with which he first gave himself over to her, he is telling Lotte in effect that it is she who brings out and sustains the wolf in him. And Lotte accepts this and is touched by it—as is Loretta, as is anyone who has eyes. Thus *Moonstruck* joins other remarriage comedies in portraying marriage as an arena for abandonment and recovery, a recovery of the self from something this film calls death. (Loretta pleads with Ronny, "I'm freezing to death"; her mother explains to Perry, "Why do men chase women? . . . I think it's because they fear death.")

If proposing such an ideal of marriage is the explicit intention of *Moonstruck*, its implicit intention is to show that film is itself a potential site for abandonment—not exactly or simply the way art in general might be but specifically by virtue of film's capacity to project a world of larger-than-life human beings, men and women transfigured by the camera, the forms of life we christen with the exquisite name "movie stars." Our relation to human greatness is one of the natural themes

and persistent concerns of film, a special version of film's interest in our relation to film itself. One might put this by saying that part of the task of explaining our fascination with and attraction to movies is to explain our attraction to and fascination with movie stars. And that requires our coming to understand why movie stars look great on film, where "looking great" identifies conditions and prospects distinct from those of looking handsome or beautiful. Howard Hawks, thinking of Walter Brennen, said that the camera likes "personalities";⁹ Cavell says it creates "individualities."¹⁰ The thought is that while you and I may have some of one or the other, chances are neither of us has their *looks*. But then what the greatness of movie stars teaches is that human greatness is neither predicted by nor precluded by particular traits, or features; rather, it insists on human particularity itself, on the expression of an identity.

Moonstruck's interest in the heroic or representative possibilities of film is shown through its insisting not only that its female star declare her identity (as other remarriage comedies do)¹¹ but that she enact before the camera its transformation of her, beginning at the moment we see Loretta Castorini step into the Cinderella Beauty Salon and ending at the moment we see Cher step out of a cab in front of Lincoln Center. (Tom Hanks enacts a similar transformation in John Patrick Shanley's later film, *Joe Versus the Volcano* [1990].) Still, one may feel that this transformation of Loretta Castorini that culminates in the vision of Cher's singular attractiveness has nothing to teach us beyond the fact of our separateness from it, as from the projected world that creates it. The silver screen screens its world from me, Cavell says;¹² the world I converse with in the city and in the farms is not the world I eye, Emerson almost says. (He says it is "not the world I think" ["Experience," *CW*, 3:48].) We sometimes say that movies offer an escape from the world; but that expression fails to capture the otherness of the projected world, and especially the fact that we cannot go there—as we can go, even escape, to Acapulco. That is not to deny the sense in which the projected world is the same as our world; what other world does a film camera film? But then one is not denying that Cher's body is the same as ours—I mean, is human—if one confesses that gazing at her up on the screen is not the same as looking at someone across the breakfast table, even when that someone is Cher. The greatness of movie stars on the screen is in part a function of the otherness of their world. Think of that as an instance of the fact that the greatness of others is in part a function of their otherness, their separateness. (The majesty of our rejected thoughts is a function of their alienatedness.) Then how can some other represent to us our unattained but attainable selves?

Consider as a candidate feature of the best texts and works of art, and so of the best teachers, their care to declare or remind us of their otherness—that we cannot become them, or that *they* are unattainable, or that the path to a next self leads us not just to them but past them. For a movie to teach this would be

something. *Moonstruck* does, again in Ronny's speech to Loretta, at the part that begins, "We aren't here to make things perfect. The snowflakes are perfect." When now—as we see the first flakes of perfect, cinematic snow, and hear the first notes of "Che gelida manina," and cut to the first and only close-ups of Nicolas Cage in this sequence—when now Ronny continues, "The *stars* are perfect. Not us. Not us! We are here to *ruin* ourselves," he is naming the necessary and sufficient distance between those screened images of light (what "Cher" means, what "Nicolas Cage" means) and the one who gazes, the one whose ruins are the only building blocks for any attainable self.

But even if this is correct, what if any difference does it make? The unapproachable distance between our worlds seems to militate against communication. We gaze unaffected. Both invisible and absent to the projected world on the screen, we experience an involuntary skepticism. But then this is only an emblem of the skepticism we live with respect to ourselves as we gaze, or read, or otherwise meet our rejected thoughts and doubt our own majesty, which is to say our freedom. The best that any film or text can do to overcome this distance is to offer some compensatory gesture. Its task is not somehow, fantastically, to eradicate the distance between us; distance or separateness is one of communication's conditions. The task is rather to remove the barrier between ourselves and our viewing, so that we come to think of our viewing as a gazing inward. A good film or text will try to make us self-conscious, or to re-create self-consciousness, perhaps not by instilling in us an absolute fear of death as Hegel's lord does his bondsman but by naming us in ways that arrest our thoughts, like an invitation out of the blue. To return to the language of the opening pages: The challenge, for a film or text that takes this to be its challenge, is not so much to make us think as to make it possible for us to be struck by thought (as if thought were essentially an experience). It tries to prepare us for the inception of thought as for a spectacle or revelation.

This is what is at work in such passages of Emerson's writing as the following, again from the essay "History":

These hints, dropped as it were from sleep and night, let us use in broad day. The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary. Thus compelled, the muse of history will utter oracles, as never to those who do not respect themselves. I have no expectation that any man will read history aright, who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing to-day. (*CW*, 2:5)

I read "history" as naming "History," the essay we are reading, so that by "the muse of history" Emerson names himself, or rather his muse, what in "Self-Reliance"

he calls his genius and Whim (CW, 2:30). Then his way of writing "in broad day" is to indicate beneath or beyond the surface of his words both how he should be read ("actively," that is, by one who "esteem[s] his own life the text, and books the commentary") and why he feels "compelled" to write thus indirectly. And his reason seems to be that he wishes not only to protect and possibly offend those who are not ready or willing to hear what he has to say, but also to address more convincingly and intimately those who are. All of that, and seeing it all, if you will, is the "deeper sense" of "what he is doing to-day," that is, what Emerson's reader is doing here and now, reading "History."

Nothing, of course, compels readers to go along with this, or to imagine that they are reading the utterances of a muse. But then such is the etiquette or logic of an invitation, especially of one to esteem one's life a text and so regard the transfiguration of a word ("history" into "History") as commentary on the transfigurative possibilities of one's reading, of oneself in reading. Emerson can no more argue (philosophy's favored mode of persuasion) for an experience of conversion than he can demand it. So like Plato and Augustine before him, he takes another tack, endeavoring to animate the reader's conversion to a new mode of life not only by representing it somehow in the work of writing but by founding it in the act of reading. When such writing succeeds, reading becomes not only a means to knowledge but a form of knowing. If this is philosophy, it suggests that the experience of reading certain philosophical texts is as integral to (at least one rendering of) philosophy's aspirations as the experience of a performance is to the aspirations of music and the theater, or the experience of a screening to the aspirations of film.

To recognize the comparable, invitatory moment in *Moonstruck* requires seeing that one of the film's images for itself, the image for its serving as a site of abandonment, is the recurring full moon, that heavenly body at which wolves are known to howl. But to see the full significance of this image requires more than noticing the similarities between moonbeams and screened images, between reflected and projected light. It requires seeing that—as the Old Man, Loretta's grandfather (Feodor Chaliapin), says in conversation over a grave—"the moon brings the woman to the man, *capisce?*"; seeing, that is, how the film declares through this image its ability to transport us.

The place to look is again at the scene outside Ronny's apartment which culminates in Ronny's offering his hand to Loretta, a gesture that repeats Mimi's offer of her hand to Rodolpho in the act 3 scene from *La Bohème* that we see on stage at the Met. Although one hand echoes the other here, the music gets displaced: Instead of Mimi's melodramatic aria of parting, "Donde lieta uscì," we hear Rodolpho's act 1 aria of courtship, "Che gelida manina." The tenor enters as Ronny first commands, then invites Loretta, who says she is freezing to death, in from the cold. The words to Rodolpho's aria run like this:

*Che gelida manina,
se la lasci riscaldar.
Cercar che giova?
Al buio non si trova.
Ma perfortuna
è una notte di luna,
e qui la luna
l'abbiamo vicina.*

What a frozen little hand,
let me give it back its warmth.
What's the use of looking?
In the dark we'll find nothing.
But by good luck
it's a night of the moon
[it's a moonlit night]
and here the moon
is a near neighbor.¹³

Putting aside certain themes or figures that are taken up by the film (being frozen; having luck; finding a near neighbor), I mention only that Loretta takes Ronny's proffered hand at the precise moment we hear Rodolpho sing his first *luna* ("moon"). It is Ronny's wooden or petrified or frozen hand, and so the hand that is missing—call this the hand that guides the plot, the hand that made these images and this film. A moment earlier we saw this hand raised and extended more or less toward us, intercut with a close-up of Loretta looking at it pensively. When Loretta reaches for this hand, her hand comes from our direction. And after her hand takes his, she seems virtually to step into the film, as if accepting the invitation for us, as if enacting our conversion.

Moonstruck seems to acknowledge the impotency of this gesture, its inability to compel the viewer, through the detail of casting Ronny's petrified member as stand-in for the film's makers. But having said that, we ought to add that its makers claim to be masters at making the petrified or emulsified "look better than they did in real life." That is the implication of these opening words of the film spoken by an undertaker ("I am a genius!") as he exits what we might call the wake room of his funeral home, a kind of theater, where the corpse he has embalmed is on display before an admiring crowd of mourners. If the mourners, whom we hear but who are not visible, fairly represent our condition as viewers as the film begins, then *Moonstruck's* culminating scene is meant to show how we are represented no less by the visible, transfigured shades up on the screen, and so how we might not only learn to mourn ourselves but undertake our abandonment.

Notes

1. Harriet Fraad has written a short essay, "Personal Life as Problematic: A Comparison of Woody Allen's *September* and Norman Jewison's *Moonstruck*," *Rethinking Marxism* 1 (1988): 169–74. But her essay is less an opening for thought into these films than a reminder of the straitjacketing of thought that late middle-aged Marxism has become.

2. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

3. *Ibid.*, 31.

4. *Ibid.*, 118; William Rothman, *The "I" of the Camera: Essays in Film Criticism, History, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 101–2.

5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 5 vols., ed. Robert E. Spiller, Alfred R. Ferguson, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971–), 3:41; hereafter cited as *CW*, followed by volume and page numbers.

6. For a discussion of this aspect of Emerson's thought in the context of a tradition of thinking that Stanley Cavell calls "moral perfectionism," see his *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); hereafter cited as *CH*.

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), see 117–19 (§§194–96).

8. Stanley Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation," *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 52–53; cf. *CH*, 57.

9. Joseph McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 106.

10. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enl. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 33.

11. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 63–64, 105–7.

12. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 24.

13. Puccini, Giacomo, *La Bohème*. Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. Trans. Peggie Cochrane, modified by author. London OSA 1299.