

# “I Saw a Different Life. I Can’t Stop Seeing It”: Perfectionist Visions in *Revolutionary Road*

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## Abstract:

In this article, I claim that Sam Mendes’ *Revolutionary Road* (2008) is a recent version of the film genre that Stanley Cavell calls the “melodrama of the unknown woman”. Accordingly, my discussion focuses on two key elements of that identification: the film’s overriding dramatic and thematic emphasis on conversation, and the central characters’ relation to the wider social and political concerns of America.

**Keywords:** Stanley Cavell; Sam Mendes; Leonardo DiCaprio; Kate Winslet; melodrama; unknown woman; moral perfectionism.

For anyone acquainted with the work of Stanley Cavell, *Revolutionary Road* (Sam Mendes, 2008) provides much food for thought. Adapted from Richard Yates’ now celebrated 1961 novel of the same name, its story of the unhappy marriage of Frank (Leonardo DiCaprio) and April Wheeler (Kate Winslet) in suburban Connecticut in the mid-1950s, is at once suggestive not only of Cavell’s interest in the blessings and (more particularly) the costs of marriage, but also of his concern with the threat to individual and social life posed by conformity, and his commitment to the idea and promise of America. However, it is perhaps Cavell’s understanding of the expression of these themes in certain 1930s and

*Film-Philosophy* 25.3 (2021): 251–271

DOI: 10.3366/film.2021.0175

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'40s Hollywood films that is most pertinent here. For in his influential work on the related cinematic genres which he calls the "comedy of remarriage" and the "melodrama of the unknown woman" (found primarily, in *Pursuits of Happiness* [1981] and *Contesting Tears* [1996], respectively), the central issue faced by their female protagonists is whether marriage as such can be accepted as an arena in which they might overcome conformity's repressive demands or should instead be rejected as a further occasion of that repression – a choice that Cavell sees as the films' embodiment of a register of the moral life that he relates to perfectionism, and which he developed in his work in reclaiming Emerson and Thoreau as the founders of a distinctively American tradition of thinking.

While Cavell does not discuss the prospect of more recent Hollywood films participating in the genre of unknown woman melodrama, he does identify numerous films<sup>1</sup> which, although not full-blown remarriage comedies, nevertheless retain what he calls the genre's "feel" or "surface" (2005, p. 342).<sup>2</sup> Such recent "versions" or "fragments" of the remarriage genre contain recognisable interpretations of certain features of the comedies, but at the same time differ in various ways from their classical predecessors (2004, pp. 153–5). In this article, I assume that this mode of inheritance is as true of the melodramas as it is of the comedies, and suggest that, accordingly, *Revolutionary Road* is a recent version of unknown woman melodrama – that April Wheeler (and thus Kate Winslet) is a cinematic descendent or sister of the women who populate the genre: Stella Dallas (Barbra Stanwyck), Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis), Paula Alquist Anton (Ingrid Bergman), and Lisa Berndle (Joan Fontaine).<sup>3</sup>

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1 Cavell mentions, in various places, some twenty-five later remarriage comedies, ranging from *Starting Over* (Alan J. Pakula, 1979) to *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987), *Grosse Pointe Blank* (George Armitage, 1997) to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). Given this comedic focus, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are relatively few attempts in the secondary literature to relate recent Hollywood films to the genre of unknown woman melodrama. Notable exceptions include *Another Woman* (Woody Allen, 2002) in chapter 8 of Shaw (2019); and *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) in both Sinnerbrink (2020) and Staat (2019).

2 For a number of reasons, Cavell thinks it unlikely that full membership of the genre is now possible. These include a shift in Hollywood's dominant conception of a genre (2004, p. 153); the changing character of leading men (2004, p. 155); and more general social and cultural changes (2005, p. 342).

3 There has been surprisingly little scholarly attention paid to Mendes' film. Exceptions include: a psychoanalytic reading by Golinelli & Rossi (2012); three philosophically informed discussions, focussing primarily on gender – chapter 11 of Shaw (2017), in relation to Simone de Beauvoir, Richardson (2010), in relation to Judith Butler, and

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I have organised my discussion around two key features or elements of this identification. First, the film's insistent thematic and dramatic focus on conversation – from beginning to end it expresses an overriding concern with modes of talking, and so with the nature and possibilities of speech. Second, the social or political significance of the Wheelers' unhappiness – the relation of their personal crisis to the wider question of America. However, since Cavell views this genre of melodrama as derived from its comedic companion, in order to grasp the former it will first be necessary to very briefly summarise the latter – before sketching the version of perfectionism in which he takes them both to participate.

### Marriage, Melodrama, Morality

Unlike classical comedies, in which the narrative is driven by a young couple overcoming certain obstacles (often the woman's father) to be together, remarriage comedies are concerned with reuniting a somewhat older couple, who must overcome the fact or threat of divorce (they thus conceive of marriage as finding ratification in nothing but the endless willingness for its own reaffirmation) (Cavell, 1990, p. 104). This basic difference in turn generates an open-ended set of features shared by the films Cavell considers definitive of the genre:<sup>4</sup> the woman of the couple is never portrayed as (or shown to have) a mother; the drama opens in a city and ultimately moves to the country (a so-called "green world", typically Connecticut); and, centrally, the man and woman are bound together by a mode of equal and witty conversation in which the depth of their intimacy is both expressed and realised (1996, pp. 4-5). In contrast, Cavell suggests the melodramas derive from the remarriage comedies insofar as they exhibit the systematic negation of these features – most fundamentally, marriage itself.<sup>5</sup> And in order to give a sense of the initial plausibility of understanding *Revolutionary Road* as a member of the genre, its fairly straightforward fulfilment of these generic obligations can be quickly adduced: the woman's rejection of marriage entails that she is

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Slade (2017); and Nicholls (2012). While I'm unaware of any previous work which relates the film to either Cavell's genre of unknown woman melodrama or his understanding of perfectionism, a brief discussion of Yates' novel in relation to relevant themes in Cavell can be found in Di Brisco (2010).

4 These films are *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941) and *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949).

5 The melodramas are *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948).

always presented as a mother (April has two children, and, decisively, comes to expect a third); the movement of the action tends to end where it began (brutally, in the house on the road which gives to the film its name); and, primarily, the central couple's conversation is characterised by irony and estrangement, leading to the woman's increasing isolation – an aspect of the unknownness to which Cavell's name for the genre alludes (the film is centred around Frank and April's seemingly unending series of violent arguments, which reflect and reinforce the latter's crippling loneliness) (1996, pp. 5–6). Despite these generic variations, however, the constant factor between the two genres is what Cavell sees as the creation or re-creation of the woman; both feature heroines who sense that their lives need radical change – a transformation or metamorphosis they think can only be attained by demanding a certain form of education from the man. And it is these themes of creation and education that eventually lead Cavell to understand both genres in terms of their perfectionist preoccupations (1996, p. 11).

For Cavell, Emersonian moral perfectionism (most systematically presented in his *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* [1990] and *Cities of Words* [2004]) is an outlook or dimension of moral thinking – rather than a theory of it, like deontology, teleology, or virtue ethics – which he takes to run (largely implicitly) throughout the history of Western culture. Its founding myth or vision concerns an idea of being true to oneself or to the humanity in oneself; of the soul as on an unending upward or onward journey that begins by finding oneself lost to the world and requires, if one is to find oneself again, a refusal of the current state of one's society in the name of some further or future, more cultured or cultivated, state of society and the self (Cavell, 1990, p. 1). Perfectionism thus pictures the self and its society as inherently divided or doubled, split between what Emerson calls their attained and unattained states, but nevertheless always at risk of occluding or repressing that division (Cavell, 1990, p. xxxi). For since each attained state constitutes a world within which the self's desires are manifested and might be satisfied, the standing danger to which perfectionism is sensitive is a form of spiritual crisis in which the self has become attached to, or fixated upon, the settled attractions of its attained state – often by a conformity to prevailing modes of thought and life – to the extent that its unattained self is effectively negated or eclipsed. In such a condition, the disorientated individual can either be confirmed in her conformity by the members of the society in which she finds herself, or instead encouraged to seek its aversion by the interventions of another who draws her to decline her attained state in favour of the unattained, but attainable, state which that other represents or exemplifies (Cavell, 1990, p. xxxii). In

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other words, this friend aims to educate her companion to reorient or recreate herself by resuscitating her individuality or autonomy – to enact Emerson’s famous call for self-reliance (Cavell, 1990, p. 12).

However, this friendship also contains a serious and self-defeating threat. Since the aim of the friend is to seduce the befriended into shifting the balance of her desires from the attractions of her attained to those of her unattained state, there is always the risk – insofar as that attainable state is embodied by the friend – that rather than perceiving the attractions of the friend as belonging to a next or further state of herself, she will instead attribute them solely to the person of the friend; that she will desire not her unattained self but the friend herself (Cavell, 1990, p.54). By idolising the friend in this way, the disorientated individual effectively replaces a fixation upon her attained state with a fixation upon the friend, merely substituting her conformity or reliance on the former with the same to the latter; thus continuing to negate or eclipse her unattained self, and so the opportunity for genuine individuality which it represents (Cavell, 1990, p. 57).

For Cavell, marriage is an allegory or model for perfectionist friendship (2004, p. 15). While the women of the melodramas share their comedic sisters’ perfectionist ambition to create or recreate themselves and their lives – to seek their unattained but attainable selves – they come to realise that they cannot share their conviction that their male companions are, after all, the enabling Emersonian friends capable of providing the education necessary to help them fulfil it. Rather, they find that they have instead succumbed to a disabling idolatry which they can only overcome by explicitly rejecting or transcending their partners, and so discovering the means for their transformation – for a life for themselves – otherwise than in marriage (Cavell, 2004, p. 108).

April’s profound sense of disappointment in her life – which she could be more properly said to haunt rather than live (a condition Cavell finds diagnosed by Emerson and Thoreau a hundred years earlier when they claim that the majority lead lives of secret melancholy or quiet desperation [1990, p. xxxi]) – expresses her despairing judgment of the current state of the world in contrast with the world as it could be, and leads her to demand or desire its transformation – to reject her present life in suburban Connecticut in favour of a vision of a future life in Paris. However, when this plan collapses – ostensibly due to April’s pregnancy and Frank’s promotion (examples of the many levels of irony of dialogue, plot, imagery, and camera motion which Cavell takes to be characteristic of the melodramas) – she comes to realise that the education she thought she needed from men (“the most valuable and wonderful thing[s] in the world”), and from Frank in particular (“a man with a fine mind”,

“the most interesting person [she’s] ever met”), is one he is unfit to provide (that he is, after all, “just a boy who made me laugh at a party – once”). In other words, although Frank is capable of inspiring April’s fantasy of Paris (when she finds a faded photograph of him in his army uniform standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, and recalls the conversation years before when he wistfully declared his ambition to return there with her), it seems he no longer believes in it (if he ever really did), and so feels incapable of enacting it. April’s realisation of Frank’s inability or inadequacy to feed her perfectionist aspirations thus leads her to express her rejection of him and their marriage (in the increasing severity of their antagonistic and isolating exchanges, and a perfunctory instance of infidelity), and, it would seem, ultimately, to stake her life on the possibility of attaining a future state of herself which she could genuinely call her own.

#### Negations of Conversation: Argument, Madness, Gossip

I think it would be fair to say that, rather than action, it is conversation – or more accurately, its argumentative negation – that carries the drama of *Revolutionary Road* (forgetting for a moment that talking is as much an action as, for example, smoking a cigarette or preparing breakfast). I also take it as obvious that the film is explicitly concerned (not least in its memorable image of the morning tide of men in drab suits and fedoras commuting into Grand Central Station) with working out the problematic of self-reliance and conformity, of hope and despair. Here, I mean that this not only constitutes the apparent subject matter of the film, but the explicit concern of the characters within it – the source of the sequence of wounding exchanges between April and Frank of which the film essentially consists. It is thus tempting to say that the film is nothing more (though nothing less) than a conversation about conformity and its aversion. Put otherwise, we might describe the film as being obsessed or haunted by this idea, in the way that April finds herself obsessed or haunted by a paralysed perfectionist vision of that aversion – of her unattained self and its world – in the course of the film itself. As she confides to her neighbour, Shep (David Harbour), in the bar after Frank has left to drive Shep’s drunken wife, Milly (Kathryn Hahn), home, “I saw a different life. I can’t stop seeing it. Can’t leave, can’t stay. No damn use to anyone”.

For Cavell, conversation is the constitutive feature shared by the accounts of marriage in the remarriage comedies and the unknown woman melodramas; its presence or absence determines the presence or absence of marriage itself, and so of the perfectionist friendship which it figures (1981, p. 151). In the comedies, the warmth and closeness

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of the exchanges between the central couple embody the idea that conversation is the basis or fact of a happy marriage, a view Cavell finds in Milton's characterisation (from his tract on divorce) of marriage as the participation in a "meet and happy conversation" – meaning not only primarily talking, but a mode of association or form of life, an intimate union of verbal, social and sexual intercourse. In short, for these couples talking together means fully and plainly being together (Cavell, 1981, pp. 87–88). In the melodramas, however, we encounter relationships in which the marriage has become unhappy, as manifested in the general absence or negation of genuine conversation.

In *Revolutionary Road*, the sense that conversation between the central couple equates with their marriage itself is perhaps most obvious when April implies that the extent of her desire for Frank is equivalent to the extent of her desire to talk to him. When Frank confesses his need for April to care about him, she explains,

Oh, I know you do. And I suppose I would if I loved you. But you see I don't think I do anymore. And I only just figured that out. And that's why I'd just as soon not do any talking right now.

In fact, for April, it would seem that not talking to Frank is more important than whatever it is that he could find for them to talk about; it is not the specific subject matter of any particular conversation that is the problem, but the very fact of talking to him at all, as if, as Emerson might put it, every word he says chagrins her. For example, when Frank attempts to initiate a conversation by asking April what she would like to talk about, she angrily refuses: "Would it be all right if we didn't talk about anything? Can't we just take each day as it comes, and do the best we can, and not feel we have to talk about everything all the time?" This sense of irritated negation is primarily figured between the couple as an apparently daily round of bitterly hostile argument. Indeed, April and Frank rarely do anything but argue; for them, arguing has become their way of being together, the distinctive (and destructive) mode of their shared form of life. But how did this argument start? How, or more precisely when, does *Revolutionary Road* begin?

The film opens with Frank's flashback to a cocktail party in New York's Greenwich Village, the Bohemian setting for his first meeting with April some seven years earlier. The camera introduces us first to April who – as if immediately declaring her kinship with her melodramatic sisters – is shown standing holding a cigarette in an exaggerated pose reminiscent of Bette Davis (we learn immediately afterwards that April is studying to be an actress). Next, we witness the couple's instant rapport, the easy wit of

Frank's initial seductive exchanges, and April's immediate interest in talking about matters of genuine self-expression or realisation, rather than the more prosaic subject of earning a living. When Frank replies to her question about what he does by saying that he's a longshoreman she presses him, "No, I mean really...I don't mean how you make money. I mean what are you interested in?" Can we hear in these opening words the start of a conversation on a perfectionist topic that will continue as long as they share a life together, before that conversation is violently negated? Or can we instead hear that conversation as already having been negated at its very start, not only in Frank's refusal to take the question seriously – in his humorous deflection, "Honey, if I had the answer to that one, I bet I'd bore us both to death in half an hour" (a boredom we see, in the end, to be more properly measured in years rather than hours) – but also in April's apparent earnestness?

We might view April's conversation here as merely conforming to contemporary fashions, as simply an empty rehearsal of popular existentialist tropes drawn from post-war, Parisian café culture. If so, could we then accuse her of having an, as it were, inauthentic grasp of the authentic; of pretending to be someone other than she really is (a penchant suggested by her theatrical aspirations), and, so, of acting in what Sartre would call "bad faith"? After all, the flashback ends by ironically cutting to a close-up of Frank's face as he sits watching the curtain fall at the end of April's disappointing performance in a disastrous amateur theatre production.<sup>6</sup> This scene raises the possibility that April's desire to be an actress was as much an affectation – as little a reflection of her true self – as her opening exchange and its ability to truly reflect that self; an example of the self-subverting trading of genuine conversation for its counterfeit that we will also see at work in the film's ending.

However long we choose to understand April and Frank to have been arguing about these matters (and so whether there was ever really a marriage between them insofar as it lacked a genuine conversational basis), this argument undeniably reaches its epic climax during the concluding scene in their kitchen, in which April's maddened aria of divorce rises to the pitch of a shrill, ear-piercing scream. This moment of utter incommunicability and isolation, of conversation's absolute negation, is preceded by April warning Frank that, "if you come any

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6 Although the title of the play is not mentioned in the film, the book tells us that it's Robert E. Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*, a story of a young American woman (played by April) who dreams of escaping her banal existence by moving to France. In the film adaptation of the same name (Archie Mayo, 1936), she is played by Bette Davis.



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closer, if you touch me or anything I think I'll scream". In transcribing these words, I am struck by the fact that, dependent on whether one chooses to place a comma before or after "I think", April's threat could be heard in one of two ways: as a hesitant attempt to protect her physical well-being, or a more confident defence of not just her body, but her mind (anything she might think). The latter would be consistent with the need or desire for thinking she expresses shortly afterwards when, pursued by Frank, she finds herself in a dark wood on the hill opposite their house and shouts at him in exhausted exasperation, "Are you still talking? Isn't there any way to stop your talking? I need to think. Can't you see that?".<sup>7</sup>

April's worry that Frank might, after all, do her harm instead of good can be understood as a response to what Cavell identifies as a taint of villainy in the leading men of both genres, something that, amongst other things, shows their ability to use language for their own negating purposes (1996, p. 5). For insofar as the films' creation of the woman takes the form of her education by the man, and despite explicitly scrutinising his authority, they suggest that even within the atmosphere of equality that pervades the comedies, and as dramatically revealed by the melodramas, there is an undeniable privileging of the male (Cavell, 1996, p. 5). In *Revolutionary Road*, this aspect of Frank's villainy is shown by a certain quality of aggression in his character which presents a constant threat of physical and mental violence. The former variously finds expression in the repeated raising of a fist, the punching of the roof of a car, the slinging of a chair against a wall, and the scattering of perfume bottles from a dressing table. The latter is illustrated by Frank's gaslighting of April, as he talks to her in ways designed to make her question her own sanity (thus recalling the experiences of April's cinematic sister, Paula, in the film whose title gave rise to this term). Frank repeatedly accuses April of being "sick", of not being in her "right mind", and of doing something that "a normal woman, a normal sane mother" would not (buying the items necessary to perform an abortion on herself); something he claims she is not "entirely rational about" and is thus symptomatic of her need to see a psychiatrist (for which he would pay, "obviously"). Throughout this, Frank never stops to consider any other possible explanation for what might drive a woman to such an action (his inability to read between such pitiful lines thereby confirms April's unknownness). And yet, in making such diagnoses, Frank endows

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7 The allusion to Dante is patent. This scene constitutes one of the film's two glimpses of Cavell's 'green world', a place of perspective and reflection (the other, dappled with sunlight, is during Frank and April's walk with John Givings).

himself with the authority to explain such behaviour, casting himself in the role of a therapist whose apparently ignorant commitment to a form of incessant talking cure (and dubious definitions of insanity) seem in danger of causing, rather than alleviating, the condition he purports to treat (as April pleads, “All right, Frank. Could you just stop talking now, before you drive me crazy, please?”). In this method, Frank, perversely, and to his imagined patient’s frustration, does most of the talking, even going so far as to put words into April’s mouth (“Right? Isn’t that what you’re going to say?” She replies, “Apparently, I don’t have to. You’re saying it for me.”). Frank thus takes it to be within his powers both to read April’s mind and speak with her voice – thereby perpetrating the very psychical violation that her scream was meant to warn him against.

The figure of the therapist is something which Cavell takes to be common to both the comedies and the melodramas (most explicitly in the latter, via Charlotte’s psychiatrist in *Now, Voyager*) (2004, p. 239). Despite Frank’s feeble and self-serving impersonation, in *Revolutionary Road* this figure actually takes the form of John Givings (Michael Shannon), the mentally disturbed son of Helen Givings (Kathy Bates), the local real estate agent from whom the Wheelers purchased their house. For Cavell, the therapist of the comedies is a comic, marginal figure, while in the melodramas he is a serious character capable of leading the action (2004, p. 239). In *Revolutionary Road* we might say that he is both:<sup>8</sup> while John’s two visits to the Wheeler home contain moments of scene-stealing, undeniably dark, humour, they are also laced with a palpable sense of both the personal tragedy and defeat to which he has been subjected, and the keenness of his still undiminished powers for the perception and blunt expression of the truth (in an ironic inversion or questioning of the roles of therapist and patient, of the nature of sanity and insanity, that links him to the literary tradition of the ‘wise fool’). Indeed, such is the nature of John’s insight that, after his first visit, Frank and April declare that, unlike their neighbours and colleagues, he is the only person with whom they can truly converse (thus confirming their shared marginality):

APRIL: You know, he’s the first person who seemed to know what we were talking about.

FRANK: That’s true. Maybe we are just as crazy as he is.

APRIL: If being crazy means living life as if it matters then I don’t care if we are completely insane. Do you?

FRANK: No.

APRIL: I love you so much.

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8 Thus suggesting a possible difference here between the genre’s early and later forms.

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But by the time of John's second visit, when the Wheelers reveal that they no longer plan to leave for Europe, this solidarity is exchanged for hostility and the threat of violence. His uncanny ability to divine that the real reason for that decision lies not with April ("too tough and adequate as hell") but in Frank's inadequacy – his failure to live up to her perfectionist ambitions (to "never have to find out what he's really made of") – leads the latter to furiously demand that John keep his opinions in the insane asylum where they belong. Thus, Frank now identifies John as suffering from a variant of the same condition he diagnosed in April.

Nonetheless, we can understand Frank and April's initial positive or affirming conception of madness (in contrast with what we might call Frank's subsequent pathological or clinical one) as recalling the perfectionist thought of Emerson's disciple Thoreau that we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense – able to recognise that our attained state is always next to, or neighbouring, its unattained counterpart (Cavell, 1990, p. 9). This picture of the self as inherently split or doubled is itself dramatised in a further instance of conversation at work in the film: Frank's apparent monologue (an example of talking to oneself, which, in another context, could be taken as a clichéd sign of madness) in the scene when, staying late at the office (he works in the sales promotions department of a business machines firm), he uses his dictation machine to record and then play back to himself copy for a sales brochure for the new Knox 500 model and its claimed benefits for coordinating factory production: "Knowing what you've got, comma, knowing what you need, comma, knowing what you can do without, dash. That's inventory control". In listening to his own words in this way, hearing his voice as if it were that of another, we might understand Frank as thereby acknowledging himself as essentially divided or doubled. Rather than a monologue, he is engaged here in an internal dialogue or conversation between his attained and unattained selves, in which economic ideas are tropes for spiritual issues. The voice Frank hears emanating from the Dictaphone is thus that of his unattained self, its calling him to take stock, or control, of the internal economy or inventory of his desires; of knowing what he's got, what he (really) needs, and what he doesn't (false desires or necessities, borne in conformity). But pivotally, this is a voice from which he literally immediately turns away, towards the approaching figure of Maureen Grube (Zoe Kazan), the young secretary with whom he is having an affair, taking advantage of her late, suggestive invitation; cynically calculating that the benefits of the settled attractions of his attained self exceed the costs of changing them.

Frank's professional expertise with words reflects his natural gift for talking. As April puts it, "Oh, Frank, you really are a wonderful talker! If black could be made into white by talking, you'd be the man for the job". She thus likens his verbal talents to an alchemic linguistic power to turn something into its opposite, to make something into what it is not – an ability that identifies him as a maker of appearances, as someone for whom the business of making false, rather than true, statements about reality would be an ideal occupation (what philosophy would call sophistry). And he employs this talent in the pursuit of not only professional, but personal goals (attempting to persuade his wife that she is losing her mind, and conjuring "Visual Aids" departments<sup>9</sup> into existence out of thin air in order to spend the afternoon with his mistress). It seems that, despite his ironic protestations to the contrary, and as emphasised by his sudden promotion, Frank is well-suited to earning a living by means of his rhetorical effectiveness in representing or marketing matters without reference to, or indeed grasping, their true nature ("I don't even know what the Knox 500 does... Do you?").<sup>10</sup>

While Frank might be a particularly adept or self-aware exponent (a self-confessed "little wise guy with a big mouth") of this sophisticated exploitation of language's inherent capacity to mispresent (as well as represent) reality, this air of falsity or insincerity also pervades the conversations of the characters that comprise the film's closing scenes – a year after April's death, when he and the children have left Revolutionary Road and moved to New York City. In both Milly's disinterested recital of Frank and April's story over drinks while entertaining the Braces (the young couple who are the new inhabitants of the Wheeler house), and Helen's disingenuous remarks to her husband Howard (Richard Easton) – where she snobbishly dismisses the Wheelers as having been unsuitable neighbours (too "whimsical" and "neurotic" for her taste), and wilfully forgets the kindness they showed her by inviting John to their home (despite the threat of the very small-minded, moralising condemnation that she now displays towards them) – we can hear a further negation of language's truth-disclosing side. For this perversion or debasement of genuine conversation into gossip or mere chatter (a major currency of conformity) forgoes the work of attempting to articulate the reality of the subject matter being talked about, and the talker's true

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9 Named, presumably, because the assistance he takes Maureen to provide essentially concerns her physical appearance.

10 The question of Frank and April's respective talents, or lack of them, is explored in Nicholl (2012).

relation to it, for the empty appearance of doing so. Milly and Helen's words are thereby divorced from the facts or truth that would give them any real weight or substance, thus allowing them and their speakers to float free of the tragic gravity or seriousness of the circumstances both women superficially seek to disseminate, and in which they are personally implicated.<sup>11</sup>

For their partners, however, it seems that participation in such a hollowed-out corruption of conversation is neither possible nor desirable, one which they can neither bear to speak nor to hear. During Milly's conversation with the Braces, Shep can only remain silent, and afterwards he tearfully appeals to her not to talk about the Wheelers anymore. Similarly, when Howard turns off his hearing aid, he signals that he not only no longer wishes to hear what Helen has to say, but also – since any genuine conversation obviously involves talking as well as listening – that he no longer has anything he wishes to say to her in return. Howard's deliberate deafness is thus a rejection of their marriage, a point of absolute conversational negation (call it a silent inversion of April's scream) that expresses the unhappy fact that the essential association of the conversational with the conjugal has been lost, and he no longer views Helen as his partner, conversational or otherwise. Instead of the sound of her voice, he would prefer to hear only a thunderous sea of silence.

#### Dreams of America and of Paris: Politics, Snobbery, Exile

Given Cavell's claim that Emerson and Thoreau are amongst the founding fathers of American culture, it is perhaps hardly surprising to find that a film titled *Revolutionary Road* – based on an American novel set in a place of the same name, and depicting a couple hoping to transform or convert, say revolutionise, their lives (who are referred to as “the nice young revolutionaries on Wheeler Road”, a reversal which emphasises that their very name suggests a capacity for such turning) – should stand in some

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11 We can see this mode of essentially empty, moralising gossip – in which the speakers have no real interest or stake in what is being said or its genuine relation to its putative subject matter – as symptomatic of the boredom from which suburbanites are often said to suffer. This is further registered in the film's recurrent interest in what people find interesting: in April's first expression of interest in Frank by asking him what really interests him, and in subsequently finding him the most interesting person she's ever met; in Frank's admission to John at their first meeting that there's nothing interesting about his job (a view obviously shared by his colleagues); in John's sarcastic remark about mathematics being interesting; in the supposedly interesting lives of Parisians; and, finally, during the chilling scene of the Wheelers' last breakfast, when Frank acknowledges April's suggestion that there is, after all, something interesting in what he does.

relation to Emersonian moral perfectionism. At the same time, of course, the film's title also signals that April and Frank stands in some relation to the work of the Founding Fathers of the United States itself; to their revolutionary ideals, and the recognition of the inalienable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" with which that nation declared its independence.

For Cavell, this conjunction of seemingly personal and political matters is another shared feature of the comedies and melodramas. He takes it that the bond of marriage between their principal pairs is not merely analogous to the bond between a democratic society and its citizens (since both are dependent, in the form of a covenant or contract, on the continuing consent or agreement of their members in order to legitimise the arrangements of their respective unions or institutions), but that such marriages – at least in the case of the remarriage comedies – in effect ratify that society as a setting in which its citizens are free to exercise those rights. They thus demonstrate that, over a century and half after the Declaration of Independence, America is still a place in which happiness and liberty can be pursued (Cavell, 1981, pp. 150–3).

For the unknown women of the melodramas, however, the pursuit of happiness is very different to its achievement; the isolating unhappiness of their marriages stands as an emblem not of the success of America's democratic aspiration, but its failure. In finding that the price of their continuing consent to society is agonisingly high (requiring them to endure irony, suffer unknownness, and court madness), such women effectively withdraw that consent through a melodramatic refusal of marriage that is also a refusal of society as it stands, imagining, instead, a further or future state of themselves and society which might more readily solicit it. The fact of women's unknownness thereby rebukes the present arrangements of society (the current inventory of its desires as they are manifest in what it variously conceives of as the good of marriage, the necessities of life, and the value of its institutions) and thus represents an internal threat to, or measure of, the legitimacy of the social order as such (Cavell, 1996, pp. 147–8). April's experience of married life as a confining unhappiness, and her imagination of a happier future in the more cultured or cultivated surroundings of Paris is, then, not an essentially private concern, but a public one – a passionate indictment of America's inability to live up to its own founding principles; that it is, as it were, a nation still to be discovered or settled. Put otherwise, it is as if April embodies the idea that the revolutionary spirit of 1776 had, by the 1950s, reached something like a dead end on Revolutionary Road, providing the defining instance of the film's pervasive ironies.

## *Perfectionist Visions in Revolutionary Road*

To see the fate of the Wheelers' marriage as epitomising the fate of America in this way is to bestow upon the couple the sort of national importance usually reserved for royalty (cf. Cavell, 1981, p. 147); Frank and April are certainly regarded in superior or aristocratic terms by those around them. As Shep reveals, they are known by everyone as "*The Wheelers*", a "terrific couple" naturally endowed with certain special gifts or talents which their neighbours do not share (as symbolised by April's patrician beauty and capacity for glamour); as Helen notes, "Well, you [April] looked simply ravishing, and I just knew Frank did something terribly brilliant in town. You just seemed...special. Of course, you still are". Obviously, the danger of such adulation is that one comes to believe it oneself (as April admits to Shep in the bar, for years she thought that she and Frank would be "wonderful in the world"), thus leading one to cultivate a certain snobbery or condescension towards others.

For Cavell, this alienating disdain is the perpetual moral risk run by the principal pairs in the melodramas and the comedies, and so of those with perfectionist aspirations (2004, p. 189). He takes it that such aspirations are concentrated amongst those fortunate enough to find that social injustice or natural misfortune are not pressing or unpostponable issues – those who are possessed of sufficient means to preserve life and pursue happiness. He sees snobbery as the characteristic vice of those in a position of relative advantage within society, such as the middle classes (whose sudden expansion typified post-war American life, and whose members could afford – partly, as a result of the low-cost loans offered by the G.I. Bill to veterans like Frank – the cars, houses, labour-saving domestic appliances, and televisions, which enabled their comparatively comfortable suburban lives on the likes of *Revolutionary Road*) (Cavell, 1990, p. xix). Like her later sophisticated dismissal of the Wheelers themselves, Helen provides the clearest example of such snobbery. Driving the Wheelers to their first viewing of what later becomes their home, she says,

Now of course, it isn't very desirable at this end. As you can see, Crawford Road is mostly these little cinder-blocky, pick-up trucky places – plumbers, carpenters, little local people of that sort. But eventually, eventually, it leads up to *Revolutionary Road*, which is much nicer.<sup>12</sup>

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12 Crawford Road is not mentioned by name in Yates' novel. Here, the filmmakers are possibly paying tribute to Joan Crawford, who played the heroine in *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), a self-sacrificing, middle-class mother trapped in an unhappy marriage during the Great Depression. In Todd Haynes' 2011 television miniseries of the same name, *Mildred Pierce* was played by Kate Winslet.

Frank's secret marking of this disdain by turning to April and lowering his sunglasses, and her stifled giggle in reply, suggests that they take themselves to be above or beyond such snobbery. But we might well wonder about the accuracy or sincerity of this sense; not only do their neighbours regard the couple in elevated terms, but Frank and April themselves also succumb to this failing, taking pride in thinking of themselves as superior to both the residents of Revolutionary Road, and the modest inhabitants of Crawford Road. Frank expresses this attitude when he declares that, "it's bad enough having to live out here among these damn people", and, more literally, in the shot where he leans smugly against the balustrade at Grand Central Station and looks down at his fellow commuters. However, such hubris invites humbling, an opportunity for genuine self-knowledge; something that begins for April with her humiliation in her amateur dramatic debut, and which later causes her to admit that,

Our whole existence here is based on this great premise that we're somehow very special and superior to the whole thing, and you know what I've realised? We're not! We're just like everyone else...We were never special, or destined, or anything at all.

This form of humbling is, for Cavell, a prelude to the overcoming of snobbery which he takes to be vital to the middle classes' recognition of the extent to which they profit (knowingly or otherwise) from the disadvantaged lives of those whom they disdain – and so of the degree of inequality present in their society (of which their material advantage is an indication) is something for which, insofar as they continue to consent to such an arrangement, they are responsible, and so are obliged to change (Cavell 2004, p. 17). The failure to withdraw or refuse their consent to this inequality, by those who gain relative advantage from it, thereby reflects their complicity with, and so compromise by, it. This middle-class condescension is thus a mask for guilt, and so the appropriate reaction by such individuals to this injustice is (as their humiliation suggests) not snobbery, but shame (Cavell, 2004, p. 68, p. 448). However, since any society will inevitably contain some degree of injustice – some partiality in its compliance with the principles of justice – the issue becomes how the relatively privileged might properly live with this continuing sense of compromise and shame (with the recognition, for example, that the inhabitants of Crawford Road are metaphorically and practically on the same road as oneself and one's apparently more esteemed neighbours) (Cavell, 1990, p. xxiv). For Cavell, the inevitable failures of democracy are not to be understood as tempting (ultimately self-indulgent) occasions for



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excusal, cynicism, or despair, but rather as vital calls for the change or transformation of oneself and one's society – a recognisably perfectionist ambition whose fulfilment depends on the forming of modes of character, education and friendship that invite oneself, and (by virtue of one's exemplarity or representativeness) others, to enter into an unattained, but attainable, state of self and society (1990, p. 56). In this way, Emersonian perfectionism's seemingly self-interested and elitist concern with the development or growth of one's own soul, and the cultivation of a society reflective of that growth, is shown not only to be compatible with democracy, but essential to its preservation, something it should honour, so that the democratic hope might be kept alive in the face of disappointment with it (Cavell, 1990, p. 56).

Against this background, April's despairing response to the stifling injustice of her situation expresses her inability to keep that hope alive. It is not merely that her refusal of marriage stands as an enabling rebuke to her society's present arrangements which calls for or invites a vision of a future state of that society in which those arrangements are transformed; rather, insofar as her refusal centres on a decision to move to Paris, it expresses April's conviction that America is no longer capable of such a transformation or revolution – that both she and it have lost faith with its democratic aspiration (as if the comedies' "green world" of Connecticut has now irreversibly darkened, requiring its displacement or relocation).<sup>13</sup> In no longer finding herself either able or willing to withstand or conform to society's failures – to continue to suffer injustice as the necessary or worthwhile price of change – April therefore judges that the cost of such toleration exceeds what she considers to be society's commitment to reform, and so whatever measure of justice it could presently be said to embody. Her averting withdrawal of consent is thus not made in the name of a future state of America, but rather with the intuition that there is nothing America can do any longer to solicit it – an expression not of temporary separation but outright divorce. In other words, we might say that April comes to find the discrepancy or distance between the reality of America's attained state of imperfect justice and its promise of an attainable state more compliant with ideal justice (and so the distance of America from its founding idea of itself) to be so unbearable that she is undone by it. In her judgement, life on

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13 In this regard, it is worth recalling that two of the four films Cavell takes as definitive of unknown woman melodrama (*Gaslight* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman*) have *fin de siècle* Europe as their setting, rather than America. Whether April's refusal of America's darkened failure constitutes a difference between early and recent versions of the genre is perhaps, then, an open question.

Revolutionary Road, and in the nation on which that road exists, is now unliveable. America has become a place that April can no longer inhabit (not simply unsettled, but unsettleable), a place whose disappointing departure of actuality from possibility is one from which she feels she must now depart.

For Emerson, the idea that the inhabitants of America might find their true selves by travelling to one of the capitals of the old cultures of Europe is, as he puts it in bluntly in 'Self-Reliance', "a fool's paradise" (1841/2003, p. 198). For him, attempting to sustain oneself on a diet of what he saw as the withered and withering remains of European culture would be an essentially backward-looking idolatry, a betrayal of the opportunity for the creation of a distinctively American form of spiritual and cultural self-reliance, as promised by the Declaration of Independence some sixty years before. Indeed, from a perfectionist perspective, April's willingness for such self-imposed exile amounts to her interpreting the, as it were, metaphysical distance between the attained and unattained states of herself and her society, as a geographical one. Since perfectionism pictures these states as immanent to the self and its society – as indicative of their inherent division or doubling – the unattained is not so much separated by a measurable distance from the attained, but rather haunts or shadows its every state (as the constancy of April's vision attests). A step into a further, attainable state of self and society is thus strictly immeasurable; it demands internal, rather than external, movement or migration, a traversing of spiritual, rather than physical, terrain. On this view, then, packing up one's family in Connecticut, and travelling three and a half thousand miles across the Atlantic in the hope of discovering one's next self appears as a dramatic false step, an almost comically profound misunderstanding of one's real openness to the future, and one's genuine potentialities – a debased or perverted form of perfectionism's true vision.

In any case, why should we imagine that things will be any better in Paris? On the contrary, there is good reason to suspect that the Wheelers' marriage would be just as unhappy in Europe as it is in America. After all, April's plan to move there was idolisingly intended to give Frank, not her, the opportunity for self-discovery. Instead, she would effectively continue to repress the question of her true identity by drowning in some anonymous secretarial pool of some nondescript, alphabet soup-named European agency. It would seem, then, that it would only be a matter of time before April's unrelenting unhappiness followed her, and she was again made to face the stern and inescapable fact of her essentially divided or doubled nature; that, as Emerson puts it: "my giant goes with me wherever I go" (1841/2003, p. 198) (a thought echoed by one of

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Frank's colleagues, when he asks, "But, I mean, assuming there is a true vocation waiting for you. Wouldn't you be just as likely to discover it here as there?"). It is as if, in her desperation, April combats a hopeless pessimism with an equally hopeless optimism. Her dream of Paris is, in reality, nothing more than an attempt to recapture a past (surely romanticised) state of her relationship with Frank, a time when – lacking the burdens of work, money, and children – they were free to indulge in fashionable conversations about authenticity and self-becoming imported from the nicotine-stained existentialists of the Left Bank. In effect, rather than suggesting a turning away from her current state of self and society, April's adventurous fantasy of Paris could be understood as a turning towards it, a further symptom of her present fixated inability to imagine, and so to have, a future which manifests as a nostalgic fixation with the past (yet another of the false or fantastic excitements that suburban boredom craves).<sup>14</sup>

For Cavell, since the attainable world doesn't exist elsewhere, outside or beyond the borders of its presently attained state, but rather within it, perfectionism's distinctive moral calling is not for the repudiation or transcendence of one's world, but for its reform or transfiguration (2004, p. 2). Rather than demanding a turn away from the familiar facts of one's existence, it requires a turn towards them – a rediscovery or reclaiming of one's ordinary or everyday life by discovering or claiming the possibilities for spiritual growth inherent within it. From this perspective, April's haunting vision of a different world becomes a vision of a world nowhere but here, of nothing but her present world transformed. Her calling is thus to reinhabit or reappropriate her life within the precincts of its suburban existence in ways that overcome or negate its undeniably repressive confinements and banalities; to come to see herself and the possibilities of her world in a new light, as if her present life were the womb containing the terms by which her future life could be delivered (Cavell, 1989, p. 46).

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<sup>14</sup> This fact that, rather than overcoming conformity, April is still subject to it, might be understood to constitute a central difference between *Revolutionary Road* and its classical predecessors. Indeed, more strongly, it could perhaps be seen as reason enough not to consider her an example (of however different a later kind) of an unknown woman at all. But this would not only, in effect, amount to denying the significance of the generic features already discussed, but more importantly, to denying the depth and reality of the increasingly desperate and paralysed perfectionist desire to which April attempts (in however distorted a way) to give expression. In this context, it is worth recalling the similarly pervasive condition of tragic, or hopeless, hope that affected April's melodramatic sister Lisa Berndle in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Lisa's unknownness, like April's, follows her through to the end.

But is it really possible for April to discover the hitherto largely unacknowledged terms that would allow for such a transformation, to find hope in the apparently “hopeless emptiness” of 1950s suburban America, while continuing to live on Revolutionary Road (to show that, as Frank says, “It is possible that Parisians aren’t the only ones who know how to lead interesting lives”)? In closing, I think, despite everything, the film suggests a possible way in which such hope can be found; in which April’s revolutionising of her inhabitation of the world might, at the very least, be imagined. For while April’s (and Frank’s) unhappiness is pervasive, it’s not absolute – once the couple decide to move to Paris, we are shown unprecedented visions of genuine happiness between them. Notably, these all feature figures who otherwise barely register in the rest of the film, and, indeed, are somewhat conspicuous by their absence – the Wheeler children (in the scenes of Frank’s surprise birthday party; of bedtime; of playing on the lawn in the sunshine, leaping through the spray of a water-sprinkler while Frank and April embrace).<sup>15</sup> The question then becomes: does the fact that this happiness is found in the expectation of leaving behind the life in which it is being experienced make it any less real? Does it necessarily make it any less possible as a potential way of living, together, at home, on Revolutionary Road? Perhaps it is April and Frank’s failure to see that this is a possibility they have only to continue to realise, one they have only to keep willingly turning towards and embracing, that leads to the tragedy that is to come. But how can we know?<sup>16</sup>

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15 Their son, Michael, is only mentioned by name twice, and we have to wait until the end credits to learn that their daughter is called Jennifer – as if she is already at risk of unknownness.

16 I am grateful to William Rothman, Stephen Mulhall, and the journal’s two anonymous reviewers for their comments on a draft of this paper.

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