

Eric M. Lachs
ENG4133 – The ABC's of Cinema
(The Philadelphia Story)

(A)ge:

In the majority of *The Philadelphia Story*'s temporal diegesis, Tracy shows hatred towards her father for his investment of money and interest into a dancer in New York.

Regardless of her lack of involvement, she becomes fixated on her father, who is presumably twice her age, and his affairs. Sigmund Freud says in *The Interpretation of*

Dreams that "the chief part in the mental lives of all children who later become

psychoneurotics is played by their parents." Furthermore, Freud theorizes a female

Oedipal complex that hypothesizes a girl's libidinal attachment to her father from a

young age. This complex would tend to explain Tracy's desire for male affection,

particularly in the form of an older male figure. Of the three leading men in the film,

Mike and Kittredge are both younger than Tracy. Dexter, the only one of the three that is

older than Tracy, ends up with her at the end. Coincidentally, Cary Grant (36 years old at

the time of the film) also has three years on Hepburn, the second oldest of the four actors.

(B)lackmail:

Mike's working assignment on Tracy's wedding materializes due to Seth Lord's dancer affair and subsequent blackmail. Sidney Kidd summons Mike to write the story while Mike intends to quit his magazine job altogether. He begrudgingly agrees and drives with Liz and Dexter to the Lord mansion, where he becomes swept up in Philadelphia high society and never begins writing his story. Roland Barthes comments on the implications of authorship in *The Death of the Author*.

“The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.... Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely.... Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.” (p. 1468-1469)

Barthes theorizes that all of language composes a pre-made dictionary of signs that the writer refers to. The death of the author occurs with his precipitation into the act of writing, manipulating the signs of language. Within the diegetic world of *The Philadelphia Story*, Mike never enters into this process. The night before the wedding, hard-pressed to begin his story, Mike discovers that blackmail motivated his assignment and chooses to turn the tables on Kidd. Barthes mentions the writings of Proust later in the same essay.

“Proust himself, despite the apparently psychological character of what are called his analyses, was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation between the writer and his characters; by making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but he who is going to write (the young man in the novel—but, in fact, how old is he and who is he? —wants to write but cannot; the novel ends when writing as last become possible), Proust gave modern writing its epic.” (p. 1467)

Mike takes on the role of Proust’s protagonist, in the final moment deciding not to write.

He turns in no story of the Lord wedding, nor does he write the blackmail to Kidd, he merely dictates it to Dexter who gets Liz to type it. In Kidd’s blackmail he avoids his own death as an author in the process of writing.

(C) coal factory:

The characters of *The Philadelphia Story* conduct themselves in a way that is concomitant with their class. Mike and Liz both despise their jobs, but remain diligent to avoid an empty stomach. Mike describes Tracy and her kind (“the young, rich, rapacious American female”) with contempt, suggesting that she causes his position in the world.

The Lord family and Dexter occupy the other side of the spectrum. Tracy glides through life (“never a blow that hasn’t been softened for her”) as does Haven, on their families’ wealth. Wealth divides the characters in the film, with the possible exception of George,

the only one to work his way into the upper echelon. He gained his wealth and position at Seth Lord's coal factory. This separation of the workers and the owners of the means of production exemplifies a capitalist economy. Walter Benjamin talks about capitalism in relation to art in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

When Marx undertook his critique of the capitalistic mode of production, this mode was in its infancy. Marx directed his efforts in such a way as to give them prognostic value. He went back to the basic conditions underlying capitalistic production and through his presentation showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future. The result was that one could expect it not only to exploit the proletariat with increasing intensity, but ultimately to create conditions which would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself.

The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production. Only today can it be indicated what form this has taken. Certain prognostic requirements should be met by these statements. However, theses about the art of the proletariat after its assumption of power or about the art of a classless society would have less bearing on these demands than theses about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production. Their dialectic is no less noticeable in the superstructure than in the economy. It would therefore be wrong to underestimate the value of such theses as a weapon. (Preface)

An examination of *The Philadelphia Story* as a text under capitalist production suggests something about that society. For instance, Tracy's goals as the protagonist imply similar goals in the wider view of society. Tracy presents an opposition to both Dexter and her father in favor of George in the beginning of the film, but comes to reject George in the end. George, the man of the people that has strived his entire life, works in a coal factory,

but her father owns the factory. In this view, Tracy's apology to Dexter and her father entails the maintenance of capitalist goals, securing economic growth and the production of wealth.

(D)inah:

The youngest member of the Lord family mentions to Mike and Liz that her name used to be Diana, but her sister changed it. Diana, derived from an Indo-European root meaning "heavenly" or "divine," relates to the Greek virgin goddess of the moon. Dinah, daughter to Leah and Jacob in the Bible, occupies the subservient role of a rape victim.

This change reflects Tracy's desire to be ravished, not revered. The original moniker doubtlessly represents the father's preference. Dinah herself suggests the number of years ago that her mother and father were together. Tracy's renaming condemns the father's choice and the "D" that specifies the dancer that she must cover up and the divorce, which haunts Tracy and her mother, as well as Liz. The replacement of Diana with Dinah, exchanging one "D" for another, foreshadows her coming to terms with her father.

The move from three syllables to two forecasts that only two of the three women haunted

by divorce will remain so, highlighted by the newfound “h,” which identifies Dexter Haven, whom Dinah had always favored. The new “D” emphasizes the importance of drunkenness, Dexter’s original vice which is “incredibly important and most revealing” when it twice befalls Tracy, eventually leading to her second marriage to him. This understanding of her name cannot help but induce laughter during the wedding when Dinah exclaims “I did it. I did it all!”

(E)ditor:

Sidney Kidd, the editor and publisher of *Spy Magazine*, initiates the project that mobilizes the film’s narrative. By preparing the project and casting Mike and Liz, Kidd resembles a studio-era producer, with Mike and Liz as writer and cameraman. Dexter becomes the director, using his ability to maneuver Mike and Liz into the residence, provide them with a suitable story, and motivate the main characters (Tracy, Dinah, George, etc.). Tracy and Dinah’s inclination to “put on an act,” once they know Mike and Liz’s true purpose, indicates their function as actors

(F)amily portraits:

Upon their entrance, Mike and Liz respond dramatically to the ornate decorations and fixtures in the Lord estate. Paintings, furniture, and heirlooms fill the rooms. Mike and Liz move from room to room examining the Lords' home and lifestyle. A close inspection reveals that a single portrait adorns the wall of the lobby when they first enter, two portraits occupy the second room, and three portraits take up the large wall in the third room. This single feature of the rooms' furnishings follows Mike and Liz, increasing with each subsequent area. The portraits contribute to the grand scale of the Lord estate, suggesting that each room makes the previous one appear smaller by comparison. Louis Aragon discusses how infinitesimal details can have a poetic value in *On Decor*.

All our emotion exists for those dear old American adventure films that speak of daily life and manage to raise to a dramatic level a banknote on which our attention is riveted, a table with a revolver on it, a bottle that on occasion becomes a weapon, a handkerchief that reveals a crime, a typewriter that's the horizon of a desk, the terrible unfolding telegraphic tape with magic ciphers that enrich or ruin bankers.... On the screen, objects that were a few moments ago sticks of furniture or books of cloakroom tickets are transformed to the point where they take on menacing or enigmatic meanings.... To endow with a poetic value that which does not yet possess it, to willfully restrict the field of vision so as to intensify expression: these are the two properties that help make cinematic decor the adequate setting of modern beauty. (p. 4)

The aforementioned portraits poeticize the film as a metaphor for Mike and Liz's arrival in two ways. First, they provide the viewer with a sign of the house's grandness to complement Mike and Liz's expressions. Furthermore, the portraits function allegorically for Tracy's relationships. Mike's arrival to the house with Dexter changes Tracy's number of men from one to three. By the time Mike and Liz are in the third room, Tracy has three men to deal with: George, Dexter and Mike.

(G)eraniums:

Mike and Tracy sit in the back of her estate on the verge of kissing when he calls her "upper class," which separates them. She retorts, and adjusts her attention to the geraniums after a brief period of silent awareness. They continue in this style throughout the scene, with the camera zooming in—focusing the viewer's attention—on each potential embrace, and zooming out just as their inebriated contentment shatters again.

Jacques Brunius talks about this cinematographic technique in *In the Margin of French Cinema*.

The images *fade in* and *fade out*, *dissolve* into each other, vision begins and ends in an iris, secrets are revealed through a keyhole, the mental image of a keyhole. The arrangement of screen images in time is absolutely analogous with the arrangement thought or the dream can devise. Neither chronological order nor relative values of duration are real. Contrary to the theater, film, like thought, like the dream, chooses some gestures, defers or enlarges them, eliminates others, travels many hours, centuries, kilometers in a few seconds, speeds up, slows down, stops, goes backwards. It is impossible to imagine a truer mirror of mental performance. (sec. *Crossing the Bridge*)

This cinematography endows the scene with feelings of both reality and peculiarity. After

going back and forth, Tracy accuses Mike of intolerance, and in her drunken state repeats

a line that Dexter said to her earlier that day. The words come to Tracy subconsciously,

and in the moment—realizing what she has said—reverts to face the geraniums. Sigmund

Freud describes this as the process of displacement in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

We have introduced a new class of psychical material between the manifest content of dreams and the conclusions of our enquiry: namely, their latent content, or the “dream-thoughts,” arrived at by means of our procedure. It is from these dream-thoughts and not from a dream’s manifest content that we disentangle its meaning.... Among the thoughts that analysis brings to light are many which are relatively remote from the kernel of the dream and which look like artificial interpolations made for some particular purpose. That purpose is easy to divine. It is precisely they that constitute a connection, often a forced and far-fetched one, between the dream-content and the dream-thoughts; and if these elements were weeded out of the analysis the result would often be that the component parts of the dream-content would be left not only without over-determination but with out any satisfactory determination at all. (pp. 923-925)

Tracy realizes her repetition of Dexter’s words, she realizes their truth, and represses her

desire for Dexter by turning to the geraniums. She pauses awkwardly before turning

away, as if she recently awoke from sleepwalking. Tracy forces Dexter’s words from the

aperture of consciousness back into her subconscious, latent dream-thoughts. They remain there until Dexter proposes to her the next morning.

(H)orses:

After meeting Uncle Willie and George at the stables, Tracy and Dinah join them to ride their horses. None of the horses have any distinguishing characteristics except for Tracy's. Her horse, the only entirely white one, emphasizes the overall whiteness of the movie. Every single actor and extra in the films is Caucasian. Richard Dyer discusses the phenomenon of racial representation in *White*.

Existential psychology, principally in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, had proposed a model of human growth whereby the individual self becomes aware of itself as a self by perceiving its difference from others. It was other writers who suggested that this process, supposedly at once individual and universal, was in fact socially specific—Simone de Beauvoir arguing that it has to do with the construction of the male ego, Frantz Fanon relating it to the colonial encounter of white and black. What I want to stress here is less this somewhat metaphysical dimension, more the material bases for the shifts and anxieties in the representation of whiteness suggested by *Simba*, *Jezebel*, and *Night*.... The most famous scene in this film [*Jezebel*] is the Olympus Ball, at which all the unmarried women wear white. Julie, to embarrass Pres and to cock a snook at outdated convention decides to wear a red dress. The immediate scandal is not just the refusal to conform and uphold the celebration of virginity that the white dress code represents but the sexual connotations of the dress itself, satin and red, connotations made explicit in a scene at the dressmaker's. This is the dress of Julie that her black maid Zette most covets, and after the ball Julie gives it to her. It is precisely its *colorfulness* that, stereotyping informs us, draws Zette—the dress is marked as colored,

a definite, bold color heightened by a flashy fabric, just as black representation is. Thus what appears to be symbolism (white for virginity, color for sex) within a universally applicable communication circuit becomes ethnically specific. The primary association of white with chastity is inextricably tied to not being dark and colorful, not being non-white, and the defiance and vitality narratively associated with Julie's wearing of the dress is associated with the qualities embodied by black women, qualities that Julie as a white woman must not display, or even have. Of course, the red dress looks merely dark in this black and white film. (pp. 737-743)

Dyer's example highlights the potential reasons for distinguishing Tracy's horse from the rest. For example, the absence of a white horse might simply connote the impurity of the bride to be, without the racist undertones. At this point in the film, the audience is already aware of her previous marriage. The white horse signifies her re-purification, and preparation for life with a new man.

(I)nebriation:

While talking in the pool-house, Dexter reminds Tracy about the one time she got drunk. Tracy remains firm that she has no recollection of such an episode. Michel Foucault presents his "Repressive Hypothesis" in *The History of Sexuality*.

The seventeenth century, then, was the beginning of an age of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies, an age which perhaps we still have not completely left behind. Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from things that

were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship. Yet when one looks back over these last three centuries with their continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable and discursive explosion. (p. 1648)

Foucault's hypothesizes that the very repression of sexually motivated a series of

discourses focusing on it. Similar to the ban on sexual discourse, alcohol was banned in

the United States from 1919 to 1933. Following from that, Tracy's refusal to admit her

inebriated incident on the roof causes it to reappear the night before her wedding,

reinforcing the well-known adage that "he who does not learn from history is doomed to

repeat it." The Hayes Production Code, stating that "no picture shall be produced which

will lower the moral standards of those who see it," subjected Hollywood filmmaking to

a comparable ban starting in 1930. This ban forced filmmakers to find loopholes in the

code, which necessitated its numerous alterations and eventual removal in 1967.

(J)unius's friends:

Mike and Liz are first introduced to the Lord family as friends of Junius. By assuming this outlet, they enter the Lord estate and begin their assignment of capturing “a day in the life of a society bride.” They follow the Lords in preparation of the wedding and view all of the strange circumstances. Laura Mulvey writes about the act of looking in film in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Originally, in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. (p. 835)

Although they know about Mike and Liz’s actual intentions, Tracy and her family still subject to their gaze by allowing it to occur. Similarly, the actors in the film allow Cukor’s camera (his “intrusive eye”) to film them, thus subjecting them to the film viewer’s gaze. Later in the same essay, Mulvey dissects the three looks of the cinema.

The voyeuristic-scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure can itself be broken down. There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watched the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate the intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. (p. 843)

Cukor magnifies—not eliminates—the effect of the intrusive camera by focusing on Mike and Liz’s imposition on the Lords’ affairs. As Mulvey notes in her essay, “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it.” Correspondingly, Mike and Liz’s analysis of the wedding destroys it. Their intervention precipitates Tracy’s drunken swim with Mike, causing her eventual break-up with George and remarriage to Dexter.

(K)isses:

George makes several attempts to take Tracy home from their wedding party. They argue about it briefly, but stop when they become conscious of their surroundings (“What will the neighbors think?). Just before they part ways, Tracy goes to kiss him and misses his face just slightly. Alan Spiegel discusses the accident in filmic context in

Fiction and the Camera Eye.

When I use the term adventitious to describe something that happens in a visualized narrative, I am referring either to the postures or gestures of a character or an object that neither signify nor connect with anything else in the narrative context beyond their own phenomenal appearances. The adventitious detail usually takes the form on an accident, the causes of which are not readily apparent; an accident that is seemingly without a narrative function and cannot be easily related to any pattern of artistic inevitability. It is, of course, a relative term and depends for its effects primarily on our sense of its opposite, that is, our sense of the necessary

and the inevitable as we have experienced them, not only in life, but, even more crucially, in the traditional practices of narrative fiction. (p. 90)
 Hepburn's trivial slip, obviously a product of her mismatch in action with actor John

Howard, carries the same dramatic significance as if the gesture was intentional. This phenomenon of chance slips through the narrative, and reveals the character's feelings before she, or the film's viewer, recognizes them. Tracy's inquiry about the neighbors implies their functions: viewing, supervising, and drawing conclusions based on that experience. The neighbors mirror the experience of the film's viewer, who, when diligent, can catch a glimpse of a misplaced kiss that foreshadows future events

(L)iz's camera:

Liz's camera intrudes into the lives of the Lord family and watches over or documents their actions. In a way, Liz, and by extension her camera, furthers director Cukor's relationship with the film's actors. Liz mirrors Cukor's function of capturing images for another's entertainment (and to some degree artistic) function. Certainly workers from a magazine called *Spy* would not attempt to justify their endeavors as artistic, however Liz's photographs could have a certain allure beyond the benefit of the

scopophilic magazine reader. Roland Barthes expounds on the function of photography in

Camera Lucida.

The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code—even if obviously, certain codes do infect our reading of it—the realists do not take the photograph for a copy of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality: a magic*, not an art. (p. 88)

Whenever Liz (or Kidd for that matter) takes a snapshot, the camera always stays on the

picture-taker and shows the frame of their camera a second later. This process engulfs the

photographic moment and continues with the film's action by briefly stopping the

narrative flow, to capture the awe or comedy of that instant. Barthes combines the ideas

of still and motion pictures in *The Third Meaning*.

This is why, to a certain extent, the filmic, quite paradoxically, cannot be grasped in the projected film, the film “in movement,” “au naturel,”; but only, as yet, in that major artifact which is the still. I have long been intrigued by this phenomenon: being interested and even being obsessed by photographs from films, and losing everything about these photographs upon going inside the theater: a mutation which can lead to a complete reversal of values. I first attributed this preference for the still to my lack of cinematic culture, to my resistance to film; it seemed to me I was like one of those children who prefer ‘illustration’ to text, or those consumers who cannot afford certain items and must be content with inspecting a choice of samples or a department-store catalogue. This explanation merely reinforces the notion of the still as a remote sub-product of the film, a sample, a pornographic extract, and technically, a reduction of the work through immobilization of what is supposed to be the cinema's sacred essence: the movement of the images. (pp. 59-60)

By focusing on Liz's photography, Cukor simultaneously focuses on the intra-narrative

story (Mike and Liz's assignment to capture the “Philadelphia Story” that Kidd sends

them out for) and encapsulates the essence of all film (beyond the narrative, to capture *The Philadelphia Story* as a film).

(M)arriage photographs:

The clicking of Sidney Kidd's camera surprises the wedding party at the end of the film, which moves constantly until this point. The portrait of characters freezes in the frame and then continues to move as a still photograph on a turning page, either of Dexter and Tracy's wedding album or more likely the latest issue of *Spy Magazine*. Siegfried Kracauer mentions this phenomenon of nascent motion in *Theory of Film*.

The third type of motion which offers special interest cinematically is not just another group of interrelated movements but movement as contrasted with motionlessness. In focusing upon this contrast, films strikingly demonstrate that objective movement—any movement, for that matter—is one of their choice subjects. Alexander Dovzhenko in both *Arsenal* and *Earth* frequently stops the action to resume it after a short lull. The first phase of this procedure—characters or parts of them abruptly ceasing to move—produces a shock effect, as if all of a sudden we found ourselves in a vacuum. The immediate consequence is that we acutely realize the significance of movement as an integral element to the external world as well as film. (p. 295)

The final scene of *The Philadelphia Story* effects a memorable summary of the film's conclusion, while also referring to the bi-textual framing of the story. The film portrays the day's events of a Philadelphia upper-class wedding, also focusing on the depiction of

those events in pulp magazine form. The final picture summarizes the conclusion of the film, and in doing so recalls the previous 112 minutes for the viewer. Analogously, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt discuss the function of an anecdote in relation to history in *Practicing New Historicism*.

New historicists linked anecdotes to the disruption of history as usual...: the anecdote appealed to those of us who wanted to interrupt the Big Stories. We sought the very thing that made anecdotes ciphers to many historians: a vehement and cryptic particularity that would make one pause or even stumble on the threshold of history.... The desired anecdotes would not, as in the old historicism, epitomize epochal truths, but would instead undermine them.... The histories one wanted to pursue through the anecdote might, therefore, be called “counterhistories.”(p. 51)

The freeze-frame disrupts the constant motion of the film as the anecdote disrupts history.

The suddenness of Sidney Kidd’s photography undermines the flow of the internal narrative (The wedding, as opposed to the external story of capturing the wedding) by delaying and avoiding the typical happy ending. Kidd’s intervention alters the wedding just as the anecdote affects the “Big Stories.”

(N)ature:

The Philadelphia Story contains a slightly outlandish narrative about an extremely wealthy Northern society woman realizing her love for two drastically different men on

the eve of her marriage to another man. The film's average viewer has no concept of her wealth, her mind-frame, or her coincidental and spontaneous love of three different men.

The typical viewer would first recognize the drawings of landscapes and Pennsylvania monuments that appear in the beginning of the film and dissolve into the outdoor scenery of the Lord estate. Andre Bazin talks about the bond of nature and cinema in *What is Cinema?*.

Must we conclude from this that cinema is dedicated entirely to the representation if not of natural reality at least of a plausible reality of which the spectator admits the identity with nature as he knows it? The comparative failure of German expressionism would seem to confirm this hypothesis, since it is evident that *Caligari* attempted to depart from realistic decor under the influence of the theater and painting. But this would be to offer an oversimplified explanation for a problem that calls for more subtle answers. We are prepared to admit that the screen opens up an artificial world provided there exists a common denominator between the cinematographic image and the world we live in. Our experience of space is the structural basis for our concept of the universe. We may say in fact, adapting Henri Gouhier's formula, "The stage welcomes every illusion except the illusion of presence," that "the cinematographic image can be emptied of all reality—save one—the reality of space." It is perhaps an overstatement to say "all reality" because it is difficult to imagine a reconstruction of space devoid of all reference to nature. (p. 416)

The characters' connection to nature solidifies the reality of the diegetic world in the mind of the viewer.

(O)ffice building:

The depiction of *Spy Magazine*'s headquarters begins with an outdoor shot of an office building with a revolving door. Mike and Liz walk into the frame in the next shot, and Dexter in the shot after them. Altogether, Mike and Liz visibly walk through four doors and down five hallways in the course of six shots, each one separated by transition. Each shot gives the impression that they are headed to a particular place in the office building without saying exactly where or showing any other places. Noel Burch discusses off-screen space in *Nana, or the Two Kinds of Space*.

Toward the beginning of the film, there is a shot in which Muffat, rushing toward Nana's dressing room, meets young Georges, Nana's new conquest, as he leaves her dressing room in a sort of ecstatic daze. The shot in which their paths cross is an extremely brief one, lasting barely a second. The two men, seen in a medium shot against a bare wall, are caught in mid-flight, Muffat entering left and Georges right; their paths cross like two arrows, without their even glancing at each other, and they exit on opposite sides of the screen. The essential part of the action in this shot (the trajectories of the two men) takes place *off screen*, although in such a brief span of time—the moment preceding and following each entrance and each exit—that it borders on the instantaneous; this action *simultaneously* defines the left and right segments of off-screen space. (pp. 18-19)

Seemingly meaningless or rote actions can activate unseen space to create the illusion of reality. In the course of walking down the hallway in one of the shots, Mike says "Hello, Joe" to a passing man who then walks off-screen. In another hallway, Mike and Liz pass a lobby area filled with people waiting in chairs presumably for appointments inside an

office. Both of these things contribute to the idea of an office building. While showing each passing office would give the viewer more information, this technique vastly improves efficiency and directs the viewer only to the most important information. In the course of six shots, over a minute of the film, the camera remains static only once, at the end of the sequence.

(P)oetry:

McCaulay Connor is a fiction writer at heart. In order to pay his bills, he works for a magazine that has a first-rate circulation and second-rate morals. In a rendezvous with Tracy Lord at the library, they discuss his book. Her favorite short story is based on the old Spanish peasant's proverb, "With the rich and mighty, always a little patience."

This theme appears in Stewart's first three Academy award-nominated performances. In Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), he plays an innocent and idealistic young man who learns the cold truth about the prosperous and powerful Senators.

Although he falls in love with Susan Paine, he ends up with the trustworthy secretary. *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) features Stewart as a man who confronts a corrupt millionaire

with his philanthropy. He remains with faithful Mary Hatch. Casting actors consistently epitomizes the star-vehicle principle. Knowing that Mike will end up with Liz, and the impossibility of John Howard beating out Cary Grant, necessitates Tracy's return to C. K. Dexter Haven. Both the proverb and the Jimmy Stewart "formula" forecast the movie's ending.

(Q)ueen:

The day before Tracy's wedding, George calls her a goddess, her father calls her a prig, Dexter sees her as high in spirit but low in decency, and Mike calls her a queen as they dance alone by the pool. Mike and Tracy's conversation, ranging from lighthearted comedy to intense drama to hatred with each line of dialogue, seems like something that could only happen in a movie. The constant change of emotion remains too detached and fantastic to come from people in such an emotional state. In *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, Andre Breton discusses the cause of this pensive reality.

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now search as one may one will never find

any other motivating force in the activities of the surrealists other than the hope of finding and fixing this point. From this it becomes obvious how absurd it would be to define surrealism solely as constructive or destructive: the point to which we are referring is *a fortiori* that point where construction and destruction can no longer be brandished one against the other. (pp. 123-124)

The scene materializes from the surrealistic process: the subversion of natural, expected codes. If Mike's insults motivated Tracy to kick him off the property and go inside the house, the movie would lose its magic. The scene's sensation occurs specifically because of the surrealistic roller coaster. Tracy embodies everything during the course of their talk, and sometimes all at once. This episode is reminiscent of Fellini's *8 ½* (1960), when Marcello tells Maddalena "You are the first woman on the first day of creation. You are mother, sister, lover, friend, angel, devil, earth, home." Tracy represents a conglomerate of signs (what each person thinks of her, what she thinks of herself) and personifies them all at any given moment.

(R)ed:

Dexter's nickname for Tracy in *The Philadelphia Story* signifies many things, as he says "That old redhead: no bitterness, no recrimination, just a good swift left to the jaw." The many connotations of "Red" include embarrassment and fieriness, even more

obscurely referring to communists and Native Americans. Roman Jakobson discusses this naming process in *The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles*.

Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details. In the scene of Anna Karenina's suicide, Tolstoj's artistic attention is focused on the heroine's handbag; and in *War and Peace* the synecdoches "hair on the upper lip" and "bare shoulders" are used by the same writer to stand for the female characters to whom these features belong. (p. 1267)

Naming by the process of metonymy solidifies certain characteristics of the subject. In

this case, Tracy is a fiery and independent woman. In *High Society*, however, Dexter calls

Tracy "Sam," a shortened version of her middle name. This change relates completely to

the differences in the second version of the film, since Dexter uses "Red" in the original

play. Barry King mentions the significations of screen performance in *Articulating*

Stardom.

Film can reduce the actor's control over performance. There remains the question of the features of film as a medium and how these provide, as it were, a semiotic "conduit" for the implementation of social decisions and objective related to control. To understand these features it is necessary to identify the point of engagement of the actor with the narrative through his or her engagement with character. As Stephen Heath has pointed out, the terms "character" and "actor" are ambiguous because they cover what are a whole series of personalities in relation to the narrative. (p. 174)

In *High Society*, Grace Kelly played Hepburn's role. Kelly does not embody the

aggressive, independent woman that Hepburn personified both as an actor and in the

Tracy Lord role. The substitution of “Red” for “Sam,” a clearly masculine moniker, replaces the aggressiveness, a predominantly masculine characteristic.

(S)py Magazine:

Sidney Kidd’s enterprise reflects the public desire to know celebrities, which Hepburn despised. The studio system made it difficult for independent. Studios protected their stars by defending and restricting them publicly. Actors that grew up in the studio system had homes on the lot, where they received lessons in education, etiquette, and the arts. Margaret Lord functions similarly, correcting Tracy’s spelling, improving Dinah’s grammar, planning the wedding, and maintaining order in her house.

(T)ake a dip:

Tracy decides to go back to her house after getting drunk at Uncle Willie’s party. When Mike drives her home, the pair continues drinking and decides to take a dip in Tracy’s pool. The last time Tracy drinks alcohol to this extent is a revealing episode

during her previous marriage to Dexter. Linda Williams speculates on the fantasy of previous experiences in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*.

Here, I would like to forge the connection between Laplanche and Pontalis's structural understanding of fantasies as myths of origins which try to cover the discrepancy between two moments in time and the distinctive temporal structure of these particular genres. Laplanche and Pontalis argue that fantasies which are myths of origin address the insoluble problem of the discrepancy between an irrecoverable original experience presumed to have actually taken place—as in the case, for example, of the historical primal scene—and the uncertainty of its hallucinatory revival. The discrepancy exists, in other words, between the actual existence of the lost object and the sign which evokes both this existence and its absence. (p. 712)

Tracy, in becoming drunk for the second time in her life, realizes that she should have supported Dexter in his vice (alcohol). As Williams says, drinking reminds her of her previous marriage and its expiration. She regrets that her relationship with him has developed into an “irrecoverable original experience” and wants to return to it. Her swim with Mike becomes less of an act of drunken recreation and closer to the act of baptism, signifying spiritual cleansing and rebirth. Mike carries Tracy from the pool to her bed in the morning in a position that is symbolic of a parent carrying a child or a groom carrying his bride across the threshold, foreshadowing her newfound love for Dexter.

(U)nderstanding heart:

Seth Lord tells his daughter she lacks this one essential thing to make a lovely woman (“without which you might as well be made of bronze”) just before they all leave for Uncle Willie’s party. Tracy mulls over this insult, and starts drinking to ease her emotional state. Later that night she returns to the house with Mike, and they end up in an embrace after trading insults for some time. The expressions of reverence and excitement on their faces is indescribable, yet this scene in the film is taken directly from the screenplay. This event in Philip Barry’s original stage version reads as follows: “The kiss is taken and returned. After it she exclaims softly ‘Golly.’ She gazes at him wonderingly, then raises her face to receive another. Then she stands in his arms, her cheek against his breast, amazement in her eyes.” (p. 542) While this literally describes the scene’s events, it does no justice to the raw emotion in the film. Andre Breton describes this phenomenon in *As in a Wood*.

What is most specific of all the means of the camera is obviously the power to make concrete the forces of love which, despite everything, remain deficient in books, from the sole fact that nothing in them can render the seduction or distress of a glance or certain feelings of priceless giddiness. The radical powerlessness of the plastic arts in this domain goes without saying (one imagines that it has not been given to the painter to show us the radiant image of a kiss). The cinema is alone in extending its empire there, and this alone would be enough for its consecration. (p. 20)

Tracy's shining moment, her realization and achievement of an understanding heart, reveals infinitely more in a visual medium. No number of words could efficiently describe this picture.

(V)iolence:

The few violent acts in *The Philadelphia Story* reflect a code, highlighted by surrealist thought, within the film. Paul Hammond writes in *The Shadow and its Shadow* that the artist Man Ray would disrupt the imagery of a film at any moment of boredom by diverting his attention and filtering the picture. Hammond quotes Breton from *As in a Wood*.

When I was "at the cinema age" (it should be recognized that this age exists in life – and that it passes) I never began by consulting the amusement pages to find out what film might chance to be the best, nor did I find out the time the film was to begin. I agreed wholeheartedly with Jacques Vache in appreciating nothing so much as dropping into a cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom – of surfeit – to rush off to another cinema where we behaved in the same way, and so on (obviously this practice would be too much of a luxury today). I have never known anything more *magnetizing*: it goes without saying that more often than not we left our seats without even knowing the title of the film which was in no way of importance to us. On a Sunday several hours sufficed to exhaust all that Nantes could offer us: the important thing is that one came out 'charged' for a few days; as there had been nothing deliberated about our actions, qualitative judgments were forbidden. (p. 10)

One who mimics the surrealist viewing would see only the few moments of exciting violence in the film, from which the ending follows logically. Dexter strikes Tracy at the beginning. The evening before she prepares to marry Kittredge, it is obvious that there are three possible men that she could marry. Mike threatens Dexter that one of them will eventually have to hit the other. That expectation is fulfilled the next day when Dexter hits Mike in order to save him from Kittredge. The violence, which disrupts the boredom of dialogue, reveals the conclusion to the surrealist viewer, who disregards all else.

(W)atch:

Tracy's drunken exploits the night before her wedding precipitate both Dexter picking up her jewelry and Mike leaving his watch in Tracy's room. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin notes the importance of the timepiece in film.

A clock that is working will always be a disturbance on the stage. There it cannot be permitted its function of measuring time. Even in a naturalistic play, astronomical time would clash with theatrical time. Under these circumstances it is highly revealing that the film can, whenever appropriate, use time as measured by a clock. From this more than from many other touches it may clearly be recognized that under certain

circumstances each and every prop in a film may assume **important functions**. (IX, footnote 11)

Mike's watch elucidates the relative lack of time until Tracy's wedding and causes an abrupt realization of what Tracy forgets the night before. The more **important function** of the watch, however, clarifies her relationship with each of the three potential suitors.

The jewelry, and its exchanges, allegorizes Tracy's feelings for the men. Mike's loss or misplacement of his watch is reconciled the next day when Tracy returns it to him. She does not accept the watch that was left in her room; similarly she subsequently refuses his marriage proposal. Dexter picks up Tracy's engagement ring and bracelet, left at the poolside for any of the men to discover. Her acceptance of jewelry from Dexter foreshadows the outcome of the wedding. Coincidentally, it is this turn of events that discourages George from marrying Tracy, an act that would necessitate her acceptance of his ring. The jewelry exchanges' significance corroborates Dexter's reference to Tracy's drunken episode as "incredibly important and most revealing."

(X):

“X,” the Roman numeral for ten, enumerates the number of primary characters in *The Philadelphia Story* (Seth and Margaret Lord, Tracy and Dinah Lord, Uncle Willie, Dexter, George, Mike, Liz, and Sidney Kidd). It also stands for the act of crossing. Furthermore, as the 24th letter of the alphabet, it equals the number of hours before the wedding, at which this cross occurs between Tracy and the trio from *Spy Magazine* (Dexter, Mike and Liz). It also abbreviates the word “extra,” of which Mike and Dexter are two unexpected male additions to Tracy’s life. Additionally, “x” abbreviates a single kiss, which Tracy shares with Mike after her wedding party. In semiotics, an “x” denotes elimination, censure, or erasure. In the course of the film, Tracy censures Dexter and his alcoholism, eliminates him through divorce, erases the memory of her night with Mike, and eventually eliminates George from her life. Finally, an “x” represents an unknown or unnamed thing, factor, or person. In this case, that unknown is the film’s major hermeneutic enigma: Who will Tracy end up with? X marks the spot. Dexter, the only name with an “x,” fills that role.

(Y)are:

Nautically admirable; seaworthy. The positive characteristics that Tracy Lord associates with a boat named *The True Love*, her honeymoon vessel from a previous marriage to C. K. Dexter Haven. Incidentally, both the emotive true love and the steadfast splendor of the ship were aspects of herself that she found only in her ex-husband in the film and somebody else's husband in her private life. Hepburn's off-screen affair with actor Spencer Tracy lasted until his death in 1967. Tracy, not unlike his *Philadelphia Story* counterpart, abused alcohol. All told, Hepburn and Tracy made 9 films together, including the critically noteworthy films *Woman of the Year* (1942) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). The secrecy that surrounded their personal relationship was particularly noteworthy. Not one public kiss was shared. Some clarity shined onto it in a 1986 documentary, *The Spencer Tracy Legacy*, in which Hepburn shared a letter she had written addressing him eighteen years after he passed away.

Living wasn't easy for you, was it? What did you like to do? Sailing – especially in stormy weather. You loved polo, but tennis, golf, swimming - no, not really. Walking - no, that didn't suit you - that was one of those things where you could think at the same time. Of this, of that...of what, Spence, what was it? Was it some specific thing, like being a Catholic and you felt a bad Catholic? You concentrated on all the bad, none of the good, which your religion offered. It must've been something very fundamental, very ever-present. And the incredible fact that there you were, really the greatest movie actor - you could do it, and you could do it with that glorious

simplicity, that directness. You couldn't enter your own life, but you could be someone else. You were the character in a moment, you hardly had to study - what a relief, you could be someone else for a while, you weren't you, you were safe. And then back to life's trials: "Oh, hell, take a drink. Yes. No. Maybe." And then stop taking those drinks - you were great at that, Spence, you could just stop. How I respected you for that - very unusual. But why the escape hatch? Why was it always open? To get away from the remarkable you. I always meant to ask you. Did you know what it was? Are you having a long rest after all your tossing and turning in life? Are you happy finally? A man who liked to sail even in stormy weather must have been yare.

Hepburn herself struggled to keep her head above water in the early years of her career. She began as an independent actress, and soon was signed to a contract with RKO pictures. She won an Academy Award for her performance in *Morning Glory* (1933) and was nominated for a second Oscar for *Alice Adams* (1935), although her public image was floundering. Historical accounts indicate that her un-ladylike appearance (no dresses or makeup) contributed to her lack of success, which culminated in being labeled "Box-office poison" in 1938. After successfully starring in the Broadway performance of *The Philadelphia Story*, she negotiated to star in the film version at MGM. This project's achievements propelled Hepburn to the top of the MGM acting staff and afforded her more leverage than the average actor.

(Z)ing:

Witty banter and caustic insults punctuate *The Philadelphia Story*'s dialogue. The verbal criticism (zing) makes a smooth transition from the original play to the film version. Keith Cohen describes this transition in *Film and Fiction, The Dynamics of Exchange*, citing Christian Metz's *Language and Cinema*.

A basic assumption I make is that both words and images are sets of signs that belong to systems and that, at a certain level of abstraction, these systems bear resemblances to one another. More specifically, within each such system there are many different codes (perceptual, referential, symbolic). What makes possible, then, a study of the relation between two separate sign systems, like novel and film, is the fact that the same codes may reappear in more than one system.... The very mechanisms of language systems can thus be seen to carry on diverse and complex interrelations: "one function, among others, of language is to name the units segmented by vision (but also to help segment them), and... one function, among others, of vision is to inspire semantic configurations (but also to be inspired by them). (p. 457)

Barring the usual setbacks, for instance conforming to the Production Code ("Are you living together" becomes "Are you going together") and adapting the story to suit a visual medium (Change of setting from only two rooms to the whole large, confusing estate), the conversations within the film remain quintessentially similar, due to the similarities in signification between novel and film. This works to the benefit of the revisionist, because the effective author intentionally writes visually—that is, making use of visual cues and description as often as possible—and the effective viewer intentionally views things

semantically (in the context of linguistic signifiers of meaning). In essence, the author writes visually, the adaptor translates the writing into a visual medium, and the viewer translates it back linguistically. The zing both begins and ends in the same semantic context, and emerges from the adaptation process unscathed.

Previous entries:

The Maltese Falcon – (A)rcher's killer:

The mystery of Archer's death is *The Maltese Falcon's* major hermeneutic enigma. It casts every character as the potential killer. Archer's murder scene is a striking shot, with the murderer off-screen and only the gun visible. This shot reverses the famous conclusion of Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), where an outlaw draws his gun and fires into the camera. While *The Maltese Falcon* reveals only the victim, Porter shows only the shooter. *The Great Train Robbery's* scene lies outside the borders of its own narrative, blurring the line between fiction and documentary. The outlaw's shots occur at the end of the film and have nothing to do with the story. Huston's film

relies on the narrative systematized by Hollywood. Archer's murder occurs at the beginning of the narrative and means everything to the story.

Meet Me in St. Louis – (C)handelier:

In one of the film's few scenes when Esther Smith (played by Judy Garland) shares the screen solely with her love interest, she asks young John Truett to accompany her through the house as she turns off the lights. It is one of the film's most slowly paced scenes, but it remains touching in its quaint innocence. To help Esther, John reaches to cut off the gas to the large chandelier in the dining room before they return to the landing for a final goodnight. The actual lights in St. Louis during the first years of the twentieth century were illuminated by gas. St. Louis in 1903 got its gas from the Edison Illuminating Company's branch, built in 1894 as an extension of the company founded by Thomas Edison himself in the same year he had introduced the Kinetoscope, one of the prototypes for the motion picture camera. The Edison Illuminating Company, originally founded in Detroit, employed Henry Ford as an engineer in 1891. Ford founded the Ford

Motor Company in 1903, the year in which the story of this film takes place and director Vincente Minnelli was born.

Meet Me in St. Louis – (K)etchup:

Meet Me in St. Louis begins in the kitchen, with each family member testing the pot of ketchup on the stove and offering a different comment for its improvement. This collective process reflects MGM's script development, where many writers could potentially be working on the same project at once independently of each other. *Meet Me in St. Louis* was revised several times from Sally Benson's original short stories, using four different writing teams, twice to meet Arthur Freed's approval, then twice again to appeal to Joseph Mankiewicz, who objected to Esther Smith as juvenile. Mankiewicz's interference would later lead to the end of his career at MGM.

Grand Hotel – (N)othing:

At the opening and closing of *Grand Hotel*, Dr. Otternschlag (played by Lewis Stone) delivers the film's mantra. "Grand Hotel... always the same. People come, people

go. Nothing ever happens.” The irony becomes apparent throughout the course of the film, intertwining stories of birth, death, love, hatred, murder, greed, and intrigue. The doctor’s remark more accurately describes the process that created it. As head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s studio from 1924 until his death in 1936, Irving Thalberg oversaw production on a steady stream of movies. As an industry mogul, he was involved in the creative process while partner Louis B. Mayer was in charge of the financial end. Historical accounts (such as Thomas Schatz’s book *The Genius of the System*) indicate that while Mayer was concerned primarily with making money, Thalberg invested time into quality production. Historically, Mayer is painted as money-driven and apathetic to the sort of glamorized period piece that Thalberg appreciated as necessary for the sophisticated style associated with MGM. The instinct that drove Mayer to invest in B-movie and series productions after Thalberg’s death suggests that he may not have understood how MGM had prospered.

Grand Hotel – (R)oom numbers:

Art director Cedric Gibbons changed the room numbers in *Grand Hotel* during its conversion from novel to film. The novel listed the characters' rooms ranging from sixty to eighty, both odd and even. This layout imagines a normal hallway with rooms on each side. Gibbons's alteration responds to the film hotel's layout. Aside from changing the order of the characters' rooms, he changed them to triple-digit, even numbers. Having only even-numbered rooms implies a circular hallway with rooms on only one side of the hall. This change is evident in the images of the hotel interior, with its towering, circular lobby, a shape connoting continuity, the film's theme. Simultaneous conversations in the lobby involve birth and death. People are always arriving to fill the recently emptied rooms.

German mathematician David Hilbert's "Paradox of the Grand Hotel" postulates a hotel with an infinite number of rooms. The paradox proposes that an infinite hotel could be theorized, but never actually exist. Hilbert also hypothesized that the only way to accept an infinite number of incoming guests would require moving each room's occupant to the room number that doubles his current one, requiring only even-numbered rooms to be inhabited. Hilbert's paradox also implies an infinite number of narrative

threads. In the Grand Hotel, each room offers a new adventure. MGM, like the hotel in the film, is superlative in bringing to life this vision. The sheer size of the hotel is an indication of the extent of attention and resources that went into these big-budget costume dramas. Schatz comments on this in *The Genius of the System*.

The development of Grand Hotel, perhaps the consummate expression of the MGM style during Thalberg's regime, provides an ideal glimpse of this process, of the steady transformation of another "property" into a distinctive MGM product. (p. 108)

Hilbert also delivered a famous series of 23 problems in an attempt to axiomatize mathematics. Each problem had a certain depth that made it particularly interesting while allowing potential expansion into more complex conclusions. Rudimentarily, the techniques of the Hollywood system developed under a similar process. The principles of basic narrative filmmaking expanded and refined by questioning certain camera movements' effects, story formulas, etc., whereby the world of *Grand Hotel* created events that never could have actually taken place.

German mathematician Gottlob Frege distinguishes between sense and referent, with *Sinn* referring to the sense of a linguistic term and *Bedeutung* to an object itself.

Frege suggests that while all meaningful expressions have sense, some (e.g. "the greatest

possible number”) have no referent. Just as Hilbert’s hotel with an infinite number of rooms has no possible referent, a movie has a sense but no actual referent. MGM’s *Grand Hotel* does not exist.

The Maltese Falcon – (S)pade:

“Spade’s” multiple connotations imply different aspects of the character. Roland

Barthes remarks on the importance of the semic and reference codes in *S/Z*.

By restoring to the discourse its hero’s proper name, we are merely acting in accordance with the economic nature of the Name: in the novelistic regime (and elsewhere?), it is an instrument of exchange: it allows the substitution of a nominal unit for a collection of characteristics by establishing an equivalent relationship between sign and sum: it is a bookkeeping method in which, the price being equal, condensed merchandise is preferable to voluminous merchandise. (pp. 94-95)

First, the shovel: as a detective, Sam Spade unearths clues. As a homonym, “spade” also suggests castration. Bogart’s character deals with Brigid, the castrating threat, throughout the film. Archer, Thursby, and Captain Jacobi die of ignorance by misrecognizing her castrating power. Furthermore, “Spade” identifies a playing card suit, concomitant with the character’s constant gambling on people’s stories. His successful outcome rests on hedging his bet, simultaneously keeping Brigid, Cairo, and Gutman in his favor and

restraining the police. Ironically, Bogart's portrayal of the protagonist's suit would have been unlikely since the 1940's audience would have seen him almost exclusively portraying a villain. His unique ability to call a spade a spade, by recognizing and dismissing Brigid, saves him in the end.