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Federico Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* as a Cavellian Melodrama of the Unknown Woman

PAIN AND SUFFERING: DIALOGUE IN PHILOSOPHY AND THE ARTS

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[SLIDE 1] Today I would like to propose an interpretation of *Juliet of the Spirits*, a 1965 film by Federico Fellini, in the light of the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, and in particular of his concepts of "moral perfectionism," or "Emersonian perfectionism," and of the *melodrama of the unknown woman*. You will find an anticipation of the thesis I will defend, and of the themes of the film, in the next two slides. **[SLIDE 2]** At present, there are no studies that interpret this film through the lens of Cavell's thought. Here you see quotations from two Fellini scholars who connect the story of *Juliet of the Spirits* with *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen—a theatrical work closely related to Cavell's notion of the *melodrama of the unknown woman*.

In an old article by Alfred Benderson we read that—and I open quote—

> "Although the film was made in 1965, Juliet is really a prototype of the contemporary, feminist heroine — a descendant of Ibsen's Nora — struggling to carve out an identity for herself in a world in which women exist merely to serve their husbands"

—end of quote.

On the same wavelength was Peter Bondanella, when he wrote—open quote—

> "An opening shot of the family's residence at the Roman beach resort of Fregene reminds the viewer […] of a dollhouse […] an explicit comment on the status of Giulietta's marriage – a doll house contains a doll, not a mature woman in full control of her destiny"

—end of quote.

[SLIDE 3] In the following slide, you see the final shots of two films. At the bottom, those of *Juliet of the Spirits*. At the top, those of *Stella Dallas* by King Vidor, one of the melodramas discussed by Cavell. Two close-ups of a woman's face as she realizes something, followed by two shots of that same woman who—leaving something behind her (a house, a family)—walks toward a new and unknown life.

As the differences in tone and style between these pairs of frames already suggest, I will have to draw a series of parallels that are in fact far from obvious: between classical Hollywood genre cinema and 1960s European auteur cinema; between Cavell and Fellini; but also— for reasons I will come to— between the father of American transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the father of analytical psychology, Carl Gustav Jung. It is therefore necessary that I devote the first part of my talk to some preliminary reflections, before turning to the interpretation of the film proper. **[SLIDE 4]**

Cavell begins writing about cinema at a time when Fellini is considered perhaps the quintessential example of the European cinematic auteur. It is therefore significant that the American philosopher speaks of the Italian director so rarely: four or five brief mentions in *The World Viewed*, one somewhat longer mention in the essay "A Matter of Meaning It," but never anything substantial. One might of course explain this by noting that the American philosopher was primarily interested in classical Hollywood cinema, a cinema of stars, mass audiences, and collective myths; and that a sophisticated—according to some even pretentious—auteur cinema such as Fellini's would lie at the opposite pole.

In this regard, however, it is worth recalling that Fellini himself was deeply influenced by Hollywood in general, and in particular by the conception of cinema as a mythopoietic machine. Moreover, it should be emphasized that Cavell's work does anything but take the genres of classical Hollywood at face value. Cavell's is rather a work of careful selection and—one might even say—of reinvention.

It is precisely to this specific work that I want to bring Fellini's film into relation, not to everything that might be defined as melodrama in classical American cinema. When Cavell identifies a genre he calls the *comedy of remarriage*, he is not speaking of all screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, but of a specific group of films which in his view embody an important American cultural myth, one whose scope and interest are, for Cavell, philosophical.

The same holds for Cavell's other genre. It is therefore to that specific Cavellian theoretical and cinematic construct called the *melodrama of the unknown woman* that I want to relate *Juliet of the Spirits*—not to any Hollywood melodrama whatsoever, to any generic "woman's film" or "tear jerker," as they were sometimes disparagingly called.

A few more words about these two genres **[SLIDE 5].** The seven plus four films listed on this slide delineate, for Cavell, two related genres: two groups of films that resemble one another internally and that entertain, with the examples of the parallel genre, a complex system of relations of similarity and

negation. Cavell says in particular that the *melodrama of the unknown woman* is a genre "adjacent" to and "derived" from the *comedy of remarriage*.

The *comedies of remarriage* are films that—like their contemporary American romantic comedies—take from New Comedy and from the Shakespearean Romances a plot structure centered on the adventures of two young people who seek to marry while overcoming the obstacles imposed by the *senex*, by the older generation.

They are called "remarriage" because these films introduce a narrative novelty: the couple is already married at the beginning of the story, but the marriage does not work. The two lovers are not mature; they are not yet fully individuals. It is in particular the woman who feels—like Ibsen's Nora—that the gender role imposed on her by her culture and by the current state of the relationship is incompatible with her personal growth, with her being fully human.

The couple must therefore break apart; both must go in search of an education, which Cavell emphatically describes as a new creation of the human, as a process of death and resurrection. Only at the end of this process can the two come back together and remarry. And the comedy lies, beyond the happy ending, in the discovery that it is precisely through conversation, through the playful and loving exchange between the two, that mutual education—the "miracle of change," as Cavell calls it—takes place.

[SLIDE 6] The derived genre of the *melodrama of the unknown woman* does something analogous: it dramatizes the relationship between love and personal growth. Like the *comedies of remarriage*, the *melodramas of the unknown woman* are "perfectionist" in the Emersonian sense. They speak of overcoming conformity and achieving self-reliance; of change, self-knowledge, and self-revelation. They propose an idea of moral life as a journey of transformation—think of the fact that the title of one of these films, *Now, Voyager*, is taken from a line by Walt Whitman.

These melodramas, too, place a woman at their center and focus on her struggle for emancipation. The difference from the comedies is that in these films the conversation of love is sterile; the female protagonist does not have before her a man in relation to whom she can become herself.

In the world of these films, the woman is destined to remain unknown—deprived of a voice of her own, or rather, endowed with a voice (at least potentially), but a voice that no one is capable of hearing. In the end, her choice will be to sacrifice love in favor of self-reliance, understanding that only in solitude and in the absence of relationship can she go in search of an education for herself.

Having offered this brief overview, I think this may be the right moment to confess a personal impression I have always had about Cavell's interpretations—an impression that is directly connected to the deeper reason why I eventually tried to relate them to Fellini. **[SLIDE 7]** Even though Cavell's critical essays on cinema, theater, and literature are at times truly profound, both philosophically and psychologically, they are rewritings, reinventions, in which Cavell comes very close to modifying the plot of the work he is analyzing in order to make it fit his interpretation. Cavell never says this explicitly—on the contrary, he claims that his interpretations merely bring out something that was already contained in the works themselves. But to me it has always seemed the opposite—and I am well aware that here I am simply communicating an impression.

Sometimes, it is true, these rewritings are extraordinarily productive and illuminating, capable of making the work speak anew, of bringing it back to life. Think, for instance, of Cavell's essays on Shakespeare—such as the one on *Hamlet*, entirely centered on Freud's *Traumarbeit*—or of the essays on the *comedies of remarriage*, which succeed in rendering philosophically rich some of the most beloved popular films in the history of American cinema. At other times, however, I feel much more strongly the impression of being faced with a distortion. And for me this is precisely the case with the *melodramas of the unknown woman*.

[SLIDE 8] Let me put this bluntly — later we can discuss it if you wish. It seems to me that the only one of the four melodramas analyzed by Cavell that truly stages an Emersonian arc of moral transformation is *Now, Voyager*, and that even there the final separation between the two lovers has little to do with that transformation. It seems to me that *Gaslight* is, at bottom, a thriller with Gothic overtones, lacking any genuine perfectionist reflection. And it seems to me that both *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Stella Dallas* are precisely what their detractors—especially within feminist film criticism—have accused them of being: films that glorify an equation between femininity and self-abnegation, between love and sacrifice (in the first film, sacrifice for the beloved man; in the second, sacrifice for the daughter), an equation that confirms rather than critiques a certain normative conception of emotions and gender roles that some would describe as patriarchal. In short, it seems to me that in this case Cavell's interpretations stray too far from the works themselves.

[SLIDE 9] And yet, the interpretations remain. The magnificent critical essays Cavell devoted to these films remain—essays collected in *Contesting Tears* and *Cities of Words*, books that could hardly be richer or more interesting. For me, it is as if these essays had remained critical interpretations in search of films worthy of them. Or, to be less eccentric: in search of films with which a theoretical framework can be fruitfully deployed—a framework that remains useful even if we do not consider

as successful the films for which it was originally devised. I hope it is not presumptuous of me to think that one such film might indeed be *Juliet of the Spirits*.

[SLIDE 10] Earlier I mentioned that one of the leaps to be made is that from Emerson to Carl Gustav Jung. The reason for this is easily explained. We are at the beginning of the 1960s, and Fellini was already an established director. He had just made *La dolce vita*, perhaps his greatest commercial success. In *La dolce vita* as well, the relationship between love and personal growth is brought into focus. Despite his charisma and the brilliant life he leads, Marcello, the protagonist of the film, is a blocked man—sunk into a decadent worldliness, incapable of growing and of truly giving meaning to his life. This condition of arrested development, of self-ignorance, is manifest in his fragmented and contradictory relationship with women, entirely shaped by the separation—typical of Catholic culture—between Madonna and Whore.

From some women Marcello seeks a desexualized, maternal love; in others he sees placeholders for an almost divine transcendence (and for this reason considers them untouchable); and toward others still he feels sexual attraction only insofar as they embody everything that Christian morality deems forbidden and degraded. He cannot come to terms with himself, nor with his relationship to them.

After this film, Fellini begins psychoanalysis with a Jungian analyst. He starts keeping an illustrated dream diary and reading several books by Jung. Interviews testify to this as well: Fellini becomes a fervent Jungian. And his cinema changes, quite rapidly. **[SLIDE 11]** The following film, *8½*, treats many of the same themes as the previous one—arrested growth, the relationship with the feminine; it uses the same actors; even the protagonist remains the same actor. But something fundamental has changed. The protagonist, Guido, is now a film director trying to make an autobiographical—or rather, a psychoanalytic—film. In *8½*, therefore, as in a psychoanalytic session, we see projected on the screen the protagonist's dreams, fantasies, memories—in short, his unconscious. We witness the gradual process through which Guido becomes aware of himself and of his relationship with the feminine.

If at the beginning of the film his marriage is in crisis, by the end he and his wife can reunite—or at least attempt to conduct together an experiment in mutual education. Seen in Cavellian terms, one might say that in *La dolce vita* Marcello is a kind of Shakespearean hero, someone destined to succumb under the blows of his own blindness toward himself. *8½*, by contrast, could in this light be considered a kind of Jungian *comedy of remarriage*.

Incidentally, this is possible because the Jungian theoretical framework is in itself well suited to extending the Emersonian perfectionism discussed by Cavell. **[SLIDE 12]** Among Cavell's points of reference, as we know, are Emerson and Freud—but not Jung. On the one hand, however, we can recall the banal fact that Jung was a pupil of Freud, albeit a heretical one. On the other hand, we must stress that there are affinities and even historical continuities between Emerson and Jung. To cite just one: Emerson was a central influence on Nietzsche, and Nietzsche in turn was a major influence on Jung.

It should therefore not surprise us that some of their concepts exhibit a family resemblance. Emerson speaks of "conformity." Jung calls "Persona" that socially acceptable mask which the ego constructs from the impersonal materials of culture in order to survive and be accepted. Emerson insists that each individual is a becoming; Jung does the same, speaking of libido as a creative and transformative energy. Emerson speaks of self-reliance; Jung speaks of a "psychology of the process of Individuation," whose goal is what he calls the "Self."

It is true that in Emerson—as Cavell emphasizes—there is never the idea of a single, final, predetermined end, whereas Jung, with his talk of the "Self" as both center and goal of individuation seems to fall back into a teleological conception. But we must also recall that the "Self" of which Jung speaks is different for each of us. Moreover, it is conceived by Jung as an ineffable and indefinable integration of the conscious and unconscious forces of the psyche. In this sense, the goal Jung speaks of is something that neither the intellect nor the conscious ego can master—something we cannot dominate or decide, and which at best can only be expressed in symbolic form.

Incidentally, there is another interesting contribution that Jungian analytical psychology can offer to reflection on cinema and perfectionism, which I can only mention here. In Jung, as in Cavell's cinematic genres and in Fellini's films, romantic relationship and personal growth are not accidentally connected, but structurally so. Among the archetypes of the collective unconscious discussed by Jung, there are two—Anima and Animus—which represent respectively the internalized feminine within each man and the internalized masculine within each woman. In the process of individuation described by the Swiss psychoanalyst, a fundamental aspect of perfectionist growth, of the achievement of individuation, concerns the necessity for each person to become conscious of the internalized images of femininity and masculinity that shape them without their knowing it.

Let us now finally turn to some considerations on *Juliet of the Spirits* itself **[SLIDE 13].** The film's opening sequence sketches the condition of the protagonist in a few, effective brushstrokes. Juliet is preparing for the evening of her anniversary with her husband. She repeatedly tries on wigs and dresses, and two minutes into her entrance on screen we have seen her only from behind. The first time her face is framed—brightly lit and radiant—is at the very moment her husband enters the house, while he himself appears in shadow and at a distance, a mere silhouette. Juliet exists only for him; she models herself for him as spectator. Her identity is entirely bound to a gaze which, however, is directed elsewhere: first toward his business trips and social engagements, then toward a younger lover, as Juliet will soon discover with dismay.

Juliet is therefore humiliated when she realizes that her husband has forgotten their anniversary and has invited a crowd of acquaintances into their home—an invasion of intimacy that will foreshadow others far more devastating.

Cavell writes that in the *comedies of remarriage* it is as if the absence from the narrative of the protagonists' mothers were a necessary condition for their growth. **[SLIDE 14]** Correspondingly, in the *melodramas of the unknown woman* the mothers are present, but their narrative function is to stifle their daughters' independence—the paradigmatic case being *Now, Voyager*. The same occurs in *Juliet of the Spirits*, which presents us with a crowd of female relatives who impose themselves on Juliet as so many normative variants of femininity that crush her—voices of which Emerson, in *Self-Reliance* might say: "every word they say, chagrins us."

We see a cold and haughty mother, who urges Juliet to wear lipstick and take better care of herself. We see a sister who is an actress—a successful, assertive woman entirely focused on herself. And then another sister, severe and judgmental, fully absorbed in the role of mother to two perfect twin girls, who makes Juliet feel inadequate for her defective marriage and childlessness. All of them physically tower over Juliet, who among them appears almost like a child herself. For this reason, unlike what happens in *Now, Voyager* in Cavell's reading, not even the role of aunt or surrogate mother is available to Juliet.

Mother and sisters embody what Freud would call Juliet's superego, what Emerson would call the *conspiracy of society*, or what Jung would define as the ideal, the dominant tendency of her conscious ego. Other figures of femininity—some real, some imaginary—play instead a specular role. **[SLIDE 15]** They represent the embodiment of Juliet's attempt to re-admit into consciousness what has been

repressed, to compensate for the unilateral character of her ego by reintegrating what Jungian terminology calls the Shadow. These figures stand for sexuality, for desire, for the capacity for seduction that Juliet has never explored.

They include Iris, the spirit who, during a séance at the beginning of the film, delivers to Juliet the message "Love for everyone." They include the hermaphrodite Bishma, the Indian sage whom Juliet consults at one point, and who advises her to transform herself into a kind of sacred prostitute. They also include Suzy, a character who—amid an increasing blurring of the boundaries between reality and imagination—appears first in Juliet's dreams, then in her memories, and finally as a real person. She is an emancipated and sensual woman, from whose bedroom a narrow tunnel leads to an underground pool of warm water, symbolizing a descent into the Id and its drives.

But however much Juliet tries, at the decisive moment she recoils in horror. Indeed, these attempts so thoroughly destabilize her psychic equilibrium that she begins to experience terrifying visions, which Fellini renders through the stylistic codes of horror cinema.

Why does Juliet recoil? Why is she unable to go all the way? Various interpretations are possible. Someone with a more historically minded perspective might see in Juliet the fear experienced by a certain generation of Italian women in the face of the growing wave of contestation and emancipation of the 1960s. A feminist critic might argue that, despite the betrayal she suffers and the pain of her marriage, Juliet remains irredeemably bound to the virginal role and to the ideal of marital fidelity to which her Catholic culture assigns her.

Personally, I think that Juliet does not wish to pursue this libertine form of emancipation because it would ultimately mean merely shifting from one side of the same cultural model to the other: a simple switch from Madonna/Wife to Sexual Object. From a Jungian perspective, in the absence of an integration between these two poles, individuation is not possible.

I will now move toward my conclusion by noting that significant parallels with the *melodramas of the unknown woman* also emerge with respect to the role of the past and of male figures. **[SLIDE 16]** Cavell writes that "in melodramas the past is frozen" (p. 6). As for male figures, he argues that they are irredeemably negative when their role is that of lovers or husbands, but he admits the possibility of male figures who function as allies of the heroine in other forms. This is the case, for instance, of the policeman in *Gaslight*, or the psychiatrist in *Now, Voyager*, Dr. Jaquith, whom you see depicted in this slide at the top left together with the protagonist.

This duality of the masculine is also present in *Juliet of the Spirits*. Indeed, the Jungian background of the film deepens this duality and extends it to the past itself, which is both a source of illness and a place in which redemption may be sought.

Among the spirits who appear to Juliet in her memories and visions, there is that of her deceased grandfather. Not a psychiatrist, but a high school teacher, whom Fellini characterizes as jovial and endowed with a thick white beard, halfway between a Buddha and a Karl Marx. When Juliet was a child, this grandfather had scandalized polite society—including Juliet's mother—by eloping with a circus dancer; that circus which, ever since *La strada*, stands for Fellini as a symbol of irregularity, imagination, and freedom. The little girl had imagined their escape on a homemade flying machine not unlike those designed by Leonardo da Vinci. This memory of a nonconformist and enlightened grandfather—one marked by a form of reason that does not fear losing itself when it yields to desire—will become a resource for Juliet's liberation.

This happens in two crucial scenes in which Juliet reworks her past. **[SLIDE 17].** The first stages a memory. In a school play at the Catholic convent school, Juliet had been made to perform the role of a martyred saint, burned alive by Roman centurions rather than renouncing her faith in God. The grandfather, seeing such a small and innocent child hoisted onto a grill, bursts out from the audience, interrupts the performance, and—scandalizing everyone once again—frees the little actress from her bonds. He exclaims: "Shame on you, this is indecent […] Putting a six-year-old child on the stove […] What do you want to make of these innocents—poor madwomen?"

This memory returns in the film's climax. **[SLIDE 18]** Juliet has now been abandoned by her husband; she is in their empty bedroom and is contemplating suicide. In a desperate act, she asks her mother for help, but the mother appears to her in a vision as a monstrous spirit. At that point Juliet hears crying. The mother orders her not to move, but she disobeys. She realizes that from her room a small door opens onto a narrow and seemingly endless tunnel: her unconscious, the repressed core of her life. The little girl is still there, bound to the grill, still burning. Juliet climbs along the narrow path. With difficulty, she frees the child—who is herself—and finally embraces her.

Now the monstrous spirits that have long persecuted her can disappear. The past is unfrozen. Juliet no longer has to be anyone's martyr—neither God's nor a man's. She has lost her husband, but she finally understands that she is free **[SLIDE 19]**, and she can walk toward an unknown and open future. Toward individuation—and toward her *next self*.