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**“Another being we have created called ‘us’”: Point-of-view, Melancholia, and the Joking Unconscious in *The Bridges of Madison County***

**By Walter Metz**

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Having heard nothing but bad things about Robert James Waller’s lachrymose novel, *The Bridges of Madison County*, I went to see Clint Eastwood’s film adaptation expecting my sole spectatorial pleasures to come from its ineptitude. Much to my surprise, I discovered an emotionally moving and politically contestatory melodrama—about an Iowa farm wife who falls in love with a photographer during a weekend tryst—the likes of which has not been produced in Hollywood since Douglas Sirk moved back to Europe. However, unlike Sirk’s 1950s films, *Bridges* is a realist melodrama: the film tells its story with stylistic simplicity, not with the aesthetics of excess common to the modernist cinema.

One of the unifying themes forwarded in the melodrama anthology, *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, is the call to reverse the trends of traditional film studies approaches to melodrama which value modernist excess over affective identification. Since *Bridges* is such a departure from the strain of melodramas on which film scholars have traditionally concentrated, it provides a useful proving ground for these new theories of melodramatic affect. I will use the anthology throughout this paper to “cross-check” (to use Luce Irigaray’s term for her engagement with Freud) with my affective and ideological readings of *The Bridges of Madison County*. In other words, I want to both explore why I found the film emotionally moving and how I see this process as a politically progressive one (not as an example of my bourgeois false consciousness, as Marxist critics who favor the modernist avant-garde would have it).

The film version of *The Bridges of Madison County* continues a long tradition in the history of the Hollywood melodrama. Its plot is familiar to fans of the genre: a lonely housewife has a torrid affair but is forced to give up her lover to save her family from the ridicule of her small town's moral disapproval. This plot precisely re-activates the central dramatic tension in Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Both films concern lonely housewives: Cary (Jane Wyman) is widowed in Sirk's film while Francesca (Meryl Streep) is emotionally abandoned in Eastwood's. In each film, this housewife falls passionately in love with a man connected with nature: Ron (Rock Hudson) is a tree farmer in *Heaven* while Robert (Clint Eastwood) is a nature photographer in *Bridges*. In each case, the specter of community scorn against a sexualized, middle-aged mother causes her to give up the affair.

In "Fassbinder and Sirk," Laura Mulvey analyzes this plot component of the Sirkian system: "Sirk has often dealt with the humiliation heaped on a mother (not necessarily, even, an 'older woman') who still publicly asserts her active sexuality. Cary's romance becomes a source of scandal and gossip" (47-8). Mulvey's article links Sirk's critique of these patriarchal relations to the film's use of modernist melodramatic techniques. In discussing the relationships between Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (the modernist film director associated with the New German Cinema), Mulvey argues: "Both come from the theater, both brought to the cinema a sense of theatrical distanciation (drama as spectacle) that works against the tendency of film to absorb the spectator into itself" (46). Mulvey predicated *All That Heaven Allows*' critique of Cary's position within patriarchal culture on the modernist sensibilities of the film. The most famous example of this from *All That Heaven Allows* is a shot of Cary's reflection in a television set purchased by her children to entertain her asexually in her later years, a shot

which I discuss in some detail in my article, “Adaptation, Intertextuality, and Douglas Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows*.”

Other critics of film melodrama have come to different conclusions regarding the intertextual connection between 1950s melodrama and *The Bridges of Madison County*. In “Neoconservative Romance,” Christopher Sharrett uses a similar method, reading *Bridges* against 50s melodrama, but sees the film as a 1990s conservative rebute to 1950s politically forward-looking melodramas like *Picnic* (Joshua Logan, 1955). However, I believe *Bridges* accomplishes a similar critique of Francesca’s position within patriarchy to that of Sirk’s critique of Cary’s position. The difference lies in Eastwood’s film’s refusal to use the modernist techniques so typical of the Sirkian system. *Bridges* is what Chuck Kleinhans theorizes as a realist melodrama. There are few visually expressive shots, little ironical framing or camera movements; in fact, the camera style is pragmatic, plot-centered, and even staid. What Heaven accomplishes visually, Bridges accomplishes through narrative development, a development averse to visually-inflected film studies, but well-studied by others, such as Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*.

Unlike Robert James Waller’s novel, on which the film is based, the film version introduces another character, Lucy Redmond Delaney, to implement the critique of the town’s moral strictures. In the film, Lucy has had an affair with a married man. The town scorns her loose morals, refusing to talk to her. Robert and Francesca learn of the town’s reaction and nearly end their own affair. However, they eventually decide to continue with the affair for a few more days. At the end of that time, Robert and Francesca part forever. One of Francesca’s first actions after Robert leaves is to go visit Lucy. Francesca brings Lucy a cake she has baked as an act of friendship (and secret solidarity against the town’s gossips). Francesca’s diary tells us that at this moment in time, “We became inseparable, Lucy and I.” The film thus establishes a defiantly

woman-identified bond between these two characters that is absent from the novel. In the novel, in fact, Waller specifically tells us that Francesca's affair served to isolate her from her community: "Except for a few women friends, she withdrew completely from the community" (133).

The film's representation of the transgressive bond between Francesca and Lucy provides a base of resistance against the strictures of patriarchal morality that go virtually unchecked in the novel. There, Francesca's friends go unnamed and unrepresented, to the extent that their effect as potential sources of resistance is completely nullified. Francesca's bond with Lucy is also much more politically contestatory than that between Cary and her friend Sarah in *All That Heaven Allows*. Sarah, for example, advises Cary to break off the affair with Ron because of the town's gossips. In effect, Sarah argues in favor of the goals of patriarchal culture in containing Cary's sexuality.

Such an analysis of *Bridges'* intertextual relationship to *All That Heaven Allows* continues a recent trend in melodrama criticism to re-think the valuation of modernist techniques in melodrama as the sole mechanism for the cinema's development of critiques of dominant culture. The essays in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* strongly advance this revisionist line of argumentation. In "Realist Melodrama and the African-American Family," Chuck Kleinhans argues that realist melodrama is an effective mode of political cinema. He focuses on the form's "power of recognition," an ability to produce a "profound psychological resonance in the audience of its own time" (163). Such a defense of realist melodrama's affective potential is a departure from Mulvey's earlier criticism which links the politics of melodrama to its modernist style.

Jane Shattuc specifically theorizes the affective over the excessive components of melodrama's contestatory politics. In "Having a Good Cry Over *The Color Purple*," Shattuc argues that modernist criticism's defense of excess is grounded in the tradition of

the Western academy, and therefore in race and class privileges. Shattuc argues, “Until we break the instrumental logic of reading all ideology as false consciousness and the reproduction of self-serving class and racially bound concepts such as excess, we limit some of the most powerful examples of political resistance and communal beliefs” (154). An analysis of *Bridges* from a modernist position emphasizing excess would see the film as hopelessly co-opted by bourgeois ideology, encouraging false consciousness in its viewers. However, following Shattuc’s methodology, my reading of *Bridges* takes seriously its profound emotional effect on its viewers (including myself). Such a reading is not a wallowing in bourgeois values, but instead takes emotions seriously, seeking out the contestatory moments of the film, of which there are many. It is only by taking affect seriously—a process defended by both Steve Neale, in “Melodrama and Tears,” and Charles Affron in “Identifications”—that we can search for the political interventions of realist melodrama.

What follows is an examination of the affective and ideological components of the textual system of *The Bridges of Madison County*. As begun above, I use an intertextual approach to compare Robert James Waller’s 1992 novel to Eastwood’s 1995 film adaptation. I argue that the film is a progressive re-working of a rather conservative novel in terms of its gender politics. The film’s Francesca is empowered to take action for her own happiness, while the novel’s Francesca is merely an object through which to tell Robert’s story. My analysis of this ideological difference is based upon a narrative and narrational transformation between the film and the novel. I analyze point-of-view and gazing relationships in both the novel and the film to demonstrate the film’s empowerment of Francesca and the novel’s pacification of her. Then, using the Freudian concept of melancholia, I argue that the novel works to pathologize Francesca while the film emplots her healthy resistance to patriarchy. Finally, while the novel uses a

discourse of imperative seriousness to construct Robert's importance, the film transforms this material into the stuff of jokes.

### **Point-of-View Structure and the Male Gaze**

The most important political distinction between the film and the novel is the different level of empowerment of Francesca's character. In the novel, Francesca fulfills a plot function which is to teach us that Robert is a wonderful lover. In his review of the novel, John Leo offers an economic explanation for Francesca's vacuousness: "The emptiness of the heroine helps marketing, too, letting female readers insert their own character into the void. . . . The woman is a cipher" (25). In the film, Francesca's choices are rendered in their complexity, so that we see *her* stake in the decisions she makes. These different modes of identification are achieved via point-of-view and gazing structures.

The novel is told from Robert's point of view. Its narrative strategy is akin to that of a pornographic sexual adventure, where we follow Robert's seduction of Francesca from beginning to end. After a brief framing device, the novel begins with a whole chapter introducing Robert. This first chapter ends with him driving into Francesca's driveway. We first meet Francesca here through Robert's gaze:

When he pulled into the yard, a woman was sitting on the front porch. It looked cool there, and she was drinking something that looked even cooler. She came off the porch toward him. He stepped from the truck and looked at her, looked closer, and then closer still. She was lovely, or had been at one time, or could be again. And immediately he began to feel the old clumsiness he always suffered around women to whom he was even faintly attracted. (15)

The novel introduces situations solely via Robert's sensations. Here, we are sutured into a patriarchal identification with Robert as he admires Francesca's body.

The film's introduction of Francesca involves much more consideration of her social position. In this version, we meet Francesca--before Robert's arrival--in the context of her relationship with her (very unpleasant) family. While cooking dinner, Francesca is startled by her son Michael's entrance into the kitchen, announced by the slamming of the screen door. This is followed by her husband Richard's similar entrance. While Francesca scolds Michael for his rude entrance, she does not feel empowered enough to confront her husband. While cooking, Francesca listens to the opera on her kitchen radio. Her daughter Carolyn enters the kitchen and immediately switches the radio to a pop station without asking permission. Everyone sits down to eat dinner. No one talks to Francesca. She tries to make eye contact with her family, to no avail. She makes hand gestures to voice her frustration, but her family is too busy eating to notice. The film works to establish Francesca's discontent with her patriarchal location in a systematic way before Robert's arrival.

After the family leaves to go to the fair, Robert arrives in his pick-up truck. Unlike in the novel, we watch this event from Francesca's point of view. We look over Francesca's shoulder in long shot as Robert's truck pulls into the driveway. Eventually, as Robert gets out of the truck, we move into over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shots of their conversation, but it takes a surprisingly long time for us to get Robert's first point-of-view shot. In a most unusual use of over-the-shoulder work, Francesca and Robert are standing at quite a distance (fifteen feet or so) from each other as they converse. These odd shot/reverse shots express the social tentativeness that both conversants feel. Unlike the novel, which expressed Robert's sexual awkwardness, the film encourages us to think about the social relations between the two, including Francesca's indifferent greeting of Robert's arrival.



The novel's strategy of filtering events through Robert's consciousness continues unmodified for the rest of the book. For example, our first description of what Francesca looks like occurs via Robert's admiration of her body: "He took a small drink of tea and watched her. She was about five feet six, fortyish or a little older, pretty face, and a fine, warm body" (38). Despite Robert's subsequent (unconvincing) claims that he finds Francesca attractive because she is intelligent, the male gaze constantly serves as the filter through which events are contextualized for us.

The film develops a transformation in the gazing relationships between the characters. When Francesca first offers to take Robert to Roseman Bridge, we get a low-angle shot from Robert's point-of-view as he admires her legs as she walks away. Thus, at first, Robert's gaze goes unreturned, as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" predicts.

The gazing relationships continue in a traditionally patriarchal vein at Roseman Bridge. Francesca attempts to return the gaze, as she begins to get interested in Robert. Rather than be seen looking, she hides inside the bridge and looks out through a crack in the boards, but Robert catches her in the act and exposes her ruse by talking to her.

However, a bit later in the film, Francesca successfully appropriates the gaze without recrimination. While Robert is outside washing up for dinner, Francesca looks at him through her bedroom window. In a shot typical of Hollywood melodramas, Francesca is framed behind the window glass from a low-angle in long shot. However, unlike the Hollywood melodrama where this gaze ordinarily expresses a woman's unsatisfied waiting—there's a shot in *All That Heaven Allows* after Cary has given up Ron in which she looks outside at Christmas carolers, thinking of the pleasure with Ron she has foolishly given up--here the desire Francesca's gaze represents is about to be satisfied by having the affair with Robert.

The novel refuses to alter its monolithic representation of Robert as an ideal male. Waller invariably affirms Robert's "Marlboro Man" masculinity, while at the same time modulating the machismo with an (inadequate) gesture toward gentility. For example, late in the novel, Francesca declares during sex, "Robert, you're so powerful it's frightening" to which the narrator replies, "He was powerful physically, but he used his strength carefully" (106).

By contrast, the film emplots a development of Robert's character, as he comes to terms with the changes his masculinity undergoes as he falls in love with Francesca. Replacing the novel's sexist machismo combined with perfunctory sensitivity, the film works to feminize Robert according to the film's social description of the domestic space. The representation of Robert's feminization is accomplished particularly through the film's mise-en-scene. In the film, Robert does not dominate the social space as he does in the novel. For example, the film constructs its social hierarchies through the chairs at the kitchen table. Robert begins by sitting at the patriarchal head of the table, but is quickly displaced from this seat of privilege. The room is arranged rectilinearly, with each chair associated with another element of the kitchen's mise-en-scene.

The people who socially belong in these chairs are established in the first flashback, during the aforementioned silent dinner with Francesca's family. Francesca sits in the chair associated with the stove. Richard sits directly across from her. Since the chair is in front of the archway leading into the living room and fireplace, Richard's chair is associated with the home's hearth. To Francesca's left is Carolyn in the chair in front of the radio. Across from Carolyn is Michael's chair, which is directly in front of the screen door leading to the back yard.

These positions are in keeping with the social formation of the patriarchal family. Francesca sits in the domestic chair from which she can rise quickly to use the stove and

the sink. Richard sits at the head of the table, in front of the hearth. Michael and Carolyn each sit in subsidiary positions next to the patriarch, each associated with their roles in society: Michael with the farm outside and Carolyn with the external world represented by the radio, her control of which has already been established.

These social positions are re-affirmed during the present tense scenes in which Carolyn and Michael read Francesca's journal. At the very beginning of the film, the adult Carolyn and Michael sit at the table reading about their mother's affair. Carolyn sits in her mother's chair in front of the stove. Carolyn makes good use of the maternal seat as she helps Michael overcome the trauma of learning his mother was "unfaithful" to him. Michael sits in the same chair as when he was a child since emotionally he has not yet matured beyond his adolescence.

Back at the affair, shortly after Robert arrives, Francesca invites him inside for a glass of iced tea. Immediately, the traditional social relations are enacted. Francesca sits in her chair in front of the stove, while Robert sits in the chair opposite her, Richard's, the seat of patriarchal privilege. Soon thereafter, the social relations between Robert and Francesca begin to transform and so do their seating positions. After dinner on their first night together, Francesca and Robert begin to re-kindle their adolescent feelings toward love and their bodies. They sit in the chairs associated with Francesca's children. However, unlike the novel that rigidly enforces gender roles, Francesca and Robert swap the gender positions of the children's places. Robert sits in Carolyn's chair in front of the radio, while Francesca sits in Michael's chair in front of the door. Both Carolyn and Robert are associated with the radio. But while Carolyn selfishly changes Francesca's station from opera to pop, Robert tunes the radio to a station Francesca would enjoy, a blues station to which they will begin dancing shortly after.

As the relationship develops further during their first night together, Francesca and Robert drink brandy and coffee. For the first time, Francesca and Robert take the seating positions that will become routine for the rest of their affair. Robert sits in Francesca's chair, in front of the stove, while Francesca sits in Michael's chair, in front of the screen door. They take seats that completely topple traditional gender roles. Robert sits in a "feminized" location. Francesca's seat makes practical sense, since, with Michael gone, she is in charge of doing the chores on the farm.

Robert and Francesca's new seating positions will continue for the next days: from now on, each time they sit, they will occupy these chairs. During their last breakfast together on Thursday morning, they take these positions. Yet now they are even closer to one another, as they angle their chairs toward the same corner of the table. For their final night together, they finally eat in the dining room, occupying the same positions of intimacy but now in one of the house's most private spaces.

The "feminization" of Robert achieves its most politically transgressive manifestation late in the film as Francesca's busy body friend Madge comes over unannounced to keep Francesca company. Robert goes upstairs to Francesca's bedroom to hide. When Francesca finally gets Madge to leave, we cut to a low-angle medium shot of Robert lying on Francesca's bed. He lies immobile, on his side facing the camera, with a forlorn look on his face. The shot is a stylistic reprise of an earlier shot in the film in which Francesca lay before the fire after she and Robert first made love. As Robert lies on the bed, Francesca enters the room, sits down behind him, and pats him on the head. Robert softly begs Francesca to come away with him.

Robert's identification with the traditional "feminine" position in the melodrama demonstrates that the film is about Francesca's choices. This is very different in the novel, where Robert's authority dominates not only the narration, but the narrative as

well. The novel is obsessively concerned with establishing Robert's discursive control. Most of the section of the novel detailing the last day of Robert and Francesca's affair is devoted to Robert's analysis of the meaning of the events. Robert delivers a self-righteous speech about the world's problems. In an unintentionally hilarious passage, Robert links nuclear destruction to male hormones:

I'm one of the last cowboys. . . . I'm not sad about it. Maybe a little wistful, I guess. But it's got to happen; it's the only way we'll keep from destroying ourselves. My contention is that male hormones are the ultimate cause of trouble on this planet. It was one thing to dominate another tribe or another warrior. It's quite another to have missiles. It's also quite another to have the power to destroy nature the way we're doing. (101)

Over the course of the five pages of Robert's speech, Francesca says two words: "Thank you" (99)! The novel positions Robert as the expert on everything, including their relationship, to which Francesca serves as his passive sounding board. One can only guess that he is really in love with her because she is the only one on the planet passive enough to listen to his outrageous social theories.

The film accompanies Robert's "feminization" with a corollary empowerment of Francesca. Francesca asserts herself throughout the narrative, but at no time more forcefully than at their Thursday morning breakfast, the day before her family is to return. Francesca begins the scene by sarcastically asking Robert what the "routine" is for his lovers after he leaves them. Earlier in their affair, Robert had boasted of his "needing everyone but no one in particular." Francesca grabs the breakfast dishes and slams them into the sink, declaring, "After you leave here I'm going to be sitting here wondering what happened to me." Here, Francesca voices her own uncertainties about what their

love has meant. This is very unlike the novel, which romanticizes the affair to such an extent that it strips away all the real-world complexities.

The film's Francesca balks at Robert's attempt to paper over the complexities of their social positions. In the film's most bitter line, Francesca exposes the pornographic dimensions of the novel's romanticization of the affair: "More eggs, or shall we just fuck on the linoleum one more time?" Francesca continues with her implicit critique of the novel's worship of Robert: "The rest of us are supposed to be grateful. . . You're a hypocrite and a phony." The novel's Francesca is never cognizant or empowered enough to realize that there are serious gender political problems with Robert's cavalier attitude toward the affair. The film's Francesca is convincingly torn between her responsibilities to her family and her need to satisfy her desires. Unlike the novel's Francesca, she is completely devastated by the unfairness of a patriarchal system which forces her to choose between the two.

In the film's most moving scene, Francesca makes her final decision to forsake Robert and stay with her children. The significance of the film's empowerment of Francesca to make that decision can be tracked intertextually. In the Hollywood cinema, such decisions are ordinarily reserved for the central male protagonist. For example, the scene of Francesca's decision replays a scene in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. George and Mary Bailey, having just gotten married, get into a cab and are about to go on their honeymoon, traveling the world as George has always wanted. At just that moment, a financial disaster strikes the Bailey Building and Loan. Caught between his dreams of world travel and his responsibilities to his family and his town, George looks out of the cab's rain-drenched back window at people mobbing the savings and loan it took his father a lifetime to build. In a striking two-shot, we see the life drain out of George's face, as Mary glances at him in sympathy. As George climbs out of the cab, we hear

Mary in voice-off implore, “George, let’s not stop, let’s go.” Mary grabs George’s arm in desperation, but he breaks free and runs to the mob. We cut from a medium shot of Mary looking out the rain-drenched cab window to a long shot of George in the rain looking at the mob. George decides at this moment to give up his dreams and to instead take care of both the town’s families and his own.

At the end of *Bridges*, Francesca’s family has just returned from a trip to the state fair. Francesca and Robert have already said their goodbyes, but Robert is still in town on his photographic shoot. Richard and Francesca drive into town to pick up supplies. While Richard is inside the general store, Francesca, waiting in the car, spots Robert out of the corner of her eye. Standing in the middle of the road, getting soaked by the rain, Robert looks at Francesca, beckoning with his eyes for her to come away with him. Francesca watches Robert through the truck’s rain-drenched window. As was the case with George Bailey, this is Francesca’s last chance to achieve happiness, to travel the world as she has always wanted. In each film, the *mise-en-scene* is the same: the woman inside the car watches the man outside in the rain. However, *Bridges* reverses the gender roles offered in *Life*. Even though it is Robert standing out in the rain, Francesca, like George, is forced to make the decision to stay home and ensure the survival of her family. Francesca, not Robert, is given the central discursive authority to make the decision, which was the privileged place for the male protagonist in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. In “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” Robin Wood analyzes the ideological complexity of *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Wood asserts that the logic of all Hollywood genres is to place the central male protagonist, in this case George Bailey, in an unsolvable bind. The protagonist wants to satisfy his “wanderlust,” and is presented with a choice between two potential mates: the virginal Mary and the whorish Violet. Wood argues that, “the good-

time gal offers no more solution to the hero's wanderlust than the wife-mother figure" (64).

In The Bridges of Madison County, the wife-mother figure is the one with the wanderlust. She is the one who receives a choice of potential mates: the great lover Robert or the stable yet boring provider Richard. In a transmutation of Hollywood tradition, Francesca's subjectivity, and *her* limited choices, take a central place in the narrative.

The intertextual relationships between *Life* and *Bridges* extend far beyond this gender reversal. Robert Ray's analysis of Capra's film in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* directly applies to *Bridges*. For example, Ray argues: "The truly subversive point about *It's a Wonderful Life*, then, was its recognition that a man could have so many of the things promised by the American Dream (wife, children, job, friends, house, car) and still be unhappy. For the movie acknowledged that having one thing (domesticity) required giving up its opposite (adventure)" (192). *Bridges* changes the gender focus of *Life*'s investigation, but still forces its characters to confront the contradictions of the American Dream, making Francesca choose, like George before her, between small-town drudgery and an uncertain, nomadic existence.

Furthermore, the function of this scene in each narrative determines the different ideological stance of the film. Wood argues that *It's a Wonderful Life* is, "a far more potentially subversive film than has been generally recognized, but its subversive elements are, in the end, successfully contained" (68). The scene's emotional power results from George's inability to escape the small town, but his discontent is ultimately contained by the film's ending which re-affirms family values as he is rescued from financial ruin by his family and his community.



Since the equivalent scene in *Bridges* occurs almost directly at the end, there is less potential for the family values re-containment to occur. Francesca's decision to stay seals her miserable fate with her unloving husband and children. The domestic discontent that *Life* buries in its second act takes center stage at the end of *Bridges*. To paraphrase Robin Wood, the intertextual complexities of Francesca's painful decision to stay makes *The Bridges of Madison County* so much more suggestive and significant a work than Eastwood the bourgeois entertainer could ever have guessed.

### **Jokes and Their Relation to Madison County**

Both the novel and film versions of *The Bridges of Madison County* are very funny narratives. The novel is unintentionally comic: its overblown prose attempts to mythologize Robert's body and spirit but produced (in me) more snickering than reverence. Conscious of both the novel's passionate following and the ridicule to which it was critically subjected, the film constructs a faithful adaptation at the level of the narrative yet completely rejects its source's narrational bombastic seriousness. While the novel constructs a one-dimensionally empty Francesca whose sole function is the worship of Robert, the film reveals both characters as witty and complex.

This adaptational transformation can be tracked by analyzing the most celebrated passage from the novel,<sup>i</sup> in which Robert, about to fall in love with Francesca, imagines his escape to the Far East:

He could have walked out on this earlier, could still walk. Rationality shrieked at him. "Let it go, Kincaid, get back on the road. Shoot the bridges, go to India. Stop in Bangkok on the way and look up the silk merchant's daughter who knows every ecstatic secret the old ways can teach. Swim naked with her at dawn in jungle pools and listen to her scream as you turn her inside out at

twilight. Let go of this"--the voice was hissing now--"it's outrunning you."

(97)

Waller unwittingly provides us with a perfect definition of orientalism: afraid of a supposed "true" love with a white woman, Robert fantasizes about returning to more "primitive" sex with an exotic woman of color. Robert's (Waller's) lack of (writing) talent is only overshadowed by his racist and sexist attitudes.

The film uses humor to ridicule the race and gender politics of this moment. In the film, Robert never has a fantasy about escaping from Francesca. Instead, after their first dinner together, Robert is trying to impress Francesca by telling her funny stories. The story that most makes her laugh is a deconstruction of orientalism in the mocking mode common to Irigaray. Robert relates that one day in Africa, he was bathing in a river (not having sex in a "jungle pool") when he was surprised by a female gorilla. The gist of the story is that he and the gorilla fell in love at first sight. At the joke's punch line--"we still write"--Francesca laughs heartily. The film's Robert makes a joke out of the encounter with the primitive Other that the novel's Robert finds so erotic. The film's replacement of a gorilla for a woman of color in Robert's encounter with a female mate in the Third World exposes the hidden racist, orientalist subtext of Waller's passage: that is, that women of color are more in touch with an "animalistic" passion.<sup>ii</sup>

The film also uses humor to position Francesca as a fully developed character. Unlike the novel's Francesca, who is universally focused on worshiping Robert in the most serious way possible, melancholically, the film's Francesca possesses a wickedly sarcastic sense of humor. In the film, Francesca tells a series of four jokes which become increasingly politically engaged.

The progression of jokes that Francesca tells in the film cross checks with the theory of jokes Sigmund Freud offers in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious.

Freud hypothesizes that there is a psychic process equivalent to the dream-work involved with the telling of jokes, which he labels the “joke-work.” For Freud, the joke-work is “the psychological processes involved in the construction of the joke” (61). Freud argues that a joke forms when “a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision and the outcome of this is at once grasped by conscious perception” (205). This unconscious joke-work at times results in “tendentious jokes” which express a deeply repressed rebellion against authority: “Tendentious jokes are especially favored in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against authority, a liberation from its pressure” (125). I am by no means unaware of the apparent contradiction in using Freudian theory in an argument which is explicitly attempting to support Irigaray’s mockery of Freud. Freud’s joke book is filled with sexist jokes in which the tendentiousness balks against an authority which is seemingly female and castratory, impinging upon men’s prerogatives to pleasure. To wit: “A doctor, as he came away from a lady’s bedside, said to her husband with a shake of his head: ‘I don’t like her looks.’ ‘I’ve not liked her looks for a long time’, the husband hastened to agree” (41). In High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy, Patricia Mellencamp analyzes the sexist basis of Freud’s pleasure in tendentious jokes which critique marriage as a threat to men’s pleasure: “It is here that Freud puts women in their historical place, as objects, dispossessed of language--the very speech necessary for making a joke and, reciprocally, understanding it” (343).

Mellencamp on jokes--like Irigaray on melancholy--offers a compelling precedent for using Freudian theory (in this case, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious) against itself. Mellencamp re-appropriates Freud’s concept of the tendentiousness of jokes to demonstrate how women comediennes have used humor to critique the very

patriarchal structures that the jokes Freud tells serve to propagate. In Freud's tendentious jokes, women are always the object of the exchange between a male joker and a male auditor. But, argues Mellencamp, when women become the subjects of the joke-telling process, the object--the butt of the joke--becomes "patriarchal social structures" (341).

The jokers that Mellencamp studies in High Anxiety are transgressive comediennes such as Roseanne Barr and Lucille Ball. Mellencamp demonstrates what is often required for women in traditionally comedic genres (like the television sitcom) to take over the joke-teller's position: "Like the joke, historically told by a male joker to a male auditor who laughs his quota off, often at the expense of women, Roseanne is aggressive, sometimes hostile" (341). Kathleen Rowe discusses Roseanne's comedy in similar terms, drawing from the Bakhtinian concept of unruliness.

However, The Bridges of Madison County is a melodrama, and Francesca is by no means outwardly unruly.<sup>iii</sup> Francesca's jokes, like Roseanne's, speak from discontent with patriarchal structures. But unlike the unruly Roseanne, Francesca speaks from inside bourgeois culture. This is a direct result of melodrama's position as the cultural form of the bourgeoisie. As critics have frequently argued, melodrama critiques bourgeois patriarchy from the inside out.<sup>iv</sup> Thus, Francesca's jokes are very different in sensibility from Roseanne's, although I would argue both are politically potent as critiques of patriarchal systems.<sup>v</sup>

Francesca's jokes in the film work to express her deep discontent with patriarchal structures. Francesca makes four jokes in the film, each of which in its own way expresses an assault on patriarchal values. Unlike the novel, in which Francesca's character never develops, the jokes in the film reveal Francesca's maturing understanding of her social position. In an uncanny way, Francesca's development as a joker mirrors

Freud's theory of the psychogenesis of jokes. The development of jokes is about increasingly "lifting suppressions and repressions" (168).

Joking, argues Freud, begins with play, "the free use of words and thoughts" (168). Francesca's first joke is a playful exchange with Robert upon first meeting him.<sup>vi</sup> Trying to find the Roseman Bridge, Robert tells her he is lost. Francesca asks him whether he is supposed to be in Iowa. When he replies in the positive, Francesca quips, "Then, you're not that lost." Francesca plays with the precision of word meanings. The ideological significance of the joke has not emerged fully, yet lies in the unconscious articulation of Francesca's material conditions. Her joke in effect tells Robert that to her, one place in Iowa is pretty much the same as the next. This discontent with her situation will emerge in greater detail as her joking progresses.

In the psychogenetic development of jokes, play changes into jest, "in order that it may retain these sources of pleasure and be able to achieve fresh pleasure from the liberation of nonsense" (168). Shortly after the lost-in-Iowa exchange, Robert asks Francesca whether she would like to accompany him to Roseman Bridge. Francesca jokes, "I was going to split the atom, but that can wait." A process of liberation has begun here, but it is still almost fully at the level of the unconscious. Francesca's nonsense about the splitting of the atom is baffling to Robert, but again it speaks to Francesca's material conditions. Francesca's jest is what Freud calls an overstatement, where the joker "succeeds in making himself [sic] understood by saying the opposite of what he thinks but must keep to himself. This opposite is an overstatement that cannot be believed" (85). Robert offers Francesca a polite way to decline his invitation by saying, "Of course, if you have other work to do. . . ." Francesca's jest implicitly ridicules Robert's statement: as a farmer in Iowa, what work of importance could there be to do that could not be done the next day?

In the third phase, we finally arrive at a joke proper, which “gives its assistance to thoughts and strengthens them against the challenge of critical judgment” (168). While jokes always originate in the unconscious, here the jokes begin to be more explicit about the political circumstances which subtend them. While at the Roseman Bridge, Robert picks some flowers for Francesca. When he offers them to her, she jokes, “Those are nice, but they’re poisonous,” at which point Robert drops them. Francesca laughs hysterically. Francesca rebels directly against the patriarchal logic which generated Robert’s offer of the flowers. Robert’s romantic gesture (this *is* the Robert of the novel as well) is hollowed out by Francesca’s transgressive wit. She attacks the conventions of romance by replying to his gesture in the least “logical” way possible. She “ruins” the romantic moment by making a joke at Robert’s expense.<sup>vii</sup>

Finally, the fourth stage yields jokes of “major purposes.” These tendentious jokes “are combating suppression, in order to lift. . . internal inhibitions” (168). Francesca’s fourth joke reveals her wit at its most radical. In a letter to her children, written years after her experiences with Robert, Francesca declares that she is telling them about Robert, “to get her affairs in order, so to speak.” We learn of Francesca’s joke by watching Carolyn read the letter, with Michael in the background. Michael storms around upon hearing his mother’s words, and whines, “I can’t believe she’s making jokes.” Francesca’s assault on patriarchal values, expressing with ease her love for both family and secret lover, infuriates and frustrates Michael. Hearing his mother voice these opinions about the control of her own body and emotions forces Michael to rethink his vision of his mother as asexual. Francesca’s wit operates at its most effective in dismantling the power patriarchy wields over her. Her success in exposing the hypocrisy of patriarchal values is expressed in the extremely violent reaction Michael has to her joke.

Francesca's humor in the film serves to express a very different approach to melancholia than in the novel's emplotment of it as Freudian pathology. Like Irigaray's theoretical empowerment via a mockery of Freudian theory, the film's Francesca develops a power to ridicule patriarchal systems via transgressive humor.

## **Conclusion**

I began this essay with a defense of an approach to melodrama that would take affect seriously. In analyzing *Bridges* as a film that exposes the patriarchal strictures under which Francesca lives, I have foremost tried to separate a style grounded in excess from political progressivity. Stylistically a realist melodrama, the film transforms the novel's conservative defense of bourgeois morality into a politically contestatory work of art. The film shows us Francesca as a rounded character, capable of making her own decisions about her life. While the novel leaves Francesca wallowing in a passive melancholic state, the film's Francesca possesses a defensive wit that empowers her to resist and critique her given circumstances.

Throughout this chapter, I have used the novel as an ideological whipping boy to demonstrate the film's subversive superiority. If affect is so important to defending melodrama from denigration, what of the novel's affective potential? What, beyond false consciousness, explains the sale of eight million copies of this novel? While I want to maintain my claims as to the ideological differences between the film and the novel, it is important to keep in mind that both texts are more polysemous than my theoretical and rhetorical strategy has allowed.

As Jane Shattuc rightly points out, all melodramas are polysemous. Drawing from Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Shattuc argues, "all melodramas produce a dual hermeneutic: a positive hermeneutic of the 'good cry' which recuperates

the Utopian movement. . . and a negative hermeneutic that discloses their complicity with white patriarchal ideology” (152). In the case of Waller’s *Bridges*, the negative hermeneutic absolutely outweighs the positive, as I hope my rhetoric above has demonstrated. However, we need to attend to the novel’s positive hermeneutic as well to interrogate why so many (including me) have found the novel so emotionally moving.

Unless we want to revert to the modernist critique of melodrama’s production of hopelessly co-opted dupes, which I do not, we need to seek a more complex vision of the novel’s politics. While I merely speak from a position of textual analysis, and not from an ethnographic understanding of any of the novel’s readers beyond myself, I would suggest a good place to start would be the central tension of the novel: Robert and Francesca’s affair. The novel’s negative hermeneutic in this regard is clear: an ideal man swooping into a middle-aged housewife’s life to rescue her from drudgery is not likely to happen. This is a dangerous ideological fantasy in its encouragement of women to passively wait to be rescued from patriarchal oppression by an ideal cross between Dr. Leo Buscaglia and the Marlboro Man.

However, the politics of this plot are more complex than this vision of false consciousness allows. Within a political climate in which the family values discourses of conservatives have taken a frighteningly strong hold over the cultural imagination, a phenomenally best-selling novel about adultery is significant. To not attend to this contradiction in discourses of morality is to give up the game to conservatives. To not attend to the transgressive component of the novel, no matter how slight it might be when compared to “truly” radical cultural artifacts (which are where exactly in 1996 America?) is to produce a monological view of our culture as inherently conservative. Cultural critics such as Barbara Klinger have warned of the dangers of this sort of monologic view



of 1950s American culture, and it is equally applicable to our current political circumstance.<sup>viii</sup>

If this defense of the novel seems excessive, much ado about nothing, consider the case of one response to the novel. As the production company struggled to find a location at which to shoot the film, they settled upon a farm in Iowa. When they went to ask for the owner's permission, he denied them, with the following rationale: "We didn't want to support any more adultery scenes. There's enough on television" (Krause, 28). Similarly, when *People* magazine asked Iowa women farmers what they thought of the book, one responded, "I thought the book glorified adultery" ("The Wives of Madison County", 153). In performing ideological readings of texts, it is always worthwhile to keep in mind the ranges of textual meaning that the text can have at any one moment. Despite whatever our personal disdain for the novel's gender politics might be (and for me it is overwhelmingly significant), we have to keep in mind that from a position more in keeping with traditional mainstream values, the book appears downright scandalous: a woman's four day affair proves so meaningful to her that it eclipses her twenty-year marriage to her boring husband. Despite whatever ideological critiques are appropriately leveled against the novel, it remains a polysemous text whose transgressions may prove just as affective as its reinforcements of the ideological status quo.

Much less in dispute for me is the film's political position, which works to deconstruct many of the novel's reinforcements of patriarchal ideology. *Melancholia* proves to be an effective way to trace the differences in a melodrama's approach to gender roles. Because melodrama is so often about the suspension of female desire, a melancholic criticism facilitates a theorization of the text's response to the imposition of delay, waiting, and passivity on its female protagonists. The novel accepts this pacification of Francesca wholeheartedly, producing her as a melancholic martyr. The

film rebels against such a stricture, lashing out with a character who actively develops across the plot, using a comic mode of resistance to critique patriarchal structures.

In addition to an intervention into the politics of melodrama, this paper forwards a new approach to thinking about adaptation. While most adaptation critics stop at determining how and why films differ from their source novels, this paper begins by assuming the inherent differences between film and novel. What this mode of adaptation criticism allows is the chance to reflect upon the meanings of a film which would not have been visible without reference to its source novel.<sup>ix</sup> In other words, *Bridges* may only be a “progressive” film in reference to its source novel, only visible intertextually. Political meaning is always relational, and intertextual criticism can be one way to delimit our provisional claims as to the political stance of the texts we find significant.

Such an approach to intertextuality studies is clearly borne out in the ways in which popular critics reacted to the film. The reviewers not familiar with the novel almost universally panned the film. Critic Richard Alleva represents this camp most succinctly when he begins his review of the film in *Commonweal* thus: “I’m a Madison County virgin, so I will have to judge the film on its own merits. And, to cut to the chase, I think the movie is dreadful” (17). However, reviewers of the film who did read the novel tended to love the film. James Wall in *Christian Century*, for example, used the contrast between novel and film to recommend the film: “The affair is told from Francesca’s perspective--a vast improvement over the novel, which is a poorly written male fantasy” (667).

What I offer, then, is not a theoretical explication of *Bridges* in order to reveal how stupid “regular” people (popular critics, moviegoers) are. Instead, I agree with the preponderance of the reviews of the film that praised its gender political critique of the novel’s inherent sexism. My analysis uses cultural theory—genre, intertextual, and

psychoanalytical criticisms, largely—in order to further support the positioning of the film by popular reviewers. Attempts at bridging (so to speak) the gaps between popular and academic film criticism are long overdue and desperately needed.

This chapter has used traditional feminist film analysis to assess the gender politics of *The Bridges of Madison County* as a melodrama in reference to the melodramatics of the Classical Hollywood Cinema, as particularly expressed in *It's a Wonderful Life* and *All That Heaven Allows*. The next chapter, about two much more contemporary melodramas—*Laurel Canyon* and *Moonlight Mile*—which I read as reinscriptions of the Oedipal melodrama of *The Graduate*, turns to post-feminist analysis to build its intertextual engagement. This shift involves an explicit movement from the traditional domain of feminism, the representation of the films' female characters, as my reading of *Bridges* has focused on Francesca, to post-feminism's concern with masculinity.

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<sup>i</sup> One indication of Warner Bros. Books' "celebration" of this passage is that they chose to reproduce it on the back of the book's jacket.

<sup>ii</sup> This is the power of an adaptational criticism sensitive to the ideological distinctions between novel and film. Without reference to the original novel, this vision of the gorilla joke in the film as a progressive critique of orientalism would not be possible. If anything, viewed in isolation, the scene would most probably be seen as orientalist itself.

<sup>iii</sup> In "The Contending Discourses of Melodrama," Jacky Bratton argues that one of the legacies of Peter Brooks' seminal book, The Melodramatic Imagination, is that the comedic aspects of melodrama have been ignored. Bratton's thesis is worth keeping in mind with respect to my ideological reading of The Bridges of Madison County. Like the comedic sidekicks Bratton discusses, comedy in Bridges is largely the means through which the film's radical potential is developed.

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<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Christine Gledhill, “The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation.”

<sup>v</sup> The film reveals its bourgeois values most clearly in its treatment of its one truly unruly woman. In the first scene, we meet Michael’s wife, Betty. Betty breaks all of the rules of bourgeois decorum: she asks the lawyer executing Francesca’s will if she left her anything, she remarks that Francesca in Robert’s picture of her is not wearing a bra, and she expresses her disgust with cremation by commenting that once Francesca’s ashes had settled, “doggie’s would do their business on her.” The film banishes the unruly Betty from the narrative, and she does not return until the final scene.

<sup>vi</sup> Since I am speaking here of Francesca’s character development, I am concerned here with the film’s fabula (story), the order of events in which Francesca experienced them. The first joke of Francesca’s in the film’s sjuzet (plot) is actually the fourth one discussed here.

<sup>vii</sup> Unlike the novel, which works very hard to preserve the mood of ideal romance from beginning to end, the film goes to great pains to undermine romance at every turn. The film is filled with earthly distractions of all sorts. Most conspicuous is the way bugs intrude upon the lovers. In a fascinating scene, Francesca reads W.B. Yeats, thinking about the dinner she and Robert just shared. Extremely aroused, she opens her nightgown to let the night breeze caress her body. Immediately, she is bitten by mosquitoes. This anti-romantic development sets up the film’s complete reformulation of an erotic highlight of the novel in which Francesca goes to her bedroom to admire her body in the mirror. Unlike the novel in which the mirror provides for an erotic fantasy, the film’s Francesca looks at her naked body in the mirror in order to put calamine lotion on her mosquito bites!

<sup>viii</sup> See Barbara Klinger, “Much Ado About Excess: Genre, Mise-en-scene and the Woman in Written on the Wind.”

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<sup>ix</sup> For more explication and theorization of this method of adaptation studies, see my dissertation, “Webs of Significance.”

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