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The Sublime Wisdom of Not Understanding: The Role of Knowledge in Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve*

Jason Michelitch

Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* (1941), as Stanley Cavell says, is a film that "knows itself to have been written and directed and photographed and edited."[1] Indeed, this is a film that concerns itself with the question of knowledge. A transcendently strange film from a transcendently strange filmmaker, the story follows Jean (Barbara Stanwyck), a con artist on an ocean liner who sets out to ensnare bumbling billionaire Charles (Henry Fonda) in a web of lust, only to end up a prisoner of love herself after she falls for the mug. When he discovers her deceit and casts her aside, her broken heart fuels her with rage, and she sets out to con him again, this time infiltrating his family estate masquerading as the titular Lady Eve, seducing him once again, with an eye towards revenge. As always with Sturges, the convoluted plot meets with hyperactive dialogue and an idiosyncratic visual pattern, synthesizing into a rare confection of entertainment that feels so otherworldly that one hesitates to place it in any particular category, be it "romantic comedy" or even "Hollywood film." Nevertheless, while it may be more than the sum of its labels, it is a film that clearly fits within both traditions, and such placement is useful to us in exploring the deeper significance of this absurdist romp.

The classical Hollywood formula is generally considered "conservative at best, reactionary at worst, attempting always to recuperate with ameliorative closure whatever problems and divisions it creates."[2] Scholars such as Robert B. Ray and Charles Eckert have shown how certain films perform the ideological work of eliding or disguising the social, economic, or political conflicts raised by their characters and settings, by focusing on the reconciliation of emotional conflicts. Thomas Schatz, in his classic text *Hollywood Genres*, writes that, in genre films such as the romantic or screwball comedy, "the basic cultural conflict…is simply recast into an emotional context where it can be expeditiously, if not always logically, resolved."[3] More specifically, regarding the screwball comedy, he argues that the genre is ideologically "integrationist" in that the "[romantic] union serves to celebrate integration into the community at large, into a social environment where cultural conflicts and contradictions have been magically reconciled."[4]

Though Schatz's brief treatment of Sturges acknowledges the director's penchant for "turning the screwball comedy inside out,"[5] Schatz does so in order to absorb Sturges into what the book calls the baroque, or mannerist, phase of genre development, in which the genre's social message does not change, but "there is a gradual shift in narrative emphasis from social value to formal aesthetic value."[6] In other words, for Schatz, the idiosyncrasy of Sturges is in his attention to the form of his genre, his innovation of the ways in which his romantic comedies perform their generic service. Such a description, however, does not fully account for the radical difference in *The Lady Eve*. While it is true that on the surface, the film appears to perform the standard trope of reconciling emotional conflict, it does so in stark contrast to the very notion of integration into civilization. Civilization hardly rears its head in *The Lady Eve*, and when it does, it is roundly mocked. Furthermore, the very notion of reconciliation is questioned, as the film ultimately revels in contradictions rather than seeking to eradicate them.

Most powerfully, the film performs these radical acts while providing an un-ironic romantic climax. While Schatz points to the "perversion of the formula's climactic embrace," in *The Great McGinty* (1941), as a prime example of Sturges "undercutting the genre,"[7] it is in *The Lady Eve*'s true and sincere climactic embrace that we find its most profound philosophical ideas. The film creates a confused sense of both reality and identity, and challenges its characters and its audience to come to terms with what knowledge is useful and what knowledge is counterproductive in our interactions with the world and with the people in that world. Taking an ultimately sincere romantic comedy and endowing each of the characters with dual and contradictory natures, the film points us towards the importance of intuitive acceptance of contradictions over any attempt at intellectual reconciliation of the same.

Cavell identifies *The Lady Eve* as belonging to what he calls the "comedies of remarriage," a subgenre he locates within classical Hollywood romantic comedy in his book, *Pursuits of Happiness*. One of the shared features of the subgenre as defined by Cavell is a use of the Shakespearean trope of the "green world" (a term originally coined by Northrop Frye), a setting away from civilization, generally in the wilderness, where plot and character interaction can take on the qualities of metaphor and fantasy. This green world can take many forms, and in several of Cavell's comedies – *The Lady Eve* included – it manifests as the forested countryside of Connecticut. There is, of course, a characteristic strangeness to the way it manifests in Sturges' film.

The Lady Eve's green world is different than those of other comedies of remarriage, as Cavell notes, declaring that Sturges' "Conneckticut" (as it is knowingly mispronounced by Jean's Lady Eve) operates at cross purposes with the Connecticut of *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks, 1939) or *The Awful Truth* (McCarey, 1937); here, "the mind or plot will not only not be cleared and restored, it will be darkened and frozen."[8] Both Conneckticut and Connecticut are mythically apart from the rest of the world, and this apart-ness, this mystical otherness, is an essential quality of any green world; we should not assume, however, that each stands apart from the same "real world." If *The Lady Eve*'s green world is an aberration, it stands to reason that the outside world of the film may be equally as strange.

In *Bringing Up Baby*, *Adam's Rib* (Cukor, 1949), and *The Awful Truth*, Connecticut is positioned explicitly in comparison with New York City. New York makes an appearance in *The Lady Eve* as well, but only a brief one, as a piece of rear-projected documentary footage; none of the on-screen action takes place anywhere recognizable as the city, and Eve describes only an apocryphal adventure on the subway. The green world of *The Lady Eve*, then, is not positioned against the recognizable real world of New York, but against the environment of the steamship where Jean and Charles meet, which in and of itself is a setting both strange and apart.

We board the ship in international waters, which is to say in a place that is inherently apart from everywhere by being in transit. The only time the ship is situated as identifiably somewhere is the aforementioned arrival in New York, which stands out as a jarring moment in the film's visual fabric. Until New York, our only glimpses of the environment surrounding the boat have been impressionistic: the hazy land mass in the distance as Charles arrives on his tender, and the nearly abstract night sky behind Jean and Hopsy (Jean's nickname for Charles, and in some ways a distinct personality from Charles – more on this below) as they stand at the prow of the ship and confess love. These moments are open, effervescent; Charles boards under an open sky, and the abstract night seems to inspire Hopsy to transcend time itself. By contrast, the arrival in New York is a sobering moment; the overwhelming claustrophobia and darkness of the compositions inspire a mood of earth-bound mourning for the airier escapades of Jean and Hopsy's first boat ride together.

In other comedies of remarriage, the characters are seen to be citizens of a real world, who either vacation in or ultimately escape to the green world, which is set apart as unreal. In *The Lady Eve*, the main setting of the boat and the green world of Conneckticut are set equally apart from the real world. Further, the characters themselves are untethered from New York or any other such earthbound locale. It is suggested that Jean and her con-artist partners, Handsome Harry and Gerald, make their living traveling on this boat and others like it (if there could be said to be others like it), and thus are, in a way, citizens of transit, of nowhere in particular. Charles' origin point in the film is never given any more definite an identity than merely "Up the Amazon," and his only other destination is the mythical Conneckticut. The characters of *The Lady Eve*, then, do not move between the green world and the outside world, but between two different types of green world. This will have implications in the film on the idea of knowledge.

That Charles is a man of science, devoted to what he calls "the pursuit of knowledge," is enough of a fact to make the question of science, and of knowledge, conspicuous within the film. The topic is further foregrounded by Jean's introduction, in which she watches Charles prepare to board the ship, and then proceeds to re-enact two of the resonant myths of science, dropping her apple onto Charles' head. The more obvious of the two myths reflected in Jean's action is the story of Sir Isaac Newton observing gravity after being struck on the head by a falling apple. This could perhaps be read as a warning sign to Charles, who will be given numerous opportunities throughout the film to observe gravity. It could also be read as an announcement of one of the major concerns of the film, which might be described as the forces that exert themselves between two bodies.

The film repeatedly suggests some sort of unseen and potentially mystical force between Hopsy and Jean: the distortion of his vision when replacing her shoe onto her foot, his apparent gaining of fourth dimensional sight on the bow of the ship. That the force is mysterious is suggested by the confusion it arouses in bystanders and in the lovers themselves, as seen when Hopsy mistakenly orders scotch for breakfast from a perplexed waiter, and in Jean's difficulty in explaining to Harry and Gerald just how Hopsy has "touched something in her heart." When Hopsy is struck by his vision through time, he declares, "I've just understood something," and then is unable to clearly articulate what that something is.

We might call that something our mysterious force, and we might call this force love; in the second act of the film, it makes itself apparent most often through gravity. Henry Fonda's awe-inspiring series of pratfalls suggests a displacement of force, that what should be pulling these two bodies together instead sends him tumbling downward. The apparent malfunctioning of the forces between them has everything to do with the confounding state of their identities in Conneckticut, which will not be resolved until they are removed from there back to the ship that is nowhere and in-between all at once. There they can refine their understanding of just who and what they each are, and by refine I mean generally abandon, for this is a film about the futility of trying to gain certain types of knowledge; or, put another way, the futility of treating certain types of knowledge as reducible to facts. Both of the lovers must learn this lesson, but they start this process with unequal aptitudes.

The less obvious of the two myths that Jean re-enacts is Galileo's experiment in dropping items from the top of the Tower of Pisa to observe that the time it takes two bodies to fall to Earth is the same regardless of their differences in mass. Here we might see another announcement of the film to come, in that it will take both Charles and Jean the same amount of time -- the length of the film -- to end up where natural forces are working to put them, which is together. More interestingly, though, invoking Galileo has the effect of putting Jean in the position of experimenter, rather than as mere vehicle for the expression of gravity (since, in the myth, no one threw an apple at Sir Isaac Newton's head). Casting Jean as a kind of scientist herself suggests that Charles is not the only one in the film seeking knowledge. Indeed, Jean's dialogue upon throwing the apple takes on an air of inquisition, as she says, (emphasis mine), "*I wonder if* I can clunk him on the head with this." Whereas the more obvious biblical allusion of the apple (not to mention of snakes and the name “Eve”) would portray Jean as merely a naïve bringer of catastrophe, here the film makes it clear that she is an equal, and at times superior, participant in an active pursuit of knowledge.

Jean and Charles may both be scientists, but they are after two different kinds of knowledge. Jean's attitude towards knowledge can be seen in her experiment with the apple: her interest is in cause and effect, in physical reality, immediately observable and intuitively understandable. Jean's other great display of knowledge comes when, as Cavell notes, she assumes the role of director, her compact mirror the role of the camera or film screen.[9] Here, too, it seems as if her knowledge of what words to speak for each person she observes comes from an intuitive understanding of human behavior, though it must also derive partially from whatever education she has received from her father, "Handsome" Harry. It is on this last point that Jean's knowledge is found to be incomplete.

Let us collapse the major lessons Jean has learned from Harry into one overarching lesson and give it the name of "cards." Her learning of cards is really her learning a system of belief: that she more thoroughly understands the rules of the game of life, and what moves are possible in that game, than anyone else. The film shows that this is true only so long as she plays the specific game of life (that played by the cynical con-artist) that the rules she knows apply to; as soon as she steps outside of that game by falling in love with Hopsy, her knowledge is useless, for as she says, that kind of thing isn't "in the cards." Received wisdom will be no help to her; luckily, she is the kind of scientist who flourishes in this scenario, concerned as she is with intuiting understanding (or something like understanding) from experience. That this is now an emotional rather than physical reality she is experimenting in is a challenge, but not an impasse, to her particular methods of experimentation. She will learn her lesson much more quickly than Charles will learn his.

Charles, on the other hand, is preoccupied with categorization, with intellectualizing away from the intuitive. His outburst over the difference between beer and ale suggests that this obsession with categorization was conditioned in him at a very young age, when he was expected to know "all about something [he didn't] give a hoot about." Without any intuitive understanding of beer – which is to say his father, his family, and his apparent place in life – he resorted to intellectualizing and categorizing, which is how he now attempts to understand the world. He has replaced intuition with intellectualization. His insistence on repeatedly identifying himself as an ophiologist and on giving the scientific names for his snakes further point to this tendency.

Significantly, though he is able to categorize and label, he is unable to translate those labels into an understanding of the thing labeled, as evidenced by his confused addendum to his explanation of the difference between ale and beer: "Or maybe it's the other way around." It should be unsurprising then that he attributes the distortion of his senses (the rippling and unfocused point-of-view shot a few moments earlier) to a bodily reaction to Jean's perfume; he is not prepared to intuitively understand it as arising from forces between them that are unavoidably perceived but impossible to precisely label.

Another word for labeling is naming, and the film has quite a bit to do with names. First we have Charles, who is re-named (or rather, re-re-named) Hopsy by Jean. Then, we have Jean, re-named as Eve by herself, and then again by Charles when he chooses to recognize her as Eve and not as Jean; that Charles may or may not be choosing to believe what he has deduced is most logical does not defuse the fact that his belief in this matter is an explicitly made choice, another act of categorization. It is not, however, the mere act of believing her to be Eve that is Charles' misstep, but the insistence that she is only one thing, that he can define her as just Eve and not also as Jean.

Really, the character played by Barbara Stanwyck is both and neither Jean and Eve, as the character played by Henry Fonda is both and neither Charles and Hopsy. Cavell mentions a tendency he observes in the comedies of remarriage to "[harp] on the identity of the real women cast in each of these films."[10] I would add that by harping on the identity of Barbara Stanwyck, the film also harps on the identity of Henry Fonda. What we ultimately see on screen is an image of a man and an image of a woman, and we cannot definitively call them Hopsy and Jean, or Charles and Eve,

or Henry and Barbara. The human film image possesses an ambiguous identity of its own, one which defies concrete naming. The image both contains and performs the identity of the actor and the character, but is bound to neither, and transcends both. The messiness of naming within the film draws our attention to this inherent ambiguity of the film image, which in turn fuels the profound ambiguity of identity at the core of the film's plot and themes.

The fluidity of identity in the film image can be temporarily frozen by text: credits naming the actors as Fonda and Stanwyck, a script naming them Charles (or is it Hopsy?) and Jean (or is it Eve?). This relationship between text and image is brought forth most clearly when Hopsy is given the photograph that will lead him to spurn Jean and return to life as Charles. Narratively, the existence of the photograph is the catalyst for this disaster, but it is in fact the text on the back of the photograph that is the culprit. The text identifies the woman in the photograph as Jean, and as a confidence artist. That the text is what overwhelms Hopsy is asserted in the long fade from the close-up of the words to his face, leaving the text superimposed over his head for many seconds, his understanding now smothered and defined by the cold hard type. The text has labeled Jean, categorized her in a way the photograph cannot.

Of the photograph, we could say that it is an image of Stanwyck, and even an image of Jean, but we must also recognize that it is *not* Jean, in the same way that Jean is not Stanwyck. Jean is the name we give to the moving and speaking image of a woman with which we have now spent considerable pleasurable time, and we understand instantly that while there is a relationship between this still photograph called Jean and the moving image called Jean, it is not the relationship defined by the text on the back of the photograph. The film is making clear to us that *image* provides us with different information, and a different kind of information, than does *text*; that image cannot replicate the unambiguity of text, and text cannot replicate the ineffableness of image.

The film repeats this argument when it has Charles recite to Eve the same speech Hopsy gives to Jean on the bow of the boat. Here, the words are the same, but the conditions have changed, and the impact is terribly different. Cavell locates our discomfort as an audience in what we take to be Charles' insincerity, and hinges the existence of that insincerity on whether or not Charles knows Jean and Eve to be the same person.[11] I would argue instead that Eve is, in fact, not Jean. There is in Eve some qualitative difference from Jean, less different but similar to the difference between Jean and the still photograph of Jean. In that same vein, Charles is not Hopsy. Our discomfort, then, does not come from Charles's insincerity, for I take him to be sincere, but from his using words that belong to Hopsy, that only seem correct when said by Hopsy, and only when said to Jean.

Moreover, we feel this discomfort because we can see not only the differences between Charles and Hopsy and between Jean and Eve, but because we can simultaneously see the congruencies. Neither Charles nor Eve are the same as their respective doubles, but neither are each of them completely different; each pair share an essence that is unavoidable and imperative for us as an audience to perceive, which in turn makes it impossible for us to declare that either actor is ever portraying just one of their two screen identities. Only when we relinquish any hope of precisely separating out who or what Barbara Stanwyck is from who or what Jean is, and likewise for each from Eve, can we truly partake in the art event that is Barbara

Stanwyck's performance in the film; the same must be said for Charles, Hopsy, and Henry Fonda. Without fully partaking in these performances, we cannot be said to be partaking of the film.

To partake of this film, then, is to accept as a location a place perpetually in-between and nowhere in particular, and to accept two main characters whose selves are not clearly definable. Not coincidentally, these are the same conditions the lovers are required to accept in order to obtain their happiness. Being the first of the pair to realize this, Eve returns to the ship as Jean and lays in wait for Charles so that she can re-enact their personal creation myth, tripping him and re-re-re-naming him as Hopsy. What is then required of Charles is to accept the situation intuitively, without putting up any intellectual barriers. He does.

As the reunited couple enters Jean's cabin, their happiness is put to the test by the reintroduction of contextual information. It would be easy for things to devolve, for Hopsy to try and assert Charles' kind of understanding, either in an attempt to reconcile the disparate strands of reality, or to repeat the sin of denial by labeling the woman before him as only Jean, and not also Eve. Instead, he reveals the depths of his new rejection of definite knowledge as he confesses to Jean what she already knows.

"It would never have happened except she looked so exactly like you," he says, acknowledging that though in some qualities Eve is different from Jean, Eve also contains the same qualities of Jean that make Jean identifiable as Jean and distinguishable from Stanwyck, and from the damning photograph, though she is also the same as these things but through different qualities; in a metaphoric echo of the climactic dialogue of *The Awful Truth*, in order to be different from one another, Jean and Eve must be the same, and vice versa. Charles, now Hopsy again, is giving himself over to the ambiguity of the image, being careful not to do violence to its ineffable nature with categorization, and actually declaring that ineffableness as what draws him to Jean. No longer is he blaming any cockeyedness on perfume.

The film grandly valorizes the impulse to experience over the impulse to understand. As the door closes on our reunited couple, we hear them reveal to each other their marriage to one another. When the door re-opens, we at first fear that intellectualism has re-asserted itself over intuition, and that this state of affairs must be reconciled and empirically understood. We are relieved to see instead that it is Mugsy, Charles's longtime companion and bodyguard, who has spent the film in paroxysms of suspicion over Jean and Eve's identities and intentions, who is ejected; Mugsy, who is also named Ambrose, to his dismay and denial; Mugsy, whose obsessive determination to concretize the identity of either Jean or Eve blinds him to the greater and more complex reality that we and our fellows (from which ranks we hope to form lasting relationships) are all walking collections of co-existing contradictions, of truths and fictions.

He is also blind to the irony of his own nom de guerre, which identifies him as a mug, which Handsome Harry has defined for us as a member of the species Suckers Sapiens. Ultimately, Jean's acceptance of her own sucker status in opting for an ineffable romance over the hard currency of a settlement shows that we are, all of us, mugs or mugs-in-waiting, all members of the same species together, which throws into

stark relief Mugsy's inability to accept the implications of his own chosen moniker. In his positively-ness about the sameness of the dame, Mugsy is the clownish counterpoint of objectivism, serving to further ennoble by comparison the sublime state of being summed up by Fonda, who is/is not Charles, who is/is not Hopsy, who says, proudly, "I don't want to understand."

Jason Michelitch is a freelance writer and filmmaker. His writing has appeared in *Wired*, *Cineaste*, and *Comics Alliance*. His film work has been shown at the Cannes Court Métrage and the Harrisburg Moviate Artsfest Film Festival. He is currently a 2014 master's candidate in Film Studies at Boston University.

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[1] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 66.
[2] Robert Phillip Kolker, "On Certain Tendencies in American Film Criticism." *American Quarterly* 38.2 (1986): 331.
[3] Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood* Genres (New York: Random House, 1981), 32.
[4] Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 155.
[5] Ibid., 168.
[6] Ibid., 41.
[7] Ibid., 168.
[8] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 49.
[9] Ibid., 66.
[10] Ibid., 64.
[11] Ibid., 61.