been experienced as, in some ways, validating the ‘bigness’ that it is, rather, concerned with criticising. Yes, the ‘epistemic authority’ might here have been used ironically (as I have shown it to have been in a number of actually existent examples) but, still, Ed’s look at the camera could never be at us. This is a man deluded – his delusion is a key condition of the film’s world as a melodramatic one – and he is so tragically and so pathologically locked in a distorted worldview that it would be patently inappropriate for the film to conjure such a ‘direct’ connection with us, even if the connection were ironically inflected.

Thomas provides a table that can further underline the seeming ‘inappropriateness’ of direct address to melodrama and the characteristics of comedic film worlds that make direct address more freely assimilable therein:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MELODRAMATIC FILMS</th>
<th>COMEDIC FILMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are characterised by</td>
<td>are characterised by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repression, displacement</td>
<td>Expression, satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical power</td>
<td>Mutuality, community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigidity</td>
<td>Improvisation, spontaneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malign fate</td>
<td>Benevolent magic (Thomas 2000: 92)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a ‘lightness’ and a transformative quality to comedic film worlds that make them both, tonally, less continuous with our own ‘real world’ than those of melodramatic narratives, and more susceptible to direct address as a gesture towards communion. This transformative quality is also manifest in the importance of performativity to comedy and the recurrence of actors performing characters performing. This is suggested in Thomas’s contrasting of melodramatic rigidity with comedic improvisation and spontaneity. The diaphanous or shifting relationship between actor and character in comedy is consistent with the cross-diegetic nature of direct address. In contrast, melodramatic characters are ‘inhabited’ by their actors and are ‘rounded’ in a way comedy characters are often not (a reason why actors in comedies are notoriously under-rewarded in the Academy Awards and by other such prizes). In the example (partly imagined) from Bigger than Life, Ed Avery remains too much ‘Ed Avery’ to look at us.\(^{15}\)

PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS IN PUBLIC: MAKE WAY FOR TOMORROW (1937)

The above has indulged in the, I hope, productive essentialising of broad modes of filmmaking and suggested the suitability of direct address to certain
traditions and its apparent incompatibility with others. Before moving on to saying something more specific of musicals (a genre that is part of the larger comedic mode but whose use of direct address has its own particular qualities), I wish to complicate these neat divisions. Indeed, it would not be in line with the analysis undertaken in Beyond Genre to employ the melodrama–comedy distinction in a bald either / or way. Thomas’s schema is highly flexible, with many films moving backwards and forwards between the extremes of melodramatic and comedic poles. Thomas’s points about romance give a flavour of this flexibility:

I observed earlier that romance is rarely free-standing and that to classify a film in this way – simply as a romance – provides only part of the picture. Romantic melodrama or romantic comedy? Is desire the ingredient that locks the romantic couple into a tight and repressive world, or can it in some way liberate them? . . . As we shall see . . . it is not always easy to determine whether romantic films are essentially melodramatic or comedic, since to some extent many of them have aspects of both. (ibid.: 99)

Leo McCarey’s Make Way for Tomorrow (1937) is a prime example of the problems of generic pigeonholing (is it a ‘social problem picture’, a ‘family melodrama’?; or is it just a ‘drama’ or a ‘romance’, as imdb.com classifies it?) but also of the potential rewards of attending to the underlying structures beyond genre. The film might be best described as a romantic melodrama, but one punctured frequently by the comic. It concerns the plight of an elderly couple, Lucy (Beulah Bondi) and Bark (Victor Moore), whose house is being repossessed. None of their five children is able (or, really, willing) to take both parents in, so the decision is made that the father will live with one of the daughters (Elisabeth Risdon) and the mother with one of the sons (Thomas Mitchell). Unable to live together, each parent becomes increasingly unwelcome in the homes of this child’s family. Events come to a head and the father is to be moved on to California and the mother to a retirement home in New York. It appears highly unlikely that they will ever see each other again.

Not just sad, the world of the film is melodramatic because its oppressiveness is ‘inherent in its social fabric and conditions’ (Thomas 2000: 12) – that is, the weak fabric of modern (1937) family bonds and the absence (though unmentioned) of a social security safety net. The comic qualities of the film emerge often from the good humour with which the old couple meet this unforgiving trajectory and, always, through the space, both literal and metaphoric, given to all the film’s actors – McCarey is a director famed for his ability to encourage ‘spontaneity’ in his performers (often in comedic films) through techniques of improvisation. Also following Deborah Thomas's
model, we can see how the scenes in the hotel just prior to Bark’s departure for California can be understood as the couple’s temporary liberation through their mutual romantic desire. However, because this film’s world is ultimately melodramatic, we always know that this space is a respite from wider socio-economic and narrative strictures, not an escape. The couple are returning to the hotel in which they honeymooned fifty years previously, and the scene’s poignancy rests with our knowledge that soon Bark must catch his train.

Having decided that they are enjoying each other’s company far too much to keep an engagement with their mostly unsympathetic children, Bark takes the decision to call their daughter, Nellie (Minna Gombell). Lucy is clearly the more anxious about the children’s feelings but Bark promises he will ‘fix it up . . . in a nice way’ (a suppressed edge in his voice suggests he is really more concerned with Lucy’s feelings about the children’s feelings than with those feelings themselves). On the phone to his daughter, he tells her fairly bluntly that they are not coming. Unseen and unheard on the other end of the line, Nellie is evidently protesting. Then, Lucy comes over and tugs at Bark’s coat and begins to say, ‘Bark . . . maybe we should . . .’. ‘Excuse me, young lady, this is private,’ Bark gently shoos her out of the phone cabin and closes the door on her. He now moves right up to the receiver, cupping his hand over it. We, like Lucy, are no longer permitted to hear what he says. A cut to Nellie conveys her mute shock at what we surmise are even blunter words. Bark leaves the cabin, assuring Lucy, ‘She took it very nice.’ Loosely diegetic music (they will approach the ballroom shortly, so it may emanate from there) builds to consummate our enjoyment as spectators of this small triumph of Bark’s.

The mostly one-sided filming of the phone conversation echoes other private conversations conducted in public earlier in the film, where the intimacy of the exchange is made more poignant by the pressures of an audience: first, there is Lucy’s phone call from Bark, which she takes in the middle of her daughter-in-law’s (Fay Bainter) bridge night – the guests, previously irritated by the mother’s intrusions, are clearly touched by what they hear; second, the letter from Lucy that Bark’s friend Max (Maurice Moscovitch) reads to Bark until he becomes too choked – ‘maybe you’d better wait until you have your glasses fixed,’ Max concludes. The loss of their privacy (Bark has been sleeping on a couch, Lucy sharing a room with a teenage granddaughter) has been an issue throughout the film and, thanks to the phone call, Bark has temporarily won for them a space in which they can be lovers again, not merely parents. Shortly, direct address will play a role in developing this private–public dynamic in a most striking way.
Bark and Lucy decide to stay at the hotel for dinner. The more than hospitable hotel manager (Paul Stanton), having heard about the couple’s return fifty years after their honeymoon there, joins them for a drink. After he has left, the film cuts to a position behind them (incidentally breaking the 180-degree rule). The couple are framed symmetrically against the dance floor and stage, halfway between facing forwards towards the dance floor and facing each other. Their facial expressions are only available in profile when they turn their heads to look at one another. Dialogue, tone of voice and gestures are enormously expressive, however, and combine to create a touching moment when Bark speaks more affectionately to Lucy than at any other point of the film – the eloquence of performance is evident, for example, when Lucy self-consciously tugs at her high collar (a garment she presumably wears for its modesty) when Bark says to her, ‘You’ve held your looks better than anyone I know.’ Lucy is touched and moves to look at Bark more insistently than before. The couple lean in to each other very steadily. Just as their lips are about to meet for what would be their first on-screen kiss, Lucy suddenly stops with a start, recoils slightly from Bart, then looks towards the camera, realising they are being watched. Her eyes, first wide in startlement, narrow as if in rebuke of those watching, before she looks down and away, her face breaking into a bashful smile – all this occurs at a pace and with a fluidity a prose description could never match (see Figure 3.4).

Her sense of being watched is partly diegetic; there are people placed on tables behind and above the couple in the direction of and beyond the camera, and Lucy’s gaze may take in these off-screen figures (precise eye-line is difficult to discern at this range – certainly in pre-HD filmmaking – and moving frame by frame through the sequence distorts rather than clarifies the gesture). However, this is a moment of direct address. Not only does Beulah Bondi make eye contact with the camera, but also the whole set-up of the shot (an approximately 135-degree cut across the axis of action so that we peer over shoulders rather than being faced by these figures head-on) makes us aware of our own position as watchers. Lucy’s look is then experienced as one at us. It is an arresting gesture by the film; it arrests us from the normal comfort of watching these characters – any characters in the film – being together. Its force is derived partly from the duration of the shot and the duration of the shots around it. McCarey’s generally unobtrusive visual style is marked by the length of his takes, often ‘invisible editing’ and spare use of close-ups; long- and two-shots predominate and give primacy to the interaction of his characters. Though the take containing Lucy’s direct address is by no means the longest in the sequence (a number of preceding shots last well over a minute), because its content is, in various ways, ‘private’, its fifty seconds start to feel like an intrusion. It is imbued with a weight one might describe as ‘to-be-watched-ness’ (this is a part-neologism I shall discuss below).
length of the take is absolutely crucial to the effect McCarey derives from the
performances he elicits. Yet, before this shot, Lucy and Bark have been com-
fortable in our company and the long-takes brought their emotions close to us
as film spectators. However, in having them turned away from us and then,
finally and most boldly, in having them actually notice us, the film brings to
fruition a whole trajectory whereby this scene in this hotel is the one where,
finally and temporarily, the couple have won out a private space away from
the interference of their children and away from prying eyes . . . even, at least
metaphorically, ours. This is extraordinarily skilled filmmaking but extraordi-
nary in a way entirely consistent with stylistic systems of the ‘ordinary’ studio
filmmaking often called ‘classical’. It is a bold rupture of the film’s established
style of playing but utterly consistent with its dramatic preoccupations. This
paradoxical position – a wholly consistent stylistic rupture – might well be
paradigmatic of the practice of direct address valued most highly in this book.

As a final note, we should acknowledge that it is well established that film
narration can limit our access to the actions and / or speech of characters
through choices in editing and / or sound design – the decision to shut us out
of the phone booth when Bark gives Nellie a piece of his mind is an example.

3.4 *Make Way for Tomorrow* (Paramount Pictures, 1937): Lucy (Beulah Bondi) senses our
prying eyes.
Such devices are regularly acknowledged by film critics or theorists and one might call the choice to make Bark’s final words to Nellie inaudible an ‘editorial’ move. Also, the language available from work on cinematic point of view can help us consider how, in Bark’s shutting the door on Lucy and in the film’s suppression of what Bark says, we are made, for the moment, to share key aspects of Lucy’s experience. Moreover, Bark’s loving ‘Excuse me, young lady, this is private’ is lent force by the film narration, and one can talk easily of a synthesis between the editorial moves of the narration and the meanings of the drama. Much more could be said of that moment, of course, but my point is simply to underline that, as viewers and scholars of film, we can easily and regularly do acknowledge how film narration might dramatise the ‘privacy’ of a moment, action or exchange through various moves. However, to my knowledge, films scholars have never acknowledged the possibility that such narrational rhetoric might also include direct address. In the example analysed above, our ‘presence’ as spectators and the camera’s attention on the characters (normally a given) suddenly become active in the dramatisation of the narrative, and a part of our conscious experience of the film. Burlesque Suicide from 1902 (discussed briefly in the Introduction) might be crude in comparison but it shows that such possibilities were alive from cinema’s beginnings. They persist still.

**MUSICAL DIRECT ADDRESS**

The analysis of musicals will be more condensed than the analysis of comedic films because, first, following Deborah Thomas’s schema, the classic musical tradition of Hollywood can be identified as a sub-division of the comedic mode (some other national cinemas have had a greater emphasis on musical melodrama but that is beyond the purview here); second, I would suggest that much of what can be said of the ‘documentary’ aspect of comedies can also be applied to musicals; and, third, I have found actual direct address to be less frequent in musicals than I had assumed before undertaking this research. The latter discovery was surprising chiefly because direct address has been relatively more readily acknowledged in scholarship on musicals than in work on other genres. For example, Jim Collins touches upon direct address in his essay on the textual mechanisms of musicals (1981: 134–46); Jane Feuer devotes a short section to direct address in her canonical The Hollywood Musical (1993: 35–42); and, though these are only asides, the musical is the genre that Tom Gunning has most often cited as continuing the ‘direct’ impulses of the cinema of attractions (Gunning 1990: 57; 1999: 826). I shall begin by discussing the scholarship before moving to suggest the ways in which direct address in musicals does play some specific roles.