

STANLEY CAVELL

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Stanley Cavell is the only major American philosopher who has made the subject of film a central part of his work. Film has figured centrally in four of his books and in numerous essays and occasional pieces. He has also reflected, philosophically, on other artistic media, such as theater, television, and opera, which bear an intimate relationship to film. To many philosophers, however, the relation of Cavell's writings on film to his explicitly philosophical writings remains perplexing. And within the field of film study, the potential usefulness of Cavell's writings – the potential usefulness of philosophy as he understands and practices it – remains generally unrecognized.

Cavell's philosophical perspective diverges in virtually every respect from the succession of theoretical positions that have gained most prominence in the field. Within academic film study, for example, it remains an all but unquestioned doctrine that "classical" movies systematically subordinate women, and, more generally, that movies are pernicious ideological representations to be decoded and resisted, not treated as works of art capable of instructing us as to how to view them. Film students are generally taught that in order to learn to think seriously about film, they must break their attachments to the films they love. Cavell's writings on film, by contrast, bespeak

a sense of gratitude for the existence of the great and still-enigmatic art of film, whose history is punctuated as that of no other, by works, small and large, that have commanded the devotion of audiences of all classes, of virtually all ages, and of all spaces around the world in which a projector has been mounted and a screen set up. (Cavell 2005: 281)

It remains another largely unquestioned doctrine of academic film study that the stars projected on the movie screen are "personas," discursive ideological constructs, not real people; that the world projected on the screen is itself an ideological construct, not real; and, indeed, that the so-called real world is such a construct, too. By providing convincing alternatives to such skeptical positions, Cavell's writings on film are capable of helping academic film study free itself to explore regions that have remained closed to it – capable of inspiring the field to think in exciting new ways about film and its history.

What follows is a summary of the arguments of Cavell's best-known writings on film, *The World Viewed* (WV, 1979), *Pursuits of Happiness* (PH, 1981), and *Contesting Tears* (CT, 1996).

The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film

The World Viewed incorporates reflections on film's origins, its historical development, its characteristic genres, the myths and human types around which those genres revolve; the medium's ability until recently to employ unselfconsciously traditional techniques that tap naturally into the medium's powers, and diverse other matters. Although it largely goes without saying, philosophy is central to Cavell's first book about film. In his view, it isn't possible to think seriously about film apart from philosophy. And philosophy cannot avoid film as a subject.

The World Viewed explores the ontological difference between film and painting by addressing the perplexing relationship between a photograph and the thing(s) and/or person(s) in that photograph. Photographs allow persons and things to reveal themselves. Yet it is misleading to suggest, as André Bazin did in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" (Bazin 1967: 30), that photographs satisfy painting's obsession with realism. First, because painting was obsessed with reality, not realism. So far as photography satisfied a wish, it satisfied the human wish – intensifying in the West since the Reformation – to escape the metaphysical isolation to which our subjectivity condemns us. "Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art," Cavell writes (Cavell 1979: 22). Second, because photographs are not more realistic than paintings. Realistic as opposed to what? The world projected on the screen is real. Yet it does not exist (now). The world on film is a moving image of skepticism, as Cavell puts it, but the possibility of skepticism is internal to the conditions of human knowledge. That we don't know reality with certainty is a fact about what human knowledge is. It doesn't follow that we cannot know the world, or ourselves in it.

One of the book's guiding intuitions is that Hollywood westerns, musicals, romantic comedies, and melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s, no less than European masterpieces like *L'Atalante* (1934) or *Grand Illusion* (1937), are about the human need for society and the equal need to escape it, about privacy and unknownness, about the search for community. But a number of intuitions crucial to his later work hadn't yet occurred to Cavell. For example, that the combination of popularity and seriousness of "classical" American movies was a function of their inheritance of Emerson's and Thoreau's concerns, and his own, for human relationship. Those intuitions await the publication in 1979 of his first essay on Emerson, his reading of *The Lady Eve* (1941), and the monumental *The Claim of Reason*.

Pursuits of Happiness

In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *Double Indemnity* (1944), Cavell remarks in *The World Viewed*,

the lovers die because they have killed, but also [because] they transgress the deeper law against combining sex and marriage. In a thousand other instances the marriage must not be seen, and the walk into the sunset is into a dying star: they live happily ever after – as long as they keep walking. (WV: 48)

Tellingly, Cavell invokes Thoreau's image, in the punning last sentence of *Walden*, of "the sun as but a morning" – and *mourning* – "star" (Thoreau 2002: 436, quoted in Cavell 1988: 54). For Thoreau, the morning of mourning, the dawning of grieving, is the alternative to what he calls "our present constitution," which must change (Cavell 1988: 54). Movies that end with a man and woman abandoned to a sexless marriage do not make explicit the necessity of transforming ourselves that Thoreau insists on. Cavell's invocation of movie couples walking into the sunset provides the penultimate image of a paragraph that singles out *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *The Awful Truth* (1937) as films in which "the marriage is established from the beginning and is worth having at the end" (WV: 49). All of *Pursuits of Happiness* can be glimpsed in *The World Viewed's* linking of *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Awful Truth* to the culminating image of *Walden*. These are two of the seven films *Pursuits of Happiness* identifies as definitive "comedies of remarriage" (the others: *It Happened One Night* [1934], *Bringing Up Baby* [1938], *His Girl Friday* [1940], *The Lady Eve* and *Adam's Rib* [1949]). Remarriage comedies recount a story or myth about a woman and man who arrive at happiness not by overcoming societal obstacles to their love, as in classical comedy, but by facing divorce and coming back together.

Cavell understands the women of these films, played by the likes of Katharine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert, Irene Dunne, and Barbara Stanwyck, to be on a spiritual quest, like Emerson in his journals or the author in Thoreau's *Walden*. A non-American source Cavell cites is Nora in *A Doll's House*, who leaves her husband in search of an education he says she needs but she knows he can't provide. Unlike Nora, the woman in a remarriage comedy is lucky that her once and future husband is a man like Cary Grant or Spencer Tracy with the capacity to embrace her creation as a new woman, and lucky to have a father who, unlike the woman's father in classical comedy, wishes to award her to a man to whom she might freely award herself.

Such remarriage comedies, Cavell claims, exemplify a stage in the development of the consciousness of women at which the issue is mutual acknowledgment of the equality of women and men. The films' criteria for a marriage worth having – mutual trust and desire, as reflected in their conversation – have nothing to do with perpetuating patriarchal power. Neither church, nor state, nor society's need for children validates the marriage that the genre envisions, which also "marries" the realities of the day and the dreams of the night, the public and the private, and city and country. This last point is registered in the genre's insistence that the lovers at a certain moment find themselves in a location conducive to a new perspective. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye influentially called this the Green World (Frye 2002: 85). Remarriage comedies usually call it Connecticut. "Connecticut" here means a perspective that discovers happiness here and now by living day and night in a spirit of adventure.

Each chapter presents what Cavell calls a reading of one comedy of remarriage.

The reading is guided by the claim that the film is an instance of a genre that inherits the preoccupations of late Shakespeare romance (*The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*). *Pursuits of Happiness* develops its understanding of genre when it asserts that instances of a genre do not share a set of features that can be completely specified. We may say they share *every* feature, so long as we remember, first, that what counts as a feature is not determinable apart from critical analysis; second, that a member of the genre may account for a feature's apparent absence by articulating a compensating circumstance (e.g., *It Happened One Night* compensates for lacking a Green World by the role played by the couple's being on the road). Cavell prefers to think of a genre's members as versions of a story or myth, or as sharing "certain conditions, procedures, and subjects and goals of composition." Each member *studies* those conditions, revises the ways other members have interpreted them, and earns membership in the genre by bearing the *responsibility* of its inheritance (PH: 28).

What a genre of film is, *Pursuits of Happiness* claims, is a matter internal to what remarriage comedies are, to what film is. What a reading of a film is, too, is such a matter. These last two facts bring home two further facts. First, although *Pursuits of Happiness* rarely refers to *The World Viewed*, it takes its reflections on film's ontology as its starting point. Second, *Pursuits of Happiness*, like *The World Viewed*, has a self-reflective dimension. What these readings enable us to know about film cannot be separated from what they enable us to know about *writing* about film. Not coincidentally, remarriage comedies, as they emerge in these readings, possess a self-reflective dimension, too.

In *The World Viewed*, Cavell argues that on film it is the human condition to be embodied, hence that film's emphasis on the bodies of women reveals that the medium singles women out as exemplars of the human. *Pursuits of Happiness* further develops this idea by insisting that each comedy has a way of "harping on the identity of the real woman cast in [the film], and each by way of some doubling or splitting of her projected presence" (PH: 64). This doubling or splitting is at once an emphasis on the *character's* identity and "an emphasis taken by the cinematic medium on the physical presence, that is, the photographic presence, of the real actress playing this part" (PH: 140). And each comedy also finds a way to declare its attention to the woman's projected presence as itself split or doubled. Thus the passage in *The Lady Eve* in which Jean first lays eyes on Hopsy virtually identifies the images on the screen with the images she sees in a mirror. "One plausible understanding of our view as Jean holds her hand mirror up to nature – or to society . . . is that we are looking through the viewfinder of a camera" (PH: 66), Cavell writes. *The Lady Eve* presents the man as a stand-in for the viewer, the woman a stand-in for the director, and "as this surrogate she informs us openly that the attitude of the film begins with is one of cynicism or skepticism." By the end, this skeptical woman/artist becomes a member of this man's species, "the sucker sapiens, the wise fool; she has found what Katharine Hepburn at the end of *The Philadelphia Story* calls a human being; she has created herself, turned herself, not without some help, into a woman" (PH: 69).

The Lady Eve thus emerges as a story about a woman's overcoming or transcending skepticism. This helps us appreciate Cavell's observation in *Contesting*

Tears that looking back he sometimes sees “*Pursuits of Happiness* as an expression of the relief in completing the study of skepticism and tragedy in *The Claim of Reason*” (Cavell 1996: 11–12). *The Claim of Reason*’s culminating reading of *Othello* fleshes out Cavell’s discovery of the affinity between Cartesian skepticism and Shakespearean tragedy – as if what philosophy interprets as skepticism is what Elizabethan theater interprets as tragedy. Shakespeare’s late romances discover a way of overcoming or transcending skepticism and thereby avoiding a tragic fate whose possibility is inherent in the condition of being human. In inheriting Shakespeare’s concerns, but also transforming them (film is not theater), remarriage comedies discover their own ways – ways film makes possible – of overcoming or transcending skepticism.

Cavell writes:

It is not news for men to try, as Thoreau puts it, to walk in the direction of their dreams, to join the thoughts of day and night, of the public and the private, to pursue happiness. Nor is it news that this will require a revolution, of the social or of the individual constitution, or both. What is news is the acknowledgment that a woman might attempt this direction, even that a man and a woman might try it together ... For this we require a new creation of woman, call it a creation of the new woman ... It is a new step in the creation of the human. (PH: 140)

Comedies of remarriage declare film’s participation in this enterprise. The genre is committed to a way of thinking that affirms the possibility – and necessity – of radical change. Remarriage comedies affirm truths about the world, and about film, that Cavell too affirms, understanding himself thereby to be representative of the films’ audience. Hence the special charm of *Pursuits of Happiness* – the sense that its author is enjoying a conversation with the reader as “meet and happy” as the conversation of a marriage worth having (even as these films enjoy such a conversation with their – our – culture).

Nonetheless, as Cavell anticipated, these readings have engendered resistance. The comedies *Pursuits of Happiness* addresses are (mostly) assumed to be escapist fairy tales for the Depression. And movie genres are (mostly) assumed to be formulas. “We seem fated to distort the good films closest to us, exemplified by the seven concentrated on in this book,” he writes in a splendid passage:

Their loud-mouthed inflation by the circus advertising of Hollywood is nicely matched by their thin-lipped deflation by those who cannot imagine that products of the Hollywood studio system could in principle rival the exports of revolutionary Russia, of Germany, and of France. This view ... expresses, it feeds on, a pervasive conflict suffered by Americans about their own artistic accomplishments, a conflict I have described elsewhere as America’s overpraising and undervaluing of those of its accomplishments it does not ignore. (PH: 39)

But something beyond that conflict keeps these films inaccessible to us. Remarriage comedies are films that many bear in their experience as memorable public events, segments of the experience, the memories, of a common life. So that the difficulty of assessing them is the same as the difficulty of assessing everyday experience, the difficulty of ... making oneself find the words for what one is specifically interested to say, which comes to the difficulty of finding the right to be thus interested ... This poses ... the specific difficulty of philosophy and calls upon its particular strength, to receive inspiration for taking thought from the very conditions that oppose thought. (PH: 41–2)

Contesting Tears

“Is it true in movies that virtue is always rewarded and vice vanquished?” Cavell asks in *The World Viewed* (WV: 48). Someone who draws the morals of movies too hastily might assume that movies condemn the “woman outside” for luring men to stray. Yet such a woman is “outside” because she rejects a marriage that would deny her nature, not because she is unworthy. It is a crucial datum in pondering the morals of movies that in films it is a moral imperative to pursue happiness. What Cavell discovered, in discovering this, is film’s commitment to what in later writings, such as *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and *Cities of Words*, he calls “moral perfectionism” or “Emersonian perfectionism” (Cavell 1990 and 2004: *passim*). In *The World Viewed* it is already a central theme that there is a serious moral philosophy internal to the stories movies are forever telling. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell doesn’t use the term “perfectionism,” but that way of thinking about morality is implicit throughout.

Cavell understands perfectionism not as a *theory* of morality, but as “a dimension or tradition of the moral life” (Cavell 1990: 2). Moral perfectionism is as internal to comedies of remarriage as it is to Shakespeare’s late romances, Emerson’s and Thoreau’s writings, *A Doll’s House*, or *Pursuits of Happiness* itself. “That there is no closed list of features that constitute perfectionism follows from conceiving of perfectionism as ... embodied in a set of texts spanning the range of Western culture” (4). *A Doll’s House* is one. Nora’s “imagination of her future, in leaving, turns on her sense of her need for education whose power of transformation presents itself to her as the chance to become human. In Emerson’s terms, this is moving to claim one’s humanness ... to follow the unattained” (115).

Cavell most fully develops the theme of a woman rejecting marriage to “follow the unattained” in *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. In the melodramas the book “reads” – *Gaslight* (1944), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Stella Dallas* (1937) – the woman seeks fulfillment outside marriage. In comedies of remarriage, it is the man who claims the woman; he only needs prodding, while she undergoes a metamorphosis; and the woman’s mother is absent, her absence underscored both by her father’s role and by the fact that the woman herself is not a mother. In short, the creation of the woman is her own business, of course, but it is also the business of men, even though the creation is that

of the so-called new woman, the woman of equality – as if there were a taint of villainy inherent in maleness. “This so to speak prepares the genre for its inner relation to melodrama,” Cavell remarks in *Contesting Tears*, where he points out that *Pursuits of Happiness* predicted the discovery of a genre of melodrama adjacent to the comedy of remarriage, in which that genre’s themes are negated in a way that hinges on the threats of misunderstanding and violence that dog the happiness of the comedies (CT: 5).

It is a claim central to *Contesting Tears* that the genre therein called the melodrama of the unknown woman is derived from the remarriage comedy by the mechanism of negation. For example, in these films

the woman’s father, or another older man (it may be her husband), is not on the side of her desire but on the side of law, and her mother is always present (or her search for or loss of or competition with a mother is always present), and she is always shown as a mother (or her relation to a child is explicit) . . . [I]n the comedies the past is open, shared, a recurring topic of fun, no doubt somewhat ambiguous; but in melodramas the past is frozen, mysterious, with topics forbidden and isolating. Again, whereas in remarriage comedy the action of the narration moves . . . from a setting in a big city to conclude in a place outside the city, a place of perspective, in melodramas of unknownness the action returns to and concludes in a place from which it began or in which it has climaxed, a place of abandonment or transcendence. (CT: 5–6)

The World Viewed claims that the most significant films are those that most meaningfully reveal the medium of film. *Pursuits of Happiness* develops this claim by arguing that comedies of remarriage reveal film’s power of transfiguration, as expressed in the woman’s suffering creation, where this refers both to the character’s metamorphosis and to the transformation of the flesh-and-blood actress into projections of herself. *Contesting Tears* develops it further by reflecting on the fact that melodramas of the unknown woman register the woman’s transformation less by revealing her body than by tracing its changes of costume and circumstance. Whatever role such a woman chooses to play at a given moment, she declares that in this role she is, and is not, herself, that her identity is not fixed. And she declares this with that “flair for theater, that theater of flair, exaggeration it may be thought, call it melodrama” that these films require of their leading women. Their star quality resides not in their beauty but their flair for declaring their distinctness, their freedom, their human *existence* (CT: 128). These women emblemize Cavell’s intuition that “every single description of the self that is true is false, is, in a word, or a name, ironic” (CT: 134). So “one may take the subject of the genre . . . as the irony of human identity as such” (CT: 134–5).

Cavell describes both remarriage comedies and melodramas of unknownness as “working out the problematic of self-reliance and conformity as established in the founding American thinking of Emerson and of Thoreau” (CT: 9). An earlier essay linked Emerson’s idea of self-reliance with the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes’

answer to philosophical skepticism (Cavell 1988: 10). Emerson's work, that essay claimed, proposes a new proof of human existence. And it linked Emerson's revision of Descartes' *cogito* to melodramas like *Now, Voyager*. The melodrama of the unknown woman, *Contesting Tears* argues, is an expression of a stage in the development of the skeptical problematic at which the theatricalization of the self becomes the main proof of the self's existence. And the book develops this suggestion by linking film with psychoanalysis. While men in movies primarily appear in contexts of mutual competition and of uniform or communal efforts, as *The World Viewed* argued, individual women have given film its depth. It is as if the role of women in originating both psychoanalysis and film – in psychoanalysis, as suffering subjects and in film, as subjects of the camera – reveals that by the turn of the twentieth century, psychic reality, the existence of minds, had become believable primarily in its feminine aspect. A star like Bette Davis reveals the affinity between film's interest in the "difference of women" and that of psychoanalysis, insofar as she

taps a genius for that expressiveness ... in which Breuer and Freud, in their *Studies in Hysteria*, first encountered the reality of the unconscious, the reality of the human mind as what is unconscious to itself, and encountered first in the suffering of women; a reality whose expression they determined as essentially theatrical, a theatricality of the body as such. (CT: 105)

In remarriage comedies, the woman's happiness depends on choosing the right man to educate her. Melodramas of the unknown woman, too, press the question of the woman's interest in knowledge, but "within their mood of heavy irony, since her knowledge becomes the object – as prize or as victim – of the man's fantasy, who seeks to share its secrets (*Now, Voyager*), to be ratified by it (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*), to escape it (*Stella Dallas*), or to destroy it (*Gaslight*), where each objective is (generically) reflected in the others" (CT: 13–4). In remarriage comedies, the "war between the sexes" is a struggle for mutual recognition. In melodramas of the unknown woman, the man struggles *against* recognizing the woman. The woman's struggle, as Cavell puts it, "is to understand why recognition by the man has not happened or has been denied or has become irrelevant, hence may be thought of as a struggle or argument (with herself) over her gender" (CT: 30). In each melodrama, the woman, unrecognized, isolated, is torn not simply over the conflicting desires or demands between being a mother and being a woman, say, but over questions

as to what a mother does and what a woman is, what a mother has to teach, what a woman has to learn, whether her talent is for work or rather for the appreciation of work, whether romance is agreeable or marriage is refusable, how far idiosyncrasy is manageable. (CT: 198)

The ratifying of Stella's reliance on her own judgment – of her "taking on the thinking of her own existence, the announcing of her *cogito ergo sum* – happens without her yet knowing who this thinker is who is proving her existence (as in

Descartes' presenting of the *cogito*, it happens without his yet knowing who he is) (CT: 219). This woman's "walk toward us, as if the screen becomes her gaze, is allegorized as the presenting or creating of a star." As an interpretation of stardom, it "is the negation, in advance so to speak, of a theory of the star as fetish. This star, call her Barbara Stanwyck, is without obvious beauty or glamour . . . But she has a future." Not only do we now know that this woman was to become the star of *The Lady Eve*, "she is presented *here* as a star (the camera showing her that particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction), which entails the promise of return, of unpredictable incarnation" (two features of stardom *The World Viewed* singles out).

"The Emersonianism of the films I have written about as genres," Cavell writes,

depict human beings as on a kind of journey . . . from what he means by conformity to what he means by self-reliance; which comes to saying (so I have claimed) a journey, or path, or step, from haunting the world to existing in it; which may be expressed as the asserting of one's *cogito ergo sum* . . . call it the power to think for oneself, to judge the world, to acquire – as Nora puts it at the end of *A Doll's House* – one's own experience of the world. (CT: 220)

For Cavell, acceptance of the woman's transfiguration in *Stella Dallas* provides "a certain verification of this philosophy, hence, of philosophy as such." *Contesting Tears* can be seen as part of his effort "to preserve that philosophy, or rather to show that it is preserved, is in existence, in effect, in works of lasting public power – world-famous, world-favored films – while the Emerson text itself, so to speak, is repressed in the public it helped to found" (CT: 220). Yet for all their popularity these films, too, are repressed in that public. Their thinking (mainly) remains unhonored and unsung (if hardly unwept):

I assume that movies have played a role in American culture different from their role in other cultures, and more particularly that this difference is a function of the absence in America of the European edifice of philosophy. And since I assume further that American culture has been no less ambitious, craved no less to think about itself, than the most ambitious European culture, I assume further still that . . . American film at its best participates in this Western cultural ambition of self-thought or self-invention that presents itself in the absence of the Western edifice of philosophy, so that on these shores film has the following peculiar economy: it has the space, and the cultural pressure, to satisfy the craving for thought, the ambition of a talented culture to examine itself publicly; but its public lacks the means to grasp this thought as such for the very reason that it naturally or historically lacks that edifice of philosophy within which to grasp it. (CT: 72)

The difficulty of grasping the thought of a remarriage comedy or unknown woman melodrama is the same as the difficulty of assessing everyday experience. Again, this difficulty calls for philosophy's capacity to receive inspiration for taking thought from

the conditions that oppose thought. “Nothing much to me would be worth trying to understand” about a melodrama like *Now, Voyager*, Cavell writes,

unless one cares for it, cares to find words for it that seem to capture its power of feeling and intelligence, in such a way as to understand why we who have caused it (for whom it was made) have also rejected it, why we wish it both into and out of existence. (CT: 117–8)

Cavell observes that despite most critics’ condescension, *Stella Dallas*, *Gaslight*, *Now, Voyager*, and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* are worthy companions of the remarriage comedies. “They are of course less ingratiating,” he adds. Indeed, they “are so often the reverse of ingratiating that it becomes painful to go on studying them. A compensating profit of instruction must be high for the experience to be justified” (CT: 7). The readings in *Contesting Tears* are worthy companions of those in *Pursuits of Happiness*, too, although they are less ingratiating, are indeed at times painful to study. In each melodrama, the woman suffers an isolation so extreme “as to portray and partake of madness,” as Cavell puts it, “a state of utter incommunicability, as before the possession of speech” (CT: 16). The extremity of her isolation gives a woman like Stella a capacity to judge the world. But isolation so extreme is painful to think about. Less painful is to deny her power of judgment and fixate on the idea that she is oblivious of her own inadequacy. Not shrinking from the pain of thinking about Stella’s thinking, Cavell’s writing seeks to undo that fixation, to understand what is of value in such a woman, such a film. What, then, is the “compensating profit of instruction” in the understanding, the pain, exchanged in the writing, and reading, of *Contesting Tears*?

Cavell writes about these melodramas “as though the woman’s demand for a voice, for a language, for attention to, and the power to enforce attention to, her own subjectivity, say to her difference of existence, is expressible as a response to an Emersonian demand for thinking” (CT: 220). What authorizes this supposition is his interpretation of Emerson’s authorship as

responding to his sense of the right to such a demand as already voiced on the feminine side, requiring a sense of thinking as reception . . . and as a bearing of pain, which the masculine in philosophy would avoid. To overcome this avoidance is essential to Emerson’s hopes for bringing an American difference to philosophy. (CT: 221)

Overcoming this avoidance, bearing the pain, is no less essential to Cavell’s hopes to inherit philosophy, as received and founded in America by Emerson’s (and Thoreau’s) writings – essential to his hopes to preserve that philosophy, or rather to show that it is preserved, that it does exist.

Cavell ends the body of his reading of *Stella Dallas* by posing three questions. Does Emerson’s idea of the feminine philosophical demand serve to prefigure the “difference of women” that film lives on? Does it articulate or blur the difference between the

denial to women of political expression and a man's melancholy sense of his own inexpressiveness? And is the relation of the Emersonian and the feminine demands for language of one's own a topic for a serious conversation between women and men? "It is . . . the logic of human intimacy, or separateness," Cavell writes, "that to exchange understanding with another is to share pain with that other, and that to take pleasure from another is to extend that pleasure. And what reason is there to enter this logic in a particular case?" (CT: 221). "No reason," Cavell concludes (with an echo of Wittgenstein's "Explanations come to an end somewhere").

In the words of *Contesting Tears*, *Pursuits of Happiness*, and *The World Viewed*, perhaps, the extremity of Stanley Cavell's own isolation can be glimpsed. But so can the way philosophy overcomes or transcends that isolation, finds its way to locate its author within the world, enables him to perform his own *cogito ergo sum*.

Contesting Tears does not shrink from the pain of thinking about the films it studies, but in most of his writings on film Cavell generously shares pleasures movies have given him, as well as pleasures philosophy alone is capable of providing (Are they the same pleasures?). Another way to put this is to say that there is poetry to Cavell's writing. In his writings on film, as in the films that move him to write this way about them, art and philosophy cannot be separated. "Unlike the prose of comic theatrical dialogue after Shakespeare," Cavell writes,

film has a natural equivalent for the medium of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry. I think of it as the poetry of film itself, what it is that happens to figures and objects and places as they are variously molded and displaced by a motion-picture camera and then projected and screened. Every art, every worthwhile human enterprise, has its poetry, ways of doing things that perfect the possibilities of the enterprise itself, make it the one it is . . . You may think of it as the unteachable point in any worthwhile enterprise. I understand it to be, let me say, a natural vision of film that every motion and station, in particular every human posture and gesture, however glancing, has its poetry, or you may say its lucidity . . . Any of the arts will be drawn to this knowledge, this perception of the poetry of the ordinary, but film, I would like to say, democratizes the knowledge, hence at once blesses and curses us with it. It says that the perception of poetry is as open to all, regardless as it were of birth or talent, as the ability is to hold a camera on a subject, so that a failure so to perceive, to persist in missing the subject, which may amount to missing the evanescence of the subject, is ascribable only to ourselves . . . as if to . . . fail to trace the implications of things . . . requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves. (Cavell 1984: 12)

The study of film cannot be a worthwhile human enterprise, in Cavell's view, when it isolates itself from the kind of criticism Walter Benjamin had in mind when he argued, as Cavell paraphrases him, that "what establishes a work as art is its ability to inspire and sustain criticism of a certain sort, criticism that seeks to articulate the work's idea; what cannot be so criticized is not art" (Cavell 2005: 283).

Marrying film and philosophy, Cavell's writings do not miss the poetry of either subject, and thinking about film emerges as a worthwhile human enterprise, indeed. In these writings, the study of film achieves its own poetry, its own "ways of doing things that perfect the possibilities of the enterprise itself, make it the one it is." That is the "unteachable point" of Cavell's writings on film, the lesson they above all aspire to teach.

See also Ethics (Chapter 10), Gender (Chapter 13), Genre (Chapter 14), and Walter Benjamin (Chapter 28).

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