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Response to Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*

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Abstract

Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology Film* (1971) is patient with the ways in which common sense is threatened by our experience of film. The book offers a perspective rather than an overview, foregrounding its own conditions – working mostly from the memory of films, for instance, and seeking to focus Cavell's sense of a discontinuity in his movie-going experience. Questions of cinematic ontology, held at an experiential level, join a broad philosophical-historical narrative concerning our lack of presentness to the world. Both of these strands develop preoccupations and discoveries found in Cavell's reception of ordinary language philosophy. Disclosing the contours of the cinematic through juxtapositions with other media, in ways evoking both medium specific and post-medium concerns, Cavell's study of film further establishes the reach of his key term, 'acknowledgment'.

Keywords

Film-philosophy

Modernism

Post-medium

Stanley Cavell

The World Viewed

'We seem to understand this, but do we understand it? (Cavell 1979: 38). Cavell's question concerns cinematic origins. It responds to Erwin Panofsky's claim that technology preceded the idea or wish for cinema rather than *vice versa*. I isolate Cavell's response because it also captures a guiding spirit of *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971). The book is patient with the ways in which 'common sense is, and ought to be, threatened and questioned by the experience of film' (212). Cavell's meditation on the nature and experience of film holds that we 'are too used to what

happens to us' (119). The emphasis is upon mystery over mechanism, as if movies might awaken us from our pre-ontological slumbers.

Without abandoning the tasks of continuity and connection, *The World Viewed* responds to a series of discontinuities and disconnections. The book's starting point is an obscure broken connection: the loss of Cavell's 'natural relation to movies' (xx). Cavell works through his sense that 'movies, unless they are masterpieces, are not there as they were' (10) during his quarter century of habitual movie going from 1935 to 1960. This working through involves an account of the nature of the connection formerly provided by movies and an account of its loss.

Taking film seriously as an art form, Cavell suggests, obliges us to consider its delayed exposure to modernism. During a period when the (other) arts entered a condition of modernism, how did film evade modernist self-questioning? How did films seem of general importance at a time when the other arts became esoteric? How were they able to remain absorbed in their conventions, able to win conviction without torment? This sense of film as having remained innocent of modernist difficulty is meant in part to unsettle a prevalent, unexamined sense of film as representing *the* modern art, as if 'a new and improved version of art' (15). Against this, Cavell contends that film might rather have been regarded as 'the one live traditional art', since able to 'take its tradition for granted' (15). Although *The World Viewed* finds the perplexities of modernism to have caught up with films by the 1960s, it remains intrigued by their former continuities.

A singularity of *The World Viewed* – part of its own work of continuity – is that it undertakes to study films 'mostly through remembering them, like dreams.' (12) This approach captures and investigates our involvement in movies, or rather the way that we 'involve the movies in us' such that 'they become further fragments of what happens to me' (154). Still, why not view the films again, pay attention to their scripts, their histories, to frame counts and the like? Such documentation would be ambiguous and premature, Cavell suggests, because his 'business is to think out the causes of my consciousness of films as it stands' (12). As Cavell contends in an earlier essay, 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', the 'problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not overcome it in agreement; but to master it in exemplary ways' (Cavell 1976: 94). This philosophical premise suits the relative newness of the academic study of film. Cavell somewhat welcomes the difficulty of

discussing movies in the absence of settled textual and critical canons, since this serves to foreground ‘experience and a wish to communicate it’ (Cavell 1979: xx).

By working from the consciousness of film, the book aspires to a ‘humane criticism’, a criticism resisting technical and theoretical accounts to the extent that these represent avoidance or flight from the experience of specific films or film as such (12). The wording of experience undertaken by *The World Viewed* offers not so much an overview of film as a perspective. Given that the achievement of continuity is an organising concern of Cavell’s work, it should perhaps feel less of a surprise than it does to find so many of his signature themes and approaches underway in *The World Viewed*. His book on film followed a first collection of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), pursuing questions in aesthetics and the philosophy of mind. A parallel can be made between the account of ordinary language philosophy in the book’s title essay and Cavell’s approach to film. The philosophical appeal to ordinary language should not be understood in doggedly empirical terms, as therefore requiring a compilation of instances of linguistic usage, but rather in transcendental terms, since requiring an act of representative self-consultation, sounding the self’s alignment to self and world in language. The need is less for further information than for another way of seeing or acknowledging something already known.

The wording of experience is a key preoccupation of Cavell’s philosophy, responsive to our tendency to take flight from our experience – an impulse understood as internal to experience itself. Ordinary language philosophy is fruitful for Cavell because, rather than dismissing philosophical worries as incoherent, stemming from misapplications of ordinary terms, it finds words and contexts that will return their truths to experience. Cavell deploys the term ‘acknowledgement’ to reinterpret the truth of other mind scepticism – our separateness from one another – as a condition opening up the possibility both of the acknowledgment and avoidance of others, rather than a cognitive limitation to be overcome or denied. In *The World Viewed*, as also in Cavell’s essay on *King Lear*, ‘The Avoidance of Love’, ‘acknowledgement’ dilates into a cultural diagnosis. Modernism is seen to recall what the rest of culture has forgotten: that ‘acknowledgement is the home of knowledge’ (110).

The World Viewed finds itself in a version of the modernist situation described in its discussion of modernist art: unable to fall back upon an agreed critical discourse, forced to win conviction from the reader on its own terms – terms aspiring to disclose facts of a certain phenomenological obviousness. *Must We Mean What We Say?* suggested

that philosophy had begun to experience modernist difficulties, that ‘the writing of philosophy is *difficult* in a new way’ (Cavell 1976: xxii). *The World Viewed* reflects this in that it speaks from a condition in which ‘philosophy, and serious writing generally, no longer knows to whom to direct its voice’ (Cavell 1979: 92). If philosophy, as a result, ‘stands on darkening straits, casting unsystematic lines, in hopes of attracting some darting wish for sense’, Cavell concludes that he is ‘without the authority to excuse myself either for, or from, that position’ (93). The book voices his responses to film ‘with their privacy, their argumentativeness, even their intellectual perverseness, on their face’ (163). The difficult matter of getting started is always a productive topic for Cavell; his work aims for ‘authority without authorization’ (118) whilst combatting fantasies of absolute preparedness and finality.

The ordinary language philosopher is a modernist of sorts, a ‘linguistic phenomenologist’, disclosing our lost presentness by ‘mapping the fields of consciousness lit by the occasions of a word’ (Cavell 1976: 101). In its simultaneous disclosure and suspension of our lost connection to self, other, and world, ordinary language philosophy is consonant with the ambition of modernist art and its quest for ‘presentness’. Wittgenstein, as Cavell puts it in *The World Viewed*, ‘investigates the world (“the possibilities of phenomena”) by investigating what we say, what we are inclined to say, what our pictures of phenomena are, in order to wrest the world from our possessions so that we may possess it again’ (Cavell 1979: 22).

Although Cavell suggests that his use of the term ‘modernist’ is not original, we should keep in mind his ‘obsession with wanting to put everything my own way’ (xxv). Informed by the art criticism of Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg, Cavell’s modernism understands practitioners as forced by the absence of workable conventions into discovering ‘unheard-of structures’ (72) that will fulfil traditional aspirations. (In its fervour, *The World Viewed* itself stands at a half-distance from disciplinary norms of philosophical argumentation, but joins the philosophical tradition in its questioning of matters that we seem to understand.) The book describes modernism as ‘an effort, along blocked paths and hysterical turnings, to hang on to a thread that leads from a lost center to a world lost’ (110). It might be felt, of course, that by 1971 modernism itself had become something of a lost world, a loss only confirmed by academic canonization. Against this sense of belatedness, Cavell presents modernism as still awaiting a home ‘within a believable critique of culture, call it a critique of historical judgment, which is

able to schematize the emergence and the features of a stage of culture that calls for such a concept of modernism at all' (218).

Such a critique would allow modernism to shed 'what is then unnecessary in its dogmatism' (218). In its absence, the arguments of *The World Viewed* take place in the 'meantime', where they join the rest of Cavell's work. (In an important sense his philosophy aspires less to argumentation and more to a certain kind of critical description aiming at the 'desophisticated' (202).) The book's various dogmatisms resist the resistance to or waning of modernism, finding modernist seriousness to be less sanctimonious than the modern 'boast of pleasure' (121). Cavell cannot share (or much bear) the feeling that classic Hollywood's world-disclosing conventions elicit 'camp' rather than conviction (6). A blank culture of exhibition and 'do-it-yourself nihilism' is countered with a hope for belief that will underwrite genuine acceptance and rejection (143).

Modernism becomes as much a matter of tradition and responsibility as iconoclasm, rediscovering the 'archaic'-sounding demand that artists should take a position:

an artist, because a human being, does have a position and does have his reasons for calling his events to our attention. What entitles him to our attention is precisely his responsibility to this condition. It used to be that apprenticeship and mastery in a discipline could take care of individual responsibility. But when an art demands that its disciple call its existence into question and then affirm it, his responsibility is also in question. (Cavell 1979: 98)

'Acknowledgement' offers a way of understanding modernist self-questioning that resists its conflation with self-reference. Whereas the latter implies involution and replaces candour with 'a further opportunity for the exhibiting of self', acknowledgment always involves 'an admission of the existence of others' (123). One of the archival properties of Cavell's text is that its cultural and textual analyses trace many of the features that would be developed by Fredric Jameson under the banner of postmodernism, but take a different path.

The World Viewed appeared a year before Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* (1972). Prefiguring the echoes of Thoreau heard in Cavell's prose, the book's epigraph is taken from *Walden*: 'Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?' The

question anticipates Cavell's insistence upon the continuity between on- and off-screen worlds: the world screened 'is literally of my world' (Cavell, 1979: 155). It also indicates a methodological premise – that ontological questions are to be answered (and, indeed, raised) through descriptive and critical attention to our experience of 'precise objects', to specifics, textual and otherwise. The spirit in which these two aspects come together is captured in Cavell's wording of the experience of film viewing: '[y]ou are given bits of the world, and you must put them together into those lives, one way or another, as you have yours' (156). A problem with anti-realist accounts of film, for Cavell, is that severing the continuity between cinematic and extra-cinematic worlds cedes the idea of film as implicated in the human responsibility for meaning (188).

Must We Mean What We Say? opens by asking questions about the nature of the 'audience' for philosophy, yielding the companion consideration that philosophy is *performed*: performed in the loosely existential sense that it involves a consultation of the self; performed in the writerly sense that the demand of the systematic in the writing of philosophy must not be unresponsive to the personal, its transience and permanence. Questions of audience are also underway in *The World Viewed*, in part because uncovering the distinct modes of audience participation characteristic of the different arts will help to pursue questions of medium specificity. Cavell's meditation upon the loss of his natural relation to movies extends to his experience of audience membership. A shift in convention, from entering and leaving a movie theatre at any point during the screening to audiences arriving and departing together, is seen to demand a commonality of response that remains unforthcoming: 'I feel as if I am present at a cult whose members have nothing in common but their presence in the same place' (11). It is easy enough to imagine this as a compelling but more or less throwaway line from a postmodern novel. With Cavell, however, the feeling is very much in earnest: 'as if the old casualness of movie-going has been replaced by a casualness of movie-viewing' (11).

The discontinuities explored by *The World Viewed*, then, situate the everyday experience of movie going within a large-scale philosophical-historical narrative ('clouds of history' (94)) concerning the unhinging of consciousness from the world. Watching a film, Cavell suggests, I am presented with a world to which I am not present. If this works to overcome my habitual distance from the (extra-cinematic) world, my 'metaphysical isolation' (21), it does so not by restoring proximity but by making that distance seem natural. Films provide a sense of connection, an assurance of the world's presence, as my 'mechanical absence' from the screen resonates with my habitual absence

from the world (130). The very ontology of film echoes a particular stage in a recognisably Heideggerian history of ontology in the sense of a history of being; it is as if film takes the matter of my lack of presentness to the world out of my hands, obscuring ‘the metaphysics of exclusions we have willed for our world’ (144).

The World Viewed finds that Hollywood’s cycles, plots and types, its ‘ways of giving significance to the possibilities of film’, are coming to an end. Cinematic conventions no longer carry conviction and come to resemble ‘conspiracies’ (131). Accordingly, ‘the screen no longer naturally holds a coherent world *from* which I am absent’ (130). At this juncture the camera must acknowledge ‘its being outside its world’ (131). If it is to be known, this acknowledgement must be responded to by the filmgoer’s acknowledgement of their own separateness from the world. This acknowledgement of separateness discloses the task of Heideggerian receptivity, letting beings show themselves of themselves rather than grasping – a difference Cavell wishes his distinction between acknowledgement and knowledge to capture. By acknowledging its own conditions, film discloses our own condition and its tasks. If film, as Cavell suggests, ‘takes our powerlessness over the world as the condition of the world’s true appearance’ (119), this need not naturalise our condemnation to viewing but might rather remind us to ‘let the world happen’ (25).

The extensive comparisons and contrasts explored in *The World Viewed* – between film, theatre, photography, modernist painting, music and the novel – elicit discoveries as to medium specificity. Cavell’s conceptual-experiential mapping of the contours of the cinematic – its ‘specific simultaneity of presence and absence’ (42) – is not intended, however, to disclose a general cinematic essence. Although the question of such an essence emerges, it is most likely ‘fruitless’ (164), because empty without the further artistic and critical work of giving (or failing to give) significance and meaning to cinematic elements. Introducing the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell took care to correct the impression that some were straightforwardly philosophical, others literary critical or applications of philosophy:

In wishing to deny that some of these essays are philosophical and others not, I do not deny that there are differences among them, and differences between philosophy and literature or between philosophy and literary criticism; I am suggesting that we do not understand these differences. (Cavell 1976: xvii)

The contrasts found in *The World Viewed* reflect a comparable sense that the differences between film and painting, or film and photography, are yet to be understood, and this understanding is seen to emerge through artistic and critical practice.

The philosophical-historical narrative informing *The World Viewed* provides a discursive continuity, whereby diverse art forms can be seen as responding to a similar issue and task. This narrative concerns art's capacity to overcome our lost presentness, focusing in particular on modernist art's attempt to restore our connection with reality through acts of meaning and presentness that model a recovery of world and others through the self's recovery of self. Cavell's discussion of modernist painting, drawing attention to the candour of its 'total thereness', finds it to have fulfilled a wish of romanticism: to achieve not the look but the conditions of nature, albeit focusing now on nature's autonomy. Modernist painting's 'declaration of my absence', Cavell writes,

and of nature's survival of me puts me in mind of origins and shows me that I am astray. It faces me, draws my limits, discovers my scale; it fronts me, with whatever wall at my back, and gives me horizon and gravity. It reasserts that, in whatever locale I find myself, I am to locate myself. (Cavell 1979: 114)

Cavell unfolds a similarly experiential moral from the ontology of film. In its screening of reality, film also screens from us the 'givenness' of reality: 'it holds reality from us, it holds reality before us, i.e. withholds reality before us' (189). This opens a space for freedom and autonomy, combining receptivity with a refusal to allow reality to dictate its significance to us; our distance from the world becomes a condition and opportunity rather than a limitation.

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