

Introduction

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WRITING ABOUT MOVIES HAS BEEN strand over strand with Stanley Cavell's philosophical life from his earliest to his latest writings. As he observes in the preface to *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Cavell's thinking about film has for four decades been bound up with his thinking "about most of whatever else I have been thinking about in what may be called philosophy or literature."¹ *Contesting Tears*, which follows *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* and *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, is his third book devoted to the subject of film—or third and a half, if we include the four essays on film (and one on television and its relation to film) in his 1984 collection of essays, *Themes Out of School: Events and Causes*. *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, whose chapters alternate between readings of movies and of classic texts of moral philosophy, makes it an even four. In addition to these books, he has also written a substantial number of other pieces on film, in a diversity of formats—some ambitious theoretical statements, others apparently slight "occasional pieces"—originally presented to a diversity of audiences, on a diversity of occasions, and published, if at all, in a diversity of journals and anthologies.

In "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting," one of the chapters in the present collection, Cavell remarks that "every collection requires an idea," and that this "seems to presage the fact that collections carry narratives with them, ones presumably telling the point of the gathering, the source and adventure of it." The idea of the present

collection is, quite simply, to gather under one cover all of Cavell's writings on film—including the material from *Themes Out of School*—other than *The World Viewed*, *Pursuits of Happiness*, *Contesting Tears*, and *Cities of Words*.

The idea of such a collection is mine, not Cavell's. He has never chosen to isolate his writings on film in this way. Nor is it my wish, in putting together this collection, to suggest that the writings it contains, or Cavell's writings on film in general, stand apart in their concerns, or in their status as philosophy, from his other writings.

In his preface to *Themes Out of School*, Cavell finds value in the fact that it is a collection of writings that address a wide range of topics. By focusing on only one topic, film, the present collection may seem to be denying that value. But that is not really the case. The pieces in this volume address "classical" Hollywood movies, such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Now, Voyager*, *North By Northwest*, and the films of Fred Astaire and the Marx Brothers; European "art" films, such as Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* and Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*; documentaries, such as Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss*; iconoclastic modernist films, such as Dusan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail, Mary*; post-modernist films, such as Andy Warhol's *Sleep* and *Empire*; and popular movies as current, or nearly current, as, among others, *The Matrix*, *American Beauty*, and *Being John Malkovich*. The writings gathered in this collection also address film's relation to other media, such as television, opera, and the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot. They address the ideas and intellectual procedures of such major thinkers as Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Austin, and, on this side of the Atlantic, Emerson and Thoreau. And they address, philosophically, such diverse concepts as medium, art, language, reading, collecting, and America, to name only a few. Taken together, these writings reflect, and illuminate, the major developments that have marked Cavell's thinking over the years. These include the emergence, as central themes, of such matters as the problematic of skepticism (which links the beginning of modern philosophy in Descartes with Shakespearean tragedy and romance); voice; the ways skepticism and voice are inflected by gender; and the outlook on morality—embraced both by Cavell and by the films he cares most about—that he calls moral perfectionism or Emersonian perfectionism.

In all the writings collected in this volume, in other words, Cavell is thinking about film, but he is also thinking about topics no less diverse and wide ranging than those addressed in the essays that comprise *Themes Out of School*, or, for that matter, in the totality of his work. Indeed, the writings collected in this volume are noteworthy not only for the range and diversity of the topics they address, but also for the range and diversity of the audiences that attended their original presentations, the range and

diversity of the institutions that have invited this American philosopher to share his thoughts on the subject of film.

And yet all of these writings are also of a piece. Every one participates, in its own way, in furthering Cavell's philosophical enterprise as a whole. It is, indeed, a defining feature of that body of work that it aspires to *be* a whole, an *oeuvre* in the fullest sense of the word, even as all his individual writings undertake to acknowledge, as he puts it in *Themes Out of School*, "the autonomy of their separate causes."²

Cavell is the only major American philosopher who has made the subject of film a central part of his work. Yet to many philosophers, 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. It has long been one of Cavell's guiding intuitions that a marriage between philosophy and film is not only possible but also necessary. To illuminate why Cavell's work aspires to such a marriage, and how it achieves it, is a central goal of *Cities of Words* and of the course of lectures, which he gave several times toward the end of his teaching career at Harvard, on which it is based. And it is the "point," the "source and adventure," of the present collection.

When Marian Keane and I published *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film*, our book promised a companion volume, a retrospective of Cavell's previously unpublished and uncollected writings on film. Such a collection, we argued, would help readers grasp the trajectory of Cavell's writing about film in the thirty years subsequent to *The World Viewed*, all of it marked by that book's initial articulation of film's philosophical importance. It would also illuminate the relation of his writings on film, as they developed in those years, to the development of his philosophical enterprise as a whole. At the same time, it would illuminate the relation of Cavell's practice of philosophy, as it developed in the same years, to the institution and development of film study as an academic field in America and throughout the world.

The potential value of Cavell's work to the serious study of film is a function of the fruitfulness of his intuitions. It is no less a function of the exemplary discipline by which his writing—word by word, sentence by sentence, page by page, essay by essay—"follows out in each case the complete tuition for a given intuition," as Cavell puts it in an Emersonian mood, so that "this prose just here, as it's passing before our eyes," is capable of achieving conviction.³ Cavell's writings on film incorporate insights about a diversity of matters pertaining to film's origins; its historical development; its characteristic forms and genres; the myths and the human types around which those genres revolve; the medium's ability, until

recently, to stave off modernism, to continue to employ without self-consciousness traditional techniques that tap naturally into the medium's powers; and so on. In addressing such matters, those writings incorporate equally insightful remarks about particular films, genres, stars, and cinematic techniques.

Although Cavell's writings on film address issues (for example: what film is; film's origins and history; film's relation to other arts, and to modernism; the conditions of film theory and criticism) fundamental to the field of film study since its inception, his perspective on such issues 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."⁴

It remains another largely unquestioned doctrine, within 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.

The academic study of film had reached a point, Marian and I felt as we were writing our book on *The World Viewed*, at which the field could no longer move forward without revisiting its own history. Looking back on that history from the philosophical perspective exemplified by *The World Viewed*, it became clear to us that at each stage of the field's development there were alternative paths that were not taken, paths of discovery that have remained unexplored. Thus, we felt, together with a reading of *The World Viewed* that undertook to introduce or reintroduce that book to the field of film study (and to introduce or reintroduce it to the field of philosophy, as well), a complete retrospective of Cavell's writings on film—

including material unknown even to most readers of his books on the subject—could help the field to achieve a new perspective on its own origins and development, hence a new understanding of the possibilities, and challenges, that remain for those who are committed to thinking seriously about film, about our experience of film.

Cavell on Film is that promised retrospective. It contains the four essays on film and the essay on television—all written between 1978 and 1983—that were reprinted in *Themes Out of School*, as well as six additional pieces from the 1980s, and sixteen written since the early 1990s. As luck would have it, however, the present volume is also something other, something much more, than the retrospective Marian and I envisioned when we began composing our book on *The World Viewed*. In the past several years, Cavell has been enjoying a period of remarkable productivity, and film has been looming more prominently than ever in his thoughts. As it turns out, more than half of this collection consists of recent writings, many of them previously unpublished. This new material includes “Nothing Goes without Saying: Reading the Marx Brothers”; “Seasons of Love: Bergman’s *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *The Winter’s Tale*”; “Something Out of the Ordinary”; “The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting”; his remarks presented at the Paris Colloquium occasioned by the publication of *The World Viewed* in French translation; “The Image of the Psychoanalyst in Film”; “Opera in (and As) Film”; “Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow”; “The Good of Film”; “Moral Reasoning: Teaching from the Core”; “Crossing Paths,” a version of a paper he presented at a colloquium on Arthur Danto’s work; and “After Half a Century,” his epilogue to a new edition of Robert Warshow’s *The Immediate Experience*.

The fact that so much of this volume is “all new,” as television networks like to put it, gives it a quite unanticipated richness and contemporaneity. That it gathers Cavell’s current thoughts as well as his thoughts from earlier periods, however, might seem to make my task all the more daunting in penning a narrative that tells the “point” of this collection. In truth, however, it makes it easier for me to introduce this volume to its potential audience, or audiences. For Cavell has already done most of the hard part in the most recent of the writings on film gathered in this collection. With that lucidity that is the wonder of so many late works by great authors, those recent writings, even as they blaze new paths, look back on his lifetime of writing on film, speak to its “point,” its “source,” its “adventure.”

In looking back in order to move forward, Cavell’s recent writings on film bear the mark of his turning to autobiography—and to autobiography’s relation to philosophy—in his recent book *A Pitch of Philosophy*. This turning was already adumbrated in *Contesting Tears*, whose final chapter, “Stella’s Taste,” begins and ends with moments of autobiography. Then

again, it is an idea that has always figured prominently in Cavell's work that in philosophy it is necessary to look back if one is to move forward. As early as the introduction to *Must We Mean What We Say?* he had argued that innovation in philosophy has traditionally gone together with a repudiation of most of the history of the subject. For a philosopher like Cavell who understands himself to be writing within a modernist situation, however, the repudiation of the past has a transformed significance, "as though containing the consciousness that history will not go away except through our perfect acknowledgment of it (in particular, our acknowledgment that it is not past), and that one's own practice and ambition can be identified only against the continuous experience of the past."⁵



In innumerable ways, the writings gathered in this volume illuminate, and are illuminated by, Cavell's books on film, and thereby help clarify the overall trajectory of his thinking. It will be helpful to recount a few of those ways.

Cavell can quite accurately say, as he does in one of the most recent pieces in the present collection (remarks he presented in Paris at a colloquium occasioned by the publication of *The World Viewed* in French translation):

The theoretical concepts put in play in *The World Viewed* have seen me . . . through two further books about film, the one on comedy and a companion volume on Hollywood melodrama . . . and a number of further essays on the subject.

And yet in those "two further books," and in *Cities of Words* as well, references to *The World Viewed* are few and far between. In *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears* it goes almost without saying, whether in their introductions or in the readings that make up the body of each book, the extent to which the theoretical concepts put in play in *The World Viewed*, indeed "see those readings through," to use Cavell's terms.

Then, too, although it is the central thrust of *The World Viewed* that it is not possible to think seriously about film apart from the perspective of self-reflection only philosophy is capable of providing, and that philosophy for its part cannot avoid the subject of film, the kinds of remarks about philosophy that are everywhere to be found in *Must We Mean What We Say?* are all but absent in Cavell's first book on film. In *The World Viewed*, it goes almost without saying the extent to which his reflections on the

ontology of film derive philosophically from the “theoretical concepts put in play” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*.

Must We Mean What We Say? is curiously submerged within *The World Viewed*, in other words, even as *The World Viewed* is curiously submerged within Cavell’s other books about film. *The World Viewed* is not comparably submerged, however, in the writings gathered in the present collection. Just as Wittgenstein’s writings from the period between the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* illuminate both books by helping readers to trace the paths between them, an essay like “What Becomes of Things on Film?” for example—written more or less simultaneously with “More of *The World Viewed*” and the foreword to the “Enlarged Edition” of *The World Viewed*—illuminates the continuities between *The World Viewed* and *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*.

In the little introduction to “What Becomes of Things on Film?” that Cavell composed for its reprinting in *Themes Out of School*, Cavell observes that this piece

played a role in my further thinking about film out of proportion to its small size. . . . A principal place these thoughts are picked up explicitly is in the *Adam’s Rib* chapter of . . . *Pursuits of Happiness*, where I read the presence of its film-within-the-film (fictionally a home movie) as a demonstration that “no event within a film (say no gesture of framing or editing) is as significant (as ‘cinematic’) as the event of film itself.”⁶

“What Becomes of Things on Film?” anticipates *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears* in other ways, as well. For one, those books take the form of readings of individual members of the genres Cavell names the “comedy of remarriage” and “the melodrama of the unknown woman,” respectively (the latter derived from the former, in his view), while “What Becomes of Things on Film?” raises the question of what “any reading of a film must do” if it is to count as a serious act of film criticism. And it anticipates those books by the twin answers it gives to this question: A reading of a film must “account for the frames of the film being what they are, in the order they are in,” and it must accurately state the film’s subject. It also anticipates *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears* by its linking of philosophical skepticism and Shakespearean Romance (which *Pursuits of Happiness* finds a crucial source of remarriage comedies, hence of the melodramas that, according to *Contesting Tears*, are derived from them). And by its discovery that such masterpieces of film as *Belle de Jour*, *Persona*, *Ugetsu*, *Vertigo*, and *It’s a Wonderful Life* share, as a common subject, “the meaning, or limits, or conditions, of female identity, hence . . . of human identity.”

At the same time, “What Becomes of Things on Film?” emphatically declares its continuity with *The World Viewed*. It does so, for example, by its suggestion that what it is about film that lends itself to such a subject as female identity or human identity is a question that demands “so solemn a topic as ‘the ontology of film.’”



When *Pursuits of Happiness* was first published, sympathetic readers were struck by Cavell’s vision of a constellation of Hollywood genres logically related to the remarriage comedy, and to each other. Yet we were at a loss to identify groups of films that constituted other comparable genres. Once the essays that were to comprise *Contesting Tears* began to appear, we had, thanks to Cavell, a second such genre to think about. Comprised of films such as *Blonde Venus*, *Stella Dallas*, *Now, Voyager*, *Gaslight*, and *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the melodrama of the unknown woman, as Cavell names the genre, is, he claims, derived from the remarriage comedy (by an operation of negation) as opposed to the operation by which members of a genre “compensate” for the apparent lack of a particular feature; for example, *It Happened One Night* appears to lack a place that functions—like Connecticut in *The Lady Eve*—as the equivalent of the “green world” in Shakespearean Romance, but it compensates for this by taking place on the road.

Even attentive readers of *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears* may find these operations perplexing, though. They may also find it a perplexing question what other genres there may be that are comparable to the two that proved so fruitful as subjects for Cavell’s readings. The chapter in the present volume called simply “*North by Northwest*,” written between *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*, finds Hitchcock’s great film to exemplify a kind of romantic thriller intimately related to the romantic comedies of remarriage, yet essentially different from them in structure. Cavell elegantly sums up the difference:

The goal of the comedies requires what I call the creation of the woman, a new creation of a new woman. This takes the form in the comedies of something like the woman’s death and revival, and it goes with the camera’s insistence on the flesh-and-blood reality of the female actor. When this happens in Hitchcock, as it did in *Vertigo*, the Hitchcock film preceding *North by Northwest*, it is shown to produce catastrophe: the woman’s falling to her death, precisely the fate *averted* in *North by Northwest*. Here, accordingly, it is the man who undergoes death and revival (at least twice, both times at the hands of the woman) *and* whose physical identity is insisted upon by

the camera. Hitchcock is thus investigating the point that the comedies of remarriage are least certain about, namely, what it is about the man that fits him to educate and hence rescue the woman, that is, to be chosen by the woman to educate her and thereby to achieve happiness for them both.⁷

By studying in considerable detail a third instance of a film genre, Cavell's reading of *North by Northwest* complements *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*, enabling readers to achieve a perspective on the remarriage comedy and the melodrama of the unknown woman that those two books, even joined by *Cities of Words*, cannot provide.



The World Viewed, *Pursuits of Happiness*, *Contesting Tears*, and *Cities of Words* all reflect on ways film is different from other artistic media (for example, still photography, painting, poetry, music). In "The Fact of Television," Cavell considers a medium whose relationship with film is especially intimate. This important essay illuminates both *The World Viewed* and *Pursuits of Happiness*, and their relation to each other, by explicitly addressing the ways television's ontological conditions differ from those of film, and by considering television's leading genres in light of those differences.

Similarly, "Opera in (and As) Film," one of the recent pieces in the present collection, illuminates the relation between film and opera. "Seasons of Love: Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *The Winter's Tale*" and "Eric Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter*," two other recent pieces, further illuminate the relation—ontological, historical—between Shakespearean theater and the Hollywood comedies and melodramas Cavell studies in *Pursuits of Happiness*, *Contesting Tears*, and *Cities of Words*. And "Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow," yet another recent piece, explores the relation between those genres of film and the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot. (In Cavell's writing, it had long been a guiding intuition that film has special affinities with opera and with Shakespearean theater. It had largely gone without saying, however, that film has comparable affinities with the nineteenth-century English novel, affinities it promises to be equally fruitful to explore. Although it is only occasionally that "Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow" explicitly raises the subject of film, film is everywhere in its thoughts.)



The World Viewed was written long before most of today's college students were born. It can leave contemporary readers quite in the dark as to what, if anything, its author might have to say about more recent films. So can Cavell's subsequent books on film, which focus on genres of "classical" Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s.

In this regard, a chapter like "On Makavejev on Bergman" (1979), which contains an extended reading of Dusan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie*, a major modernist film made more than a decade after the latest films referred to in *The World Viewed*, is instructive. Written during the period Cavell was composing the readings of remarriage comedies that were to comprise *Pursuits of Happiness*, "On Makavejev on Bergman" is illuminating, among other reasons, for affirming—at a moment when Cavell's readers might have thought he had turned his back on current films—that works such as Makavejev's, which he accepts as a "significant present in the history of the art of film," were still being made. And for reaffirming that such works constitute "a place in which the future of filmmaking, hence of significant film theory and of film studies generally, will have to work itself out."⁸

In "Prénom: Marie," his foreword to *Jean-Luc Godard's Hail Mary: Women and the Sacred in Film*, an anthology of essays edited by Maryel Locke and Charles Warren, Cavell is led by his experience of *Hail Mary*—an even more recent film whose claim to seriousness he finds himself prepared to accept—to revise his perhaps too harsh judgment of Godard in *The World Viewed*. Godard's films of the mid-1960s, Cavell had charged, criticized our culture for treating people as if they had no souls, yet that seems to be precisely how the filmmaker himself treated his subjects—and his viewers. From so compromised a position, how can an artist achieve an authentically radical critique of our culture? How is the world's dehumanizing of its inhabitants to be distinguished from Godard's depersonalizing of them? Those inclined to side with Godard's earlier Marxist politics, Cavell observes in "Prénom: Marie," are "apt to sense a falling off, or backing off," in Godard's late films. Yet Cavell thinks of *Hail Mary* "not as an evasion of politics, but as a critique of politics, of what he had once named politics." And he recognizes Godard's self-criticism, in this film, "as a continuation of a mode of criticism internal to his work from the beginning."⁹ Godard is thinking about film and about films, about their origins, the conditions of their possibility. Wasn't he always?

And in "Eric Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter*," whose ideas are further elaborated in the concluding chapter of *Cities of Words*, Cavell addresses a yet more recent film he accepts as a "significant present in the history of the art of film," taking seriously the film's invocations of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, which *Pursuits of Happiness* identifies as a source for

the Hollywood remarriage comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. If the Shakespeare play is about “an art / which does mend nature—change it rather—but / The art itself is nature” (Act IV, sc. Iv), Rohmer’s film, in Cavell’s view, is in part a meditation on the fact that Shakespeare’s words, when applied to film—“writing in light and motion”—“take on an uncanny literalness.”¹⁰

No less illuminating are the pieces that incorporate Cavell’s thoughts on recent American movies and their relation to “classical” Hollywood genres. These range from his tiny piece on *Groundhog Day* (which in sixty-two words suggests that this “small film that lives off its wits and tells a deeply wonderful story of love” poses the question—highly resonant in the context of Cavell’s work—“how, surrounded by conventions we do not exactly believe in, we sometimes find it in ourselves to enter into what Emerson thought of as a new day”)¹¹ to “The Good of Film,” one of the most recent of the essays in the present volume, and among the most ambitious. In the course of its extended meditation on film’s affinity with Emersonian perfectionism, the over-riding concern of *Cities of Words*, “The Good of Film” considers a wide range of recent movies (among them: *As Good as It Gets*, *Clueless*, *Groundhog Day*, *The Savage Heart*, *Inventing the Abbotts*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, *Everyone Says I Love You*, *Cookie’s Fortune*, *Say Anything*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, *Good Will Hunting*, *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Dogma*, *Waking the Dead*, *American Beauty*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *The Cider House Rules*). These films differ from remarriage comedies of the 1930s and 1940s in a number of ways the chapter explores (for example, the couples in the recent films tend to be, or to seem, much younger than their counterparts). How could today’s films not differ from those of the 1930s and 1940s, Cavell observes, since “the fear of divorce has changed, the threat of pregnancy has changed, the male and female stars and the directors and writers who put them in action are gone?” Nonetheless, he argues, “there do seem to me a remarkable number of new films (within my limited experience)” that have something of the “feel” of classical remarriage comedies, provide interpretations of some of their features, and, like them,

concern a quest for transcendence, a step into an opposite or transformed mood, not so much by becoming another person, or taking a further step in attaining an unattained self, or becoming who you are, as by being recognized as the one you are by having, or giving, access to another world.¹²



In “*North by Northwest*,” Cavell writes:

What I found in turning to think consecutively about film a dozen or so years ago was a medium which seemed simultaneously to be free of the imperative to philosophy and at the same time inevitably to reflect upon itself—as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition.¹³

In almost every one of the writings in the present volume, as in all of his books on film, Cavell reflects on the affinity he finds between film and philosophy, an affinity that makes the marriage between them, exemplified by his own writings on film, possible—and necessary. In “The Thought of Movies,” for example, he poses the question: What does it reveal about movies, and what does it reveal about philosophy, that “the same sensibility that is drawn to and perplexed about philosophy is drawn to and perplexed about movies”?¹⁴ Cavell’s thoughts on this affinity and its implications, both for philosophy and for the serious study of film, become deeper and more complex as he ponders, in the writings collected in this volume, the role movies played in his own philosophical education.

During the period he was writing *The World Viewed*, it had not yet fully dawned on Cavell the extent to which the unique combination of popularity and artistic seriousness of American movies, especially of the 1930s and 1940s, was a function of their inheritance of the concerns of American transcendentalism. Not coincidentally, during the period he was writing *The World Viewed*, the extent to which Cavell’s own way of thinking inherited Emerson’s understanding and practice of philosophy also had not yet fully dawned on him.

In the writings collected in the present volume, however, Cavell’s intuition that Hollywood movies have inherited the philosophical concerns of American transcendentalism, conjoined with his intuition that he has inherited these concerns, too, leads to the astonishing further intuition that his own philosophical procedures are underwritten by the ways American movies think about society, human relationships, and their own condition as films. It is in the very movies that were for so many years a normal part of Cavell’s week that Emerson’s ways of thinking remained alive within American culture, available as an inheritance. Apart from the role Hollywood movies played in Cavell’s education, it would not have been possible for a philosopher who received his professional training within an Anglo-American analytical tradition that has never acknowledged Emerson as a philosopher to have inherited Emerson’s ways of thinking at all.



By comparison with *The World Viewed*, *Pursuits of Happiness*, *Contesting Tears*, and *Cities of Words*, some of the writings contained in the present volume may, as we have suggested, appear to be relatively slight, mere occasional pieces. Yet Cavell's occasional pieces bring home, with special vividness, a crucial feature of his aspiration and achievement as a writer; namely, that every one of his writings is an occasional piece. Every one of Cavell's writings responds to, acknowledges, its particular occasion, an occasion inseparable from the writing's "cause." This brings home, in turn, that any and every occasion may be found to call for philosophy. And it is in itself an occasion whenever philosophy finds itself answering to its calling. Some of those occasions—the writing of *The Claim of Reason*, for example—are of extraordinary magnitude within Cavell's career as a whole. Others are more . . . everyday or ordinary. Cavell, like Emerson, is capable of finding something out of the ordinary in the most ordinary of occasions. Philosophy, for Cavell, is not a realm of abstract thought. It is an activity performed by human beings *in* the world, an activity best performed in a spirit of adventure. Philosophy is a way of rising to its occasion.

Even when in a particular piece of writing Cavell may seem only to be reiterating an idea or argument he has already articulated elsewhere, his recounting on this new occasion always constitutes a new accounting, a revision that creates a new thought from the old, enables a new aspect to dawn. Every piece of his writing questions every other, acknowledges every other, is as capable as any other of revealing, and teaching, something about philosophy as Cavell understands and practices it. Attentive readers of this collection can expect the pleasure of discovering, or rediscovering, that every one of Cavell's writings, even those that may seem the slightest, contains at least one new idea or thought, an idea or thought so astonishing that it illuminates the entirety of his work, and which he expresses, puts into words, more fully here, on this occasion, than anywhere else in his writings.

The remarks by Cavell at the Paris Colloquium that we have already had occasion to cite, for example, are studded with such revelatory ideas or thoughts. One is his intuition that thinking about film has had an effect on his "ambitions for philosophical prose." In particular, as he puts it, the "necessity to become evocative in capturing the moods of faces and motions and settings, in their double existence as transient and as permanent," has left "permanent marks" on the way he writes. "It was, I believe," he adds, "more than any other ambition I held, a basis of freedom from the guarded rhythms of philosophy as I had inherited it."¹⁵

In thinking about film, Cavell is saying with these words, he recognized the need for prose capable of evoking the evanescence of the world on film, the ever-shifting moods of “faces and motions and settings,” and capable of capturing, as well, what remains inflexible, fixed, in the physiognomy of the world on film (what in *The World Viewed* he calls the “reality of the unsayable,” the “unmoving ground” that makes film capable of exhibiting the world).¹⁶ Then the double existence—the transience and permanence—that is automatically possessed by the world on film, vouchsafed by the ontological conditions of the medium, became an aspiration of Cavell’s philosophical prose.

Part of what this means can be registered by saying that each of Cavell’s writings (this Paris talk, for example) aspires to permanence (it lives on in these pages). Yet it also aspires to acknowledge, to rise to, the transient occasion that gave rise to it. But the point is also, I take it, that “the moods of faces and motions and settings, in their double existence as transient and permanent,” are the stuff of philosophy, as Cavell aspires to practice it, no less than the stuff of film. The originality and power of Cavell’s view of skepticism, for example, resides in the way he envisions the onset of skeptical doubt as a scene—not a scene from a stage play, but a scene that happens in the world, like a scene from a movie. For Cavell, writing philosophical prose that is capable of achieving conviction, like writing about film that is capable of achieving conviction, requires the ability, and willingness, to be evocative.

Thus it is quite characteristic and instructive that Cavell’s way of contesting the philosophical position staked out by Saul Kripke, in his influential book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, is by taking issue with the way Kripke “reads” a particular “scene” from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. (From *PI*, Section 217: “If I have exhausted the justifications [for following the rules of mathematics or of ordinary language as I do] I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say, ‘This is simply what I do.’”) Hence the following passage from “Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow” (yet another of the recent pieces in the present collection), which provides a perfect illustration of the way Cavell’s thinking about film has empowered his prose, freed it to be evocative, helped liberate it from the “guarded rhythms” that keep most philosophical writing from swinging, or soaring. (Writing powerful, evocative prose like this is simply what Cavell does.)

Kripke . . . takes the teacher’s (or speaker’s) gesture of showing what he does to be meant as a show of power. . . . I have taken the gesture oppositely, as acknowledging a necessary weakness, I might call it a creative limitation, in teaching (or socialization), stressing

that the arrival at an impasse between teacher and pupil also threatens, and may enlighten, the teacher. This difference of interpretation demands a long story (which I undertake to tell in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*). At the moment I wish to be as uncontroversial as possible and draw a moral from the fact that, whichever way you take the scene of instruction, when the teacher recognizes that she or he has exhausted the justifications, he becomes silent and waits. Satisfaction eludes him, but more words are pointless. Wittgenstein anticipates this inevitable moment of silence in teaching—that the student must at some point go on alone—in the very opening section of the *Investigations*, where he notes, casually but fatefully, “Explanations come to an end somewhere.” The moral I draw for Wittgenstein is that an utterance must have a point, whether to inform, amuse, promise, question, insist, beseech—in that sense must be worth saying; and that the point will exceed the saying, is inherently vulnerable, as human action is, to misfortune. . . . And the moral of silence in teaching at the same time implies a task of teaching, namely to demonstrate that informing, amusing, promising, questioning, insisting, beseeching, etc., must themselves be seen to be worth doing. Quite as if teaching must, as it were, provide a reason for speaking at all. As if we might become appalled by the gift of language, the fatedness to speech, the condition Wittgenstein describes as the life form of talkers, of us.¹⁷

Within the field of film study, it is sometimes supposed that Cavell’s writing is impressionistic, unrigorous, self-indulgent. And yet Cavell’s ambition is ultimately to be known as a writer. His prose is the measure of his achievement. It is, to be sure, unsystematic. That is, Cavell—like Emerson, like Thoreau, like Nietzsche, like Wittgenstein—is not a philosopher who strives to construct a *system* of thought. As a consequence, his writing, like theirs, can be difficult.

Insisting on the difficulty can make it seem—and sometimes it can seem—that reading Cavell is a painful matter. There are times when Cavell’s writing is painful. For example, *Contesting Tears* dwells on films, such as *Gaslight*, which in their own ways are as great as the comedies of remarriage Cavell writes about in *Pursuits of Happiness*, but which are at times not pleasurable, are even painful, to view. Cavell’s writing does not shrink from this pain. *Pursuits of Happiness* itself, however, is altogether pleasurable to read, to savor. Most of the pieces in the present collection are closer to *Pursuits of Happiness*, in this regard, than to *Contesting Tears*. In them, Cavell generously shares pleasures movies in his experience 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.¹⁸

We "coarsen and stupefy" ourselves insofar as we think about film, write about film, in ways that miss the poetry of the subject. The study of film cannot be a worthwhile human enterprise insofar as 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."¹⁹ And yet, as Cavell reminds us, Benjamin himself developed "his famous speculations concerning the technological medium of film . . . without consulting a film's idea of itself, or undertaking to suppose that one or another may have such a thing." Contrast *Pursuits of Happiness*, say, in which Cavell treats "the seven films principally studied in that book both as representative of the best work of Hollywood's classical period and (hence) as

works capable of reflecting critically on the cultural conditions that make them possible.”

Marrying film and philosophy, the writings gathered in the present collection 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 this collection, the lesson it above all aspires to teach.

Notes

1. Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), xi–xii.
2. Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point, 1984), xi.
3. “An Interview with Stanley Cavell (with James Conant),” in Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, editors, *The Senses of Stanley Cavell, Bucknell Review*, Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1989, 59.
4. From Cavell’s remarks at the Paris Colloquium on *La Projection du Monde* (French translation of *The World Viewed*), 1999.
5. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribner, 1969), xix.
6. From “What Becomes of Things on Film.”
7. From “*North by Northwest*.”
8. From “On Makavejev on Bergman.”
9. From “*Prénom: Marie*.”
10. From “Eric Rohmer’s *A Tale of Winter*.”
11. From “*Groundhog Day*.”
12. From “The Good of Film.”
13. From “*North by Northwest*.”
14. From “The Thought of Movies.”
15. From the Paris Colloquium.
16. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking, 1971; Enlarged Edition, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 148.
17. From “Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow.”
18. From “The Thought of Movies.”
19. From the Paris Colloquium.