

Locating American Experience: Cavell's Paths to Film and Transcendentalism

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For Cavell, American transcendentalism and film share the capacity to provide an education in taking an interest in one's experience. The results of such interest are for him ultimately political, allowing for self-cultivation and hence for mutual progress; an aspiration both romantic and liberal. However, the meeting of an experiential focus with political hopes extends beyond Cavell, and the wider fact of this convergence allows us to conceive his project as part of a broader milieu. One way to think Cavell historically is to consider some of the contexts in which his voice was forged. Although he sometimes alludes to it, we don't readily associate Cavell with 1960s radicalism, the counterculture, or the New Left. His sensibility and concerns seem more abstract than this, and operate on other planes than activism or polemic. His voice also unmistakably belongs to both a disciplinary training in philosophy (specifically, a 1950s analytic context) and to an earlier generation. Yet granting the unmistakable significance of these, we can still observe that despite his originality, and his anomalousness as an analytic philosopher, Cavell is not an a-contextual voice in American letters. He is not alone in exploring the value of attention to (American) experience as a resource for improvement, a fact to which he himself draws notice. Further, he anticipates certain developments in our critical present centred around the possibilities for a tone of hope and optimism with more than personal implications.

Cavell's interest in both liberal and transcendentalist versions of community, and tropes of hope and despair for American liberals, have some added resonance now. As historian Wendy Wall points out, from "the mid-1990s, and particularly since 2001, there has been a resurgent interest in the kinds of questions that preoc-

cupied Americans between the mid-1930s and the early 1960s.”¹ Of course, Cavell began writing much earlier than this renewed interest in what George Packer has called an extended “Roosevelt republic” and what it might have offered in terms of liberal solutions, and generated in imaginaries, began.² However, perhaps in places Cavell’s project shares, not the sentiment of nostalgia itself, but concerns in common with a contemporary “nostalgia for an earlier age — roughly the period from the New Deal through the key legislative victories of the civil rights movement.” Wall suggests that the story of these times is “a bit more complex” than that of a country united by “common dreams,” an era of unity that can be looked back to for inspiration. Instead, “Americans of that era were indeed united, but above all, by a *quest* for common ground.”³ When Cavell speaks of America as ‘our unattained but attainable commonwealth’, he consciously references something that has never existed.⁴ Much hinges on the importance of this distinction. But because of its focus on and composition during certain eras, his work on Hollywood film also reflects changes in ideas of US national community as a goal.

As Timothy Gould notes, there is “a tension between the eschatology of perfection, with its intermittent victory over despair, and the more normal canons of historical descent and inheritance.”⁵ Since even the idea of perfectionist instants has its own kind of historicity, I’d suggest that the thematics of hope and despair in Cavell’s writing are suffused with context. One important American context for stepping into a “transformed mood” is of course transcendentalism.⁶ The notional possibility of brief ecstatic reprieves, usually made possible in Cavell’s work by artworks or music, belongs to a romantic project positing that the aesthetic (including scenes in films as well as certain kinds of writing) might provide a transhistorical space of transfiguration from which to gain better purchase on comprehensive political or social change

1. Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 290.

2. See George Packer, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).

3. Wall, *Inventing* 290.

4. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 69.

5. Timothy Gould, unpublished review of *Stanley Cavell’s American Dream: Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Hollywood Movies*, by Lawrence Rhu, <http://olponline.org/2010/08/19/tim-gould-reviews-lawrence-rhus-stanley-cavells-american-dream-previously-unpublished/>

6. Cavell, “The Good of Film,” in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 344.

in the broadest sense. But another important context here for hope and despair relates to American liberal aspiration of a more historically situated kind.

Cavell's engagement with the hope and despair of the transcendentalists took shape against a particular background. His interests in both film and American transcendentalism began to come to fruition during the 1960s, a time when liberal hope and transcendentalism were linked by American artists and theorists. The convergence of experiential and politically liberal themes was also a wider phenomenon of the times in the US, as for example in the espousal of both existentialism and American romanticism by student activists, where a perception of a "lost" America coexisted with a concern not to be "lost" to one's own experience. Cavell explicitly links his beginning to write about film, too, to questions of *bildung*. It is a key part of his narrative of coming into selfhood specifically as a writer, and into aesthetic, and concurrently political, education: terms very similar to those in which he conceives the impact of transcendentalism on him. As he explains, when he began to write about film philosophically, in the late 1960s, the external "ambience" generated by the Vietnam conflict and the civil rights movement informed his writing about it alongside the cues he was taking from Wittgenstein's and Austin's work.⁷

During the composition of *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, which appeared in 1971, Cavell was simultaneously immersed in rereading Thoreau's *Walden*, and he has asserted that he wouldn't have felt entitled to write the ensuing *The Senses of Walden* (1972) had he not taken part in the Freedom Summer of 1964, during which he gave classes at Tougaloo College. Pointing out in his memoirs that his primary response to a political crisis is generally "psychological," Cavell concludes that had he not acted at that particular time, in that moment of decision about the nation, it would have amounted to a declaration of having no "political desires at all."⁸ Although, then, the background to the gestation of Cavell's first books on both transcendentalism and on film was a context of political upheaval and civil rights activism, to claim Cavell himself for activism would be an overstatement. However, his comment here suggests that the issue of segregation went beyond that distinction for

7. Andrew Klevan, "What Becomes of Thinking on Film? (Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan)," *Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 192.

8. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 430.

him, its abolition being a prerequisite for any meaningful national conversation to begin.

Gould's comment about canons of inheritance is made in a review of Lawrence Rhu's *Stanley Cavell's American Dream: Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Hollywood Movies*, in which Rhu argues that "Cavell is an American dreamer of a recognizable kind." When Gould writes of Rhu that his work confirms that "Cavell's America is more than a dream if still less than the eventual community we had hoped for," this interesting use of the past pluperfect ('had hoped') allows us to infer that the "we" who wished for eventual community refers specifically to the generation of intellectuals slightly younger than Cavell who came of age during the 1960s, raising the idea of a lost wish or possibility as a generational experience.⁹ Another scholar, intellectual historian James Kloppenberg, poses a question about the struggle to find a productive register in the face of liberal disappointment that also seems relevant here. "Many of us who came of age in America during the war in Vietnam urged our elders to stop seeing the world through a World War II-induced reflexive pro-Americanism," Kloppenberg observes, going on to ask: "Can we now stop seeing our past through an equally distorting Vietnam-induced reflexive anti-Americanism? Can we acknowledge that indignation and cynicism too can obstruct critical understanding?"¹⁰ Kloppenberg's most recent book is an exploration of Obama's debt to American philosophical pragmatism, though since its publication, some may argue the Obama administration has added some causes for liberal despair. What is at stake in his comments about cynicism is the struggle to find a register that is productive without being complicit, hopeful without being purblind, and restorative without being culpable. Cavell explicitly identified this issue and thematised it before others have, finding his own solution in the incorporation of Emerson's voice, characterised as an optimistic valence that is won back from, and has passed through, tragic knowledge, an alternative to either cynicism or obliviousness.

Cavell's own "audacity of hope" is in general less identified with immediate circumstance, being rather a transcendental open-ended hopefulness, allowing for

9. Gould, review, <http://olponline.org/2010/08/19/tim-gould-reviews-lawrence-rhus-stanley-cavells-american-dream-previously-unpublished/>.

10. James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.

the ongoing *possibility* of change and improvement. However, his explicit comments on being politically “liberal” in his memoirs occur in connection with Vietnam and the student protests of the 1960s, and with questions of race relations in America. One of the few places in his work where he self-identifies specifically as “liberal” is in relation to a 1969 occupation at Harvard in protest against Vietnam:

radicals and conservatives have reasons. Liberals like myself, with jerking knees and bleeding hearts, seem to have no reasons; merely, instead, to give interpretations. People will say that a time for talking comes to an end. Of course I would expect to have an interpretation of their saying so, since as long as there is time to say so there is time to listen and think.¹¹

The same year, Cavell and John Rawls intervened in another student protest, which resulted in their helping with the process of setting up the African American Studies programme at Harvard (Cornel West has even said that without Cavell, there would be no such department there, apparently in partial response to the question of whether Cavell has been conscious enough of matters of race in American cultural and political life).¹² Rawls was Cavell’s longtime friend and colleague, and their work has been linked by critics and admirers alike. Cavell carefully distinguishes his work from Rawls’ around issues of perfectionism’s relation to democracy, but to some degree his own reception has been caught up in questions of whether he himself is or isn’t a liberal thinker. Stephen Mulhall remarks that “Cavell’s picture of aesthetics, morality, and politics is essentially liberal,” but “this may be because [...] aesthetic, moral, and political practice in the late twentieth century – are themselves inevitably and ineradicably liberal.”¹³ Arguably though, a specifically American sense of the “liberal” pervades Cavell’s work at the level of contextual background in addition to this philosophical sense.

In *Little Did I Know*, Cavell acknowledges himself as liberal, as well as highlighting the ways in which the external world of 1960s political events made its way

11. Cavell, *Little*, 507.

12. Cavell and Paul Standish, “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Paul Standish,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46.2 (May 2012): 163.

13. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 71.

into the classroom. In addition, as I have argued elsewhere, it is likely that the liberalism of mid-century American intellectual culture was an important influence on his thinking (a differently qualified position than that of 1960s activism). But for Cavell, such political liberalism doesn't translate directly to his philosophy, owing both to the distinctive brief of philosophy, and to the work the transcendentalist register does in his project. Philosophy's task, as Cavell defines it, is responsiveness to the fact of interest. This is different to the task of political advocacy, though what such response reveals may enable it. As he explains in *Little Did I Know*, "Perhaps prehistory is my medium, to give an account of the conditions, call it the context, that have to happen before something happens."¹⁴ For Cavell, polemic is something other than philosophy.¹⁵ The case he makes for the need to identify philosophy's distinctive American locations accompanies a persistent distrust of speaking literally in a political register that has exposed him to censure, an issue not helped by the exceptionalist legacy of American romanticism. Nonetheless, the preparedness for mutual exposure expressed in speech (or writing) and response remain more primary for Cavell than specific political affiliation: "no amount of contribution is more valuable to the formation and preservation of community than the willingness to contribute and the occasion to be heard."¹⁶

If, then, we pinpoint certain high liberal moments, such as the mid-to late 1960s, as important to his work, it would be misguided not to stress at the same time the enduring significance of the 1950s and early 1960s, the period in which forms of "ordinary language philosophy" emerged as a counterpoint to logical positivism, and in which Cavell was educated; he submitted his doctorate in 1961, having begun it ten years previously. As he outlines in the foreword to *The Claim of Reason*, this development not only enabled him to find a way to "go on" in disciplinary terms, it cast new light on moral problems. However remote ordinary language philosophy may seem from some of Cavell's other (and sometimes later) interests, we can't hold it apart from them, since it is integral to the ethos by which those interests are interpreted. As Cavell explains the connection, as he sees it, between transcendentalism

14. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 511.

15. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (1979; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiii.

16. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 207.

and his debt to this other kind of thinking: “In Emerson, as in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, I encounter the social in my every utterance and in each silence.”¹⁷ For him the philosophical quest for the ordinary and the search for political democracy each involve finding one’s voice and its reception by others.

Explaining his dismay about his philosophical contemporaries’ readings of Wittgenstein as a conservative thinker, Cavell explains that he construes Wittgenstein as intent on a distinctive “task” of philosophy that is “resistant to philosophically violent change, namely, politically or ideologically sponsored change.”¹⁸ Ralph Berry points out that the first time Cavell directly responded to the charge that his teachers in ordinary language philosophy were “conservative” was in 1968, in the foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say*, which Berry describes, despite its focus on ordinary language philosophy, as “a very sixties book.”¹⁹ In this foreword, Cavell writes: “There is no revolutionary social vision that does not include a new vision of education; and contrariwise.”²⁰ Education is key for Cavell as a locus of change. If OLP provides one picture for him of how instruction happens, film is also part of his idea of how philosophy can be taught, as indeed is transcendentalism.

Following the completion of *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell began studying the Hollywood remarriage comedies, and during this same period, he began reading Emerson in a committed way. The move from Thoreau to Emerson in Cavell is a move from a more phenomenological slant on American transcendentalism to a more perfectionist one. But this is a shift in stress rather than in wholesale intent. It isn’t until *Pursuits of Happiness* (and more explicitly still in *Cities of Words*) that Cavell’s film writing turns to Emersonian perfectionism as such. But if *The World Viewed* was somewhat informed by Cavell’s reading in Heidegger, and a phenomenological approach to experience, we can see in parts of the book that film is also already an impetus to his thinking about the American polis and its contradictions. Cavell speaks of the era when he began writing about film as one when, in light of the Vietnam conflict, “the worth of an American identity [itself] was under terrible questioning, of an intensity I suppose not reached since the Civil War and not approached again until

17. Cavell, *Cities*, 4.

18. Cavell, *Little*, 478.

19. Ralph M. Berry, “Cavell’s Meaning 1968,” *Theory Trouble*, spec. issue *Symploke* 11.1/2 (2003): 241.

20. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays, Updated Edition* (1969; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxxix.

the present era in Iraq,” identifying a dynamic of recurring legitimization crises running from the Civil War, through Vietnam, to the George W. Bush administration.²¹

These are moments, for him, of “deformation”: that is, not only moments of political disagreement, but of casting into doubt the viability of a more extensive understanding of the “project” of America (and indeed, of the Enlightenment project, as these come together in his readings in *Pursuits*). As Shira Wolowsky has pointed out, in Cavell, as in Whitman, “the issue of skepticism appears not to be theoretically epistemological but [...] concerned instead with questions of American culture, society and politics: that is, of civic decision and responsibility,” in the context of a concern with the fragility of “joint national life.”²² Wolowsky is alluding to the strain of American writing in which the writer attempts to propose solutions to the problems of epistemology at the same time as those of society, where personal and political forms of skepticism, figured as loss and crisis, are intimately related.

For Cavell, Thoreau’s *Walden* is a superlative instance of this approach, which he reads as “a book of losses” explored philosophically, losses linking a personal skeptical crisis and national failings.²³ While we might expect to find this link in regard to a transcendentalist text, such losses and linkages are also alluded to in *The World Viewed*. Immediately following a passage about belief in the book is a passage in which historically located American anxieties sit very close to the skeptical drama as such. A subtle elision is at work, whereby the ‘mind’ in general, Cavell’s own mind, and America’s mind — expressed in the first person plural “we” — become identified:

We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that men doing the work of the world together are working for the world’s good [...] the stain of atomic blood will not wash and [...] its fallout is nauseating us beyond medicine, aging us very rapidly. It is the knowledge, and refusal to know, that we are ceding to Hitler and Stalin the permanent victories of the war [...] in the spasms of our

21. Cavell, *Little*, 315.

22. Shira Wolosky, “On Cavell on Whitman: On Cavell on Whitman: Questions about Application,” *Symposium: A Taste for Complexity, Common Knowledge* 5 (Fall 1996): 63, 62.

23. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 171.

fixed fury we do ourselves no injury, in order not to see the injury we have done, and do. So the mind tears itself apart trying to pull free.²⁴

If during World War II America understood itself to be working for the world's good, by the time of writing Cavell is beset with guilt about American acts of violence. The way this passage breaks into *propria persona*, and the connection drawn between skepticism as such, and skepticism about America's moral and political status, echo the well-known passage in the "The Avoidance of Love," Cavell's essay on King Lear, composed in 1967, in he makes reference to Vietnam. Parts of "The Avoidance of Love" bear a striking resemblance to sociologist Robert Bellah's celebrated essay, "Civil Religion in America," also of 1967. There, Bellah refers to the moment of his writing as "the third time of trial" for the nation, the first two trials being the war of independence and the internal battle over slavery. Bewitched by its own power, America has for Bellah, in Vietnam, "stumbled into a military confrontation where we have come to feel that our honor is at stake."²⁵ Cavell shares a diagnosis with commentators such as Bellah, though it is tied in his own work to philosophical questions.

In "The Avoidance of Love," Cavell invokes America as the protagonist of its own tragedy, in its "insatiable" desire to be the object of love, and its skepticism about its own existence:

Since it had a birth, it may die. It feels mortal. And it wishes proof not merely of its continuance but of its existence, a fact it has never been able to take for granted. Therefore its need for love is insatiable [...] Those who voice politically radical wishes for this country may forget the radical hopes it holds for itself, and not know that the hatred of America by its intellectuals is only their own version of patriotism. It is the need for love as proof of its existence which makes it so frighteningly destructive [...] and which makes it incapable of seeing that it is destructive and frightening. It imagines its evils to come from outside [...] *Union* is what it wanted [...] Hence its terror of dissent, which does not threaten its power but its integrity.²⁶

24. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (1971; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 62-63.

25. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Three Decades of "Daedalus,"* spec. issue *Daedalus*, ed. Stephen R. Graubard, 117.3 (Summer 1988): 112, 113.

26. Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 345.

In his response to this passage, Gould observes, “I doubt that one can separate Cavell’s sense of his own genesis as a writer from his awareness of the war in Vietnam or of Nixon’s efforts to stay in power at the expense of the American Constitution.” The motif of individual perfectionist skeptical crisis — Cavell’s sense of his trajectory to becoming a writer — is here explicitly situated in the context of a wider national crisis. As Gould puts it, “the sense of connection between his crisis and the nation’s is all but ubiquitous.”²⁷ It is the nature of this connection that places Cavell specifically in the American romantic tradition, though the national crisis of course suffused the work of his contemporaries, literary and otherwise.

In *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell writes “the time of crisis depicted in this book is not alone a private one, and not wholly cosmic. It is simultaneously a crisis in the nation’s life. And the nation too must die down to the root if it is to continue to recognize and neighbour itself.” The narrator of *Walden* expresses a “mood at once of absolute hope and yet of absolute defeat, his own and the nation’s,” since “the nation, and the nation’s people, have yet to be well made.” This crisis is one, according to Cavell, for which *Walden* proposes the remedy of writing of a certain kind: “It would be a fair summary of the book’s motive to say that it invites us to take an interest in our lives, and teaches us how.”²⁸ Through the writer’s and the reader’s mutual constitution of one another’s voices in the process of reading and being read, the nation can be “reconstituted,” a goal Cavell hasn’t been shy of claiming for his own work, adding his own voice to the transcendentalist “chorus” as Thoreau’s inheritor.²⁹

In this way, the nation’s lack of identity with itself in his own times is linked for him with the crisis Thoreau perceived. Throughout his project, Cavell argues that there is an eclipsed “radical” intent and meaning behind words tarnished with (mis)use, or with forgetfulness, and of the power of such meanings if actually enacted. The above passage from “The Avoidance of Love” both comments on a contemporaneous 1960s radicalism, and posits another understanding of “radical”: a return to the nation’s root purpose, (re)infusing what has become rhetoric with its root meanings. Cavell’s suggestion is that a true American radicalism would be one that worked

27. Gould, review, <http://olponline.org/2010/08/19/tim-gould-reviews-lawrence-rhus-stanley-cavells-american-dream-previously-unpublished/>.

28. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (1972; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 116, 9, 116, 67.

29. Paul Anderson, “Agee After Cavell, Cavell After Agee,” *Stanley Cavell, Literature, and Film: the Idea of America*, ed. Andrew Taylor and Áine Kelly (New York: Routledge, 2013), 136.

to realise the American project as conceived by earlier generations, specifically the transcendentalists: hatred of an America that has lost its way would thus stand as evidence of love for true American promise (an interpretation giving some weight to Sacvan Bercovitch's hypothesis about the recuperative logic of American protest).³⁰ This idea, that a radical American intellectual could be working in the service of an "invisible republic" inside or under the extant one — despair figured as commitment to the dream, rather than a rebuttal of it — brings together romantic strains of the counterculture with the transcendentalist vision.³¹ While Cavell came to find a reanimation of Emerson's perfectionist message in the American cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, Thoreau was taken up by artists and thinkers in the 1960s as an example of both political and spiritual resistance (as in the importance of his essay "Civil Disobedience" to groups like SDS). Thoreau was also an artistic inspiration in terms of experiential and everyday aesthetics, and we could speculate here about whether Cavell might have seen or been aware, for instance, of avant garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas' film *Walden: Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* of 1969, an unedited video diary of his life in New York.

Cavell speaks on several occasions of feeling generationally out of step, being too young during the Depression years to claim that era, missing his chance to join those who served in World War II, the so-called greatest generation (though only just, for reasons of health), and being somewhat older than the young radicals of the 1960s. Indeed, it is this very issue of "partial identification," he says, that informs his awareness that to say 'we' and speak on behalf of others is to make a "moral claim," not simply to reflect a state of affairs.³² However, although his interest in the transcendentalists is the most extensive and well documented aspect of his engagement with American writing, Cavell's response to twentieth-century American writers is equally directed toward finding exemplars within the American scene who approach experience in same way he does. Hence while he famously reaches backwards to Emerson and Thoreau, he also makes examples of near contemporaries, including some who cast his own work in a slightly different light than it is perhaps usually considered. Cavell was based at UC Berkeley until 1962, where the Free Speech Movement

30. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

31. The phrase "invisible republic" is one coined by Greil Marcus.

32. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 432.

erupted on campus in 1964, initiated by student activists who had taken part in the Freedom Summer and were agitating for civil rights. This is generally considered to have been a defining moment in the campus activism that subsequently took place all over the US.³³ Cavell presents himself in *Little Did I Know* as differently placed to these protesting students. However, although they would later part ways ideologically, Berkeley's student activists initially quoted Paul Goodman extensively, and Cavell too makes several telling references to Goodman, marking him as a candidate for inclusion in his American moral perfectionist canon. The question for Cavell isn't only what the consequences of a mode of thinking that takes experience as a base might be, but what the consequences for American thought could be if it is *American experience*, specifically, that is its starting point. In this way, Goodman becomes an example for him as a potential teacher whose contribution hasn't properly been heeded.

Richard King suggests that Goodman (alongside Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown) could be considered among the "theorists of a second transcendentalist revolt," with Goodman aligned with its more "utopian" wing.³⁴ By claiming Goodman as one of his alternative educators — alternative to the tradition of analytic philosophy — Cavell draws a circle that encompasses elements of the counterculture alongside transcendentalism and film. Goodman's work was a broad project of social criticism comprising questions of community, the innovation of Gestalt therapy, and queer activism, amongst other concerns. Investigations of the individual achievement of freedom, of education, and of what kind of country America should be, link him to the thematics of improvement and *bildung*. For Cavell, he is also linked with the potential for American experience to make a useful contribution to the scene of national and indeed world culture.

We might ask here how Cavell's conception of the importance of experience differs from the 1960s exaltation of experience more generally. Goodman was chary of the Beats, and where the Beats' stress on the importance of experience is often understood to have prized immediacy, spontaneity, and sensation, Cavell's caution about immediacy sets him too apart from them. Just as Cavell's vision of community

33. An interesting further dimension here is the suggestion that these campus protests at Berkeley and elsewhere were started, specifically, by philosophy majors well-read in existentialism. See Martin Woessner, *Heidegger in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 164.

34. Richard King, *The Party of Eros: Radical Social Thought and the Realm of Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 173-174.

has something in common with that of the Hollywood film of the 1930s, his romantic sense of the importance of experience to self- and political development shares ground with articulations of this in the 1960s. But in addition to the crucial fact of his philosophical training, there is something belonging to neither era in Cavell's complex of influences, partly because the intellectual climate of the 1940s and 1950s remains so important to it.

Speaking of Goodman in the context of beginning teaching at Harvard, Cavell explains in his memoir that he found "little charm in analytical aesthetics." By contrast, the "best or most influential recent literary critics in English [...] remained incomparably more interesting."³⁵ Several of the names Cavell cites here fall under the heading of 'New Critics'. While the New Critics are exemplary for Cavell in certain respects, they're also lacking in key areas. Where they stressed aesthetic integrity, the New York intellectuals (among whom Goodman is often counted) highlighted social and cultural contexts, and Cavell has wished there could have been more commerce between these two. He has also suggested that the New Critics' failure to include philosophy in their intellectual programme paved the way for poststructuralism's incursions into American intellectual life, with the concomitant eclipse of America's indigenous responses to the issues it raised.³⁶

Reiterating his point about the value of both Goodman and the New Critics in *Little Did I Know*, Cavell comments, "I wanted philosophy to take on such criticism, perhaps be taken on by it, not, as was mostly the case, to avoid it."³⁷ Not only did the New Critics fail to engage with philosophy, philosophy failed to engage with them. This is where the preoccupations I have been tracing return us to film. Cavell suggests that the remedy for America's occlusion of philosophy might lie in film. America has generated a unique philosophy, Cavell argues, but lacks the tools with which to recognise it. Analytic philosophy shares in this failure of recognition. And so, Cavell explains, "It was from this sense of pedagogical impasse that I came to the idea of experimenting with what could be said about film":

35. Cavell, *Little*, 422-423.

36. See Cavell, "After Half a Century", *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* by Robert Warshow, enlarged edn. (1962; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

37. Cavell, *Little*, 423.

Film had for me become essential in my relation to the arts generally [...] There was, or I knew, comparatively little intellectual work to start from in the early 1960s [...] Philosophers, it seemed, had almost without exception left the field alone [...] oughtn't the fact of this neglect itself inspire suspicion? Given my restiveness with philosophy's treatment, or avoidance, or stylization, of human experience [...] what better way to challenge the avoidance than through the worldwide phenomenon of cinema?³⁸

Cavell insists “on writing about philosophy and movies in the same breath, insisting on both of them, but especially on their conjunction, as part of my American intellectual and cultural inheritance.”³⁹ If film is one of Cavell's teachers, what film has to teach has implications, for him, for understanding the American philosophical tradition, as well as throwing into relief the question of who, or what, has the authority to teach. And it potentially reverses the direction of influence between European intellectual traditions and American ones. Like Emerson's and Thoreau's work viewed as philosophy, the best Hollywood film is not yet, for Cavell, fully culturally possessed, its significance not fully understood or owned. Likewise, Goodman and others (including certain of the New Critics and the New York intellectuals) aren't fully possessed. To possess them would be to gain access to the ways in which they mark out a path. Much of Cavell's writing on film is involved in the task of undertaking this possession, constructing a canon or alternative genealogy of texts, broadly defined, of American philosophical importance. The other claim here is that Hollywood film, alongside these examples, is another of the places that a native tradition of thinking through experience is expressed.

If the ownership of experience is a step on the way to philosophical consciousness, film thus helps to provide Cavell with a direction in philosophy that is specifically American. Since what Cavell conceives as the “American difference” in philosophy is related, for him, to America's search for itself, Hollywood film becomes, potentially, part of the path toward America's self-finding. While this kind of finding is the aspiration, a countervailing self-losing or self-forgetting is also a danger. For Cavell, one manner of averting this is through the activity of criticism. Since both an idea of

38. Cavell, *Little*, 423.

39. Cavell, “The Thought of Movies,” *Cavell on Film*, 99.

criticism, and of the role of experience in criticism, are worked out in Cavell's approach to film, his choice of "companions" in this enterprise becomes significant. As we've seen, unusually for a philosopher, Cavell expresses a debt to practitioners of criticism, both cultural and aesthetic. The object isn't criticised in isolation though. The critic's life also comes into her criticism, partly because each film (or artwork) is seen at a specific time and place, as well as with other people.

Cavell's assertion that he didn't read Walter Benjamin until the 1970s underscores the fact that his journey toward film scholarship was informed by untypical sources — his first book on film acknowledges a strain of influence deriving from Clement Greenberg (through his friend, the art historian Michael Fried), but not yet "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," placing his work in an American intellectual nexus and circle of influence. His list of preferred American film critics, though, doesn't include his near contemporary, the *New Yorker* reviewer Pauline Kael. In closing, I will explore their relation as a way into a broader point about Cavell's sensibility. Kael was based in Berkeley at the same time as Cavell, and he credits her in his memoirs with providing part of his education in movies, enabling him to see European art house films among others. This is significant, since as we've seen, education in and by film is a weighty theme for him, and also because Kael's own response to film reflects a cultural turning point.

Cavell for his part connects Kael's film screening enterprise in Berkeley with *l'air du temps*:

Pauline Kael had converted a pair of adjacent small shops three blocks from Sather Gate — being the main pedestrian entrance to the Berkeley campus, the plaza Sather Gate opened onto became the site of the initial massive student demonstrations that will form in the spring of my first year of teaching back at Harvard — in effect into two screening rooms, showing different films and changing films more often than once a week, each room primitive in appointment [...] but each with programs satisfying the advanced taste of the most sophisticated art house audience. It was a glorious span of education.⁴⁰

40. Cavell, *Little*, 396.

The fact that Cavell personally attended Kael's screenings might lead us to think that she influenced him importantly. Both bring elements of a West Coast perspective — if this can be characterised as a certain amount of irreverence for the propriety of “culture” — to East Coast pursuits (Kael majored in Philosophy at Berkeley before becoming a critic), and there are interesting similarities between them. For Kael, as for Cavell, movies are objects of a love no less real for their being putatively suspect, and they offer a potential community that might “react as you do,” even when you are “[s]itting there alone or painfully alone” at the movies. Like Cavell, Kael often uses the first person plural, since “We're not only educated people of taste, we're also common people with common feelings. And our common feelings are not all *bad*.”⁴¹ And she shares Cavell's perception of a tendency among Americans not to think of American films as art. She feels there are special difficulties entailed in being a critic of “mass culture,” and that one needs particular qualities in order to do it well.⁴²

But Cavell's version of a democratic project, though it takes in popular culture, isn't a populist one. His tastes in the arts aside from film belong to a distinct era, pre-dating what we might think of as “postmodern.” And his specifically American cinematic preferences (as opposed to the European cinema he has written about) don't accord with Kael's. Kael's film criticism embraced another mood than is aspired to in Cavell's work; she admired the work of directors like Scorsese, Altman, and DePalma, the 1970s being to Kael as the 1930s and 1940s are to Cavell in terms of providing an American cinematic peak. Kael's understanding of the democratic nature of movie viewing deliberately encompasses “low” or “trashy” pleasures. Cavell praises her for establishing film as “a body of work to be taken seriously,” but laments her “kiss, kiss, bang, bang' sense” of what American film can do.⁴³ It is Cavell, not Kael, who insists that the movies themselves (at least the good ones) can be a measure for other arts to be held against.

The nature of the movies, for Kael, is that they “took their impetus not from the desiccated imitation European high culture, but from the peep show, the Wild

41. Pauline Kael, “Trash, Art and the Movies”, *American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents Until Now*, ed. Phillip Lopate (New York: The Library of America, 2006), 338, 357.

42. Francis Davis, *Afterglow: A Last Conversation with Pauline Kael* (Boston MA: Da Capo, 2002), 105.

43. Klevan, “What Becomes,” 178.

West show, the music hall, the comic strip — from what was coarse and common.”⁴⁴ Cavell also points to the way that movies had their earliest origins in “popular or folk arts [...] farce, melodrama, circus, music hall, romance.”⁴⁵ But one of Cavell’s questions in dealing with movies is that of where, if anywhere, their moral dimension is located. While, then, Kael’s criticism forms part of the backdrop to Cavell’s education in valuing movies, he is placed differently. Cavell sees films as aesthetic objects where every detail counts. But he also finds in them a moral-political dimension. This dimension is differently defined by him than by, for example, Siegfried Kracauer, but Cavell doesn’t dismiss “moralising” intellectualism in the way that Kael does. Cavell, though younger, is still touched by, or close to, the seriousness of Kracauer’s generation (and even circle) of critics and criticism in a way Kael chose not to be. Although Kael can then be seen in some ways as one of Cavell’s educators, since she extended the range of film he was exposed to, they are separated not only training but by a cultural shift.

In *The World Viewed*, Cavell regrets that the movies, and movie-going, are “not what they were.” By the time of writing, he finds that he has “increasing difficulty’ persuading himself to see new movies, in large part because the form of companionship involved in moviegoing has changed, resulting in a sensation of attendance ‘at a cult.’”⁴⁶ Kael’s essay “Trash, Art, and the Movies” was published in *Harper’s* in 1969. There, Kael speaks of the movies as a response to lostness. She identifies a pervasive anomie reflected by cinema that paradoxically creates a (disenchanted) kind of movie-going community:

Like those cynical heroes who were idealists before they discovered that the world was more rotten than they had been led to expect, we’re just about all of us displaced persons, “a long way from home.” [...] that home no longer exists. But there are movie houses. In whatever city we find ourselves we can duck into a theater and see on the screen our familiars — our old “ideals” aging as we are and no longer looking so ideal. Where could we better stoke the fires of our masochism than at rotten movies in gaudy seedy picture palaces in cities that

44. Kael, “Trash,” 349.

45. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 29.

46. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 11.

run together, movies and anonymity a common denominator. Movies — a tawdry corrupt art for a tawdry corrupt world — fit the way we feel.⁴⁷

National political contexts for disenchantment are no doubt important here, but the issue by 1969 is also one for Kael of overfamiliarity with cinematic conventions, and an arrival at irony; an aesthetic change, whereby the movies' embrace of trashiness seems apt.

I hope I have begun to illustrate earlier in this paper that Cavell draws together experiential and liberal themes with American romanticism, a confluence that can to an extent be seen as shared in and informed by a context. But I would also like to highlight that his emplacement within that context remains highly particular. His mixing of romantic hope and liberal disappointment, alongside his debts to existentialism and phenomenological philosophy, seem to locate him in time, alongside the youth of the 1960s. Cavell's aesthetic preferences, though, are a point of dissimilarity with the counterculture, especially as these were to be expressed by the time of the 1970s "New Hollywood" cinema Kael championed. Further, although he shares ground with this milieu, Cavell's sensibility, as I've mentioned, is importantly shaped by the aesthetic and intellectual mores of the preceding decades. Cavell's affinities with the American intellectual and artistic culture of the 1960s, though I would suggest that these do exist, thus occur at a particular angle of inflection.

By way of concluding, I would like to return to the thematics of hope and despair. While there are other reasons Cavell doesn't find Kael an entirely companion spirit in her response to film, one facet of their divergence is tonal. Owing to its Emersonian inflections, the development of Cavell's work on Hollywood cinema over the course of his career has moved towards its consideration in terms of potential for an improved sociality (he explains that the idea of remarriage comedy, with its onus on the "second chance," coalesced for him around 1974). The mood of New Hollywood cinema and neo-noir is rather one of disillusion and even dissolution, where community seems distinctly frangible. We have arrived in our current critical moment at a further turn of the wheel than that of Kael's era, where for some, a disenchanting mood, and the aesthetics of irony in general, no longer seem productive. In the search

47. Kael, "Trash, Art and the Movies," 337.

for alternative kinds of tone, as this impetus is manifested for example in my own field, literary studies, both Emersonian ethics and a Thoreauvian model of attention have increasingly become a focus. This return to the transcendentalists (often directly via Cavell), and a renewed emphasis on experience now, may bring a submerged historical context in its wake.