

A Brief Encounter with Cavell in Amsterdam

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Stanley Cavell was hardly known to me before I met him in person. And then I was genuinely astounded about how, until then in my own pursuits in philosophy to come to terms with the (in)famous discrepancies and differences between the Continental and Anglo-American philosophy, I had somehow managed to miss his contributions. Besides, I found that even before my brief encounter with Cavell I had shared another interest with him not only in cinema, but also in the specific cinematic genre of melodrama. Unfortunately, I could not refer to Cavell's "Melodrama of the Unknown Woman" in my own book on melodrama, written in the little-known Slovenian language in 1988.¹ Cavell actually published the chapter on psychoanalysis and drama already in 1989, but the book *Contesting Tears*, of which this chapter was made part of, wasn't published before 1996.

Anyway, I met Cavell when he visited the University of Amsterdam in 1998, when I happened to be an "academic visitor" for a few months there on a grant for scholars from the countries aspiring to enter the European Union. It must have been in April of that year, when Professor Mieke Bal at Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (graduate school attached to the University of Amsterdam) announced the visit of professor Stanley Cavell—"known as a representative of skepticism"—in the frame of a program of "Spinoza lectures." Subsequently, Cavell took part in three days of seminar for the faculty at the Department of Philosophy, dedicated to his seminal book *The Claim of Reason*. Of course, I remember it being a great intellectual pleasure to have had the privilege to share with some twenty or so other participants of the conference. However, since I have read the book more thoroughly only after the conference, I cannot really recall in any detail what Cavell and the members of his lively

1. In those still pre-digital times it took some time for getting the text ready to print and so my book was finally published in 1989. Darko Štrajn, *Melodrama: žanr sreče in obupa* [*Melodrama, the Genre of Happiness and Despair*] (Ljubljana: Revija Ekran, Imago, 1989.)

and active audience imparted. The text of “*The Claim*,” which I read with great interest after I returned home from Amsterdam—apart from two or three chapters that I read immediately before the seminar—later “over-scribed” and, hence, besieged the spoken words from that conference in my memory.

Afterwards Cavell also gave a lecture for a much larger audience of at least three hundred listeners at the University’s special place auditorium of the “Lutherse Kerk.”² I shall never forget Cavell’s simultaneously scholarly and seriously frivolous twist from this lecture, which was accompanied by the clip of a sequence from Minelli’s film *The Band Wagon* (1953). Of course, I cannot quote word for word what Cavell said in that lecture, but I definitely remember the line of his thinking and the rhetoric, which as they were, aimed to cause an effect of illuminating astonishment among the sophisticated listeners. When he addressed the above-mentioned relationship between the Anglo-American and Continental philosophy, he pointedly raised a question of the content of thought based on these two distinctive paradigms. Acknowledging a large scope of thought by such philosophers as Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and so on, Cavell asked (himself) whether it was possible at all that such dimensions of thought as in their philosophies were not reflected in the Anglo-American culture. The answer to his question elicited at first some giggling and appreciative laughter an instant later, when the lecturer’s point got fully assimilated in our comprehension. Needless to say, what continental philosophers had devised in their work was not absent from Anglo-American culture; the ideas that the empiricist, positivist and analytical philosophies—and, moreover, not all of them strictly “geographically” American or British—did not really considered, were “given voice” in literature, in Shakespeare’s tragedies, in writings of transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, later in the novels of Henry James, and in Hollywood films. To illustrate his point, Cavell explicitly compared Hegel to Fred Astaire, at once condensing in his words the “master–slave” dialectics, the relationship of concepts of the particular vs. the idea of totality or the whole, American history, questions of aesthetics, economy and metaphysics. So, as it was expressed in Cavell’s slightly “provocative” tone, dancing and singing on film are acts of thinking and performing philosophy. Undoubtedly, a number of themes, which were touched upon in the lecture

2. This is in fact a church building, now for quite some time turned into the University’s special place for important lectures, defenses of theses, academic celebrations of all kinds, and so forth.

in a rather condensed and rhetorically accentuated manner, could be found throughout Cavell's works, but rarely in such a straight, clear-cut and revealing form. To illustrate the point, let me just take an example from his treatise on Thoreau's *Walden*.³ He claims that *Walden* was "written in a pre-philosophical moment of its culture," when also a range of different disciplines from philosophy to politics had not been separated; and then Cavell proceeds: "This pre-philosophical moment, measured in American time, occurred before the German and the English traditions of philosophy began to shun one another, and I hoped that if I could show *Walden* to cross my own philosophical site, I might thereby re-enact an old exchange between these traditions." I cannot go further than this in this short piece. Allow me just to mention that after making this point, he embarks on a dialogue with Derrida and Levi-Strauss regarding the "idea of literature as *écriture*."⁴ I dare to say that Cavell's enormous contribution, which through the concept of (Descartes-based) skepticism brought up a new vision of intellectual dialogue, still needs to resonate in maybe some yet unconceivable space or framework of thinking. Cavell's writing touches upon not only relationships between different "systems" (or in some articulations "paradigms") of philosophy, but also between different levels, forms of expression and genres, of which his expanding of Austin's concept of the ordinary language philosophy into the broader "philosophy of the ordinary" is just one explicit case. His works—no matter how much they are maybe seen as such in some "unfriendly" American philosophies—cannot be read at all as an advocacy of the "European" philosophy against the "American" one, but strictly as an affirmation of mutual recognition, exchange and suggestion of an eye-opening intellectual (however not necessarily only sophisticated) experience. When he discusses positivism and deconstruction, he points out that "the appeal to mathematical logic for its algorithmic value is an appeal to its sublime inscriptional powers (of alignment, rewriting, iteration, substitution, and so on)."⁵ Much such discernment clearly bears witness to his deep philosophical impartiality regarding the gap between two cultures and two "logics" of thought. On the other hand, his great book on Wittgenstein is in many respects a case *for* positivist philosophy in the areas of its strength.

3. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), xiv.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 83.

Cavell undoubtedly anticipated some currents and new areas of thinking, which could be now clearly illustrated in a number of “post-post-structuralist” philosophies and, even more, in a variety of new combinations of the interdisciplinary humanities. After all, the publication of his first book on film (*The World Viewed*, 1971) for almost a decade preceded the renowned Deleuze’s *Image-mouvement* (1981), let alone more recent contributions of “filmosophy.”

As for the detail of associating Astaire to philosophy, I found out that before 1998 Cavell mentioned Astaire and his dancing just more or less sporadically. Therefore, his point in the lecture at the “Lutherse Kerk” could not have resulted from his previous work. What did sound as a bit frivolous cerebral “arrogation,” became only a few years later a well-founded philosophical analysis, within which Astaire is brought into a dialogue with, among others, Immanuel Kant. Pointing out the emphases on the reading of individual works of art, Cavell says: “I think of this emphasis as letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it, and I regard that attention as a way of testing whether the time is past in which taking seriously the philosophical bearing of a particular work of art can be a measure of the seriousness of philosophy.”⁶

But let me come back to where I began. My personal encounter with Cavell exceeded only my presence among the audience. One day after the seminar on “*The Claim*” a small group of five or six went for a coffee outside a bar near new Amsterdam city hall. There I had a chance to talk to Cavell directly and I caught his interest by telling him that I wrote my dissertation on Johann G. Fichte, and that I found out that some American colleagues had never heard of him. He then explained that even he himself in his formal philosophy curriculum had hardly heard of even Descartes, let alone all notorious German philosophers. We exchanged some views on the then already gone attempts of a dialogue between post-structuralism and some Anglo-American philosophies, which seemed to share somewhat similar conceptual attitude towards language, and in the end we were grateful of the coincidence, which brought about Ludwig Wittgenstein.

6. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 10.