

1. Apologies to Stanley Cavell

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I read *The World Viewed* as soon as it was published in 1971. Although I was outraged (and even at times disgusted) by that first reading, I was touched by its eloquence. My hostility was undoubtedly the premature judgment of a champion of avant-garde cinema toward a critic whose taste differed so radically from mine. I could hardly attend to what Cavell actually wrote at that time. My rage began with the opening chapter's claim that "in the case of films, it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like the typical ones." Here, I thought, was a parodic example of a professorial movie buff, taking what the Brattle Cinema in Cambridge happened to screen as the art of film. He amply declares that only a fool would judge paintings or music on the same basis. I wondered would he would say to someone who took the full range of books in the "philosophy" section of a typical Boston bookstore as the parameters of *his* disciple, noting at that time that there would be nothing by Cavell himself on such a shelf. (His 1969 collection of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?* had disappeared by then. I had to order the book—hardcover only—from the publisher a year later.)

The fifteenth of *The World Viewed's* nineteen chapters, called "Excursus: Some Modernist Painting," drove home to me what a loss Cavell's mind and pen were to what I then considered serious film study. In that chapter he brilliantly enacted the characteristic moves of his best writing, above all, by investing aesthetic distinctions with moral values. It didn't take the copious footnotes to that chapter to show how indebted his choice of privileged paintings was to Michael Fried's controversial (and dubious) taste. Yet his way of writing about them was astounding, and very moving:

Acceptance of such objects achieves the absolute acceptance of the moment, by defeating the sway of the momentous. It is an ambition worthy of the highest

art. Nothing is of greater moment than the knowledge that the choice of one moment excludes another, that no moment makes up for another, that the significance of one moment is the cost of what it forgoes. That is refinement. Beauty and significance, except in youth, are born of loss. But otherwise everything is lost. The last knowledge will be to allow even that knowledge of loss to vanish, to see whether the world regains. The idea of infinite possibility is the pain, and the balm, of adolescence. The only return on becoming adult, the only justice in forgoing that world of possibility, is the reception of actuality—the pain and balm in the truth of the only world: that it exists, and I in it.¹

I had never read such Emersonian eloquence in defense of—in the description of the experience of—abstract painting. Sure: I had known that Cavell was a figure of the Harvard Philosophy Department who was beginning to bridge the abyss that then separated the readers of Anglo-American post-Wittgenstein analysis from the work of Heidegger. In the “Excursus” one could see that bridgework in operation, as Cavell pitted the “moment” against the “momentous” in the passage above, and even more brilliantly in his extensions of the words of “automatism,” “candid,” “medium,” “representation,” and “abstract” in that same chapter. He marshalled asyndeton to spin out the “abstract” nouns for the psychological and moral distractions such paintings obliterated, and then capped the observation poignantly with a verbless riff of inner rhyme: “Because these abstractions retain the power of art, after the failure of representations to depict our conviction and connectedness with the world, they have overcome the representativeness which came between our reality and our art: overcame it by abstraction, abstracting us from *the recognitions and engagements and complicities and privileged appeals and protests* which distracted us from one another and from the world we have constructed. Attracted from distraction by abstraction.”² His diction echoes and twists key terms previously used in the chapter. Earlier he had boldly conflated representation as *mimesis* with political representation [*praesens*] without the slightest Heideggerian pretense to philological authority or

1. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 116-17.

2. *Ibid.*, 117 (my italics).

to the recovery of an ancient synthesis. The paintings alone were sufficient authority and the language of the philosopher *represented* the depth of his response to them.

Luckily, the intensity and acuity of his moral vision of art impelled me to acquire *Must We Mean What We Say?* as soon as I was able. I write “Luckily”—because otherwise I might never have found a reason to read his essay “Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Religion*.” That essay allowed me to complete the dissertation I was struggling to write on Maurice Blanchot and Charles Olson. At that time, the scholarship and writing on Blanchot was scarce and thin. Most of what there was was French, and none of its authors seemed interested in tracing Blanchot’s references. I had been able to pick out of his early writings unattributed phrases that he culled from Hegel, the Latin Vulgate, Heine, Ponge, and Kierkegaard, but it wasn’t until I read Cavell’s essay that I knew what I might do with that arcana. Cavell had read Kierkegaard on Authority as a proleptic text on modern art (among many other things, of less pertinence to me). Suddenly in the light reflected from Cavell’s pages I saw all those oblique quotations of Blanchot’s as attempts to define the impossible task of writing and representation in literature. That made my mundane task of academic writing possible.

Without meticulous biographies it would be impossible to untangle the priorities in the Cavell/Fried relationship. Fried might not have known Cavell’s Kierkegaard essay when he published “Art and Objecthood” in 1967. Cavell might not have even written it by then: it appeared in his 1969 collection of essays. By opening that essay with a quotation from Perry Miller, the Harvard historian of Puritan theology, and ending with the dictum, “Presentness is grace,” Fried had earned the contempt of such colleagues as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster for his capitulation to the language of religion, while I found that hint of the metamorphosis of Puritan theology to the theory of art the most fascinating aspect of his polemic. But the explicit claims of Cavell were nevertheless more illuminating, as when he writes “[...] our serious art is produced under conditions which Kierkegaard announces as those of apostleship, not those of genius. I do not insist that art has become religion (which may or may not describe the situation [...]) but that the activity of modern art, both in production and reception, is to be understood in categories which are, or were, religious.”³

3. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 175.

I believe my attitude toward Cavell's film writing began to change when I read his lengthy discussion of Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du jeu*, 1939) in "More of The World Viewed" in the *Georgia Review* in 1974. Then two years later, in the same journal, he published "Leopards in Connecticut" a definitive study of Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). It was the first, and utterly convincing glimpse, we had of what would become his *Pursuits of Happiness*, the finest study of a film genre ever written, and all the more impressive because Cavell actually discovered and delimited the genre: comedies of remarriage.

There was still one more bump in the path of my full appreciation of Cavell: between *The World Viewed* and *Pursuits of Happiness* he wrote *The Senses of Walden*. It was an insightful and often dazzling book on the second-best thinker of Concord. But I could not understand why he was focusing his mind on Thoreau and ignoring Emerson, the primary poet-philosopher of America. Of course, I did not realize then that I was repeating my previous error of judging the book by its critical subject. It took *Pursuits of Happiness*, a book utterly outside of my academic domain and territorial interests, to make me an avid reader of all that Cavell published.

At the time that I was reading *The Senses of Walden*, one of my preoccupations was the Americanness of the American avant-garde cinema. The chapters of my dissertation on Olson had brought me to a deeper understanding of Emerson and of his Puritan influences, convincing me that he had pioneered a pervasively influential national aesthetics by infusing everyday perception (and thereby art) with the visionary intensity of the tradition of Jonathan Edwards and the Mathers. Because I was so obsessed with the tropes filmmakers had forged from walking with a movie camera, or turning it upside down, or filming from cars, trains, and airplanes, a hitherto overlooked passage in the "Idealism" chapter of Emerson's 1836 book *Nature* drew my attention:

Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us. Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position apprizes us of a dualism. We are strangely affected by seeing the shore from a moving ship, from a balloon, or through the tints of an unusual sky. The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air. A man who seldom rides, needs only to

get into a coach and traverse his own town, to turn the street into a puppet-show. The men, the women,—talking, running, bartering, fighting,—the earnest mechanic, the loungeur, the beggar, the boys, the dogs, are unrealized at once, or, at least, wholly detached from all relation to the observer, and seen as apparent, not substantial beings. What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the rail-road car! Nay, the most wanted objects, (make a very slight change in the point of vision,) please us most. In a camera obscura, the butcher's cart, and the figure of one of our own family amuse us. So a portrait of a well-known face gratifies us. Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it any time these twenty years!

In these cases, by mechanical means, is suggested the difference between the observer and the spectacle,—between man and nature. Hence arises a pleasure mixed with awe; I may say, a low degree of the sublime is felt from the fact, probably, that man is hereby apprized, that, whilst the world is a spectacle, something in himself is stable.⁴

Consequently, a statement by Tony Smith disparaged by Fried in “Art and Objecthood” where I first encountered it, thrilled me:

When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the '50s, someone told me how I could get on to the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 30-31.

done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art.⁵

The aesthetic results of these “experiences” are positively manifested in avant-garde cinema and polemically misapplied to sculpture and painting by Fried. One of my mistakes was thinking then that Cavell's closeness to Fried and his insistence on the priority of Hollywood films, and their escape from the demands of Modernism, blinded him to this, and generally, to the aesthetic dimensions of Emerson's philosophy. But when he turned, eventually, to Emerson, he revealed profundities in the bard of Concord that I hadn't been able to see.

Every few years in my long tenure at Princeton University I would offer a course in Film Theory. *The World Viewed* was usually included on the syllabus, making me fonder of it with each iteration. One time, co-teaching the course with Thomas Levin, a delightfully good-natured agonist whose perpetual disagreements with me enlivened such collaboration, I saw, as in a funhouse mirror, my own earlier prejudices toward Cavell incarnated by my colleague, who also deplored the objects valued in that book, but not for the same reasons I had discarded. It was great fun to become, at last, Cavell's advocate, and illuminating to have revealed the irrelevance of the objects of discussion.

By then I had met Cavell a few times. His generosity and kindness were outstanding. Over time the logic of his inquiries brought him to accept and champion what had been my own youthful enthusiasms, Emerson and Heidegger—and in so doing he gave us very useful instruction in what was most valuable in them—although he never “acknowledged” the importance of avant-garde cinema. Now that “film,” as we both knew it, is a matter of the past and Modernism is no longer an arena of high-stakes contention, the grounds of our ideological opposition have dissolved into the atmosphere of critical history where my dispute will be an irrelevant footnote to his permanent eminence.

5. Tony Smith, “Interview with Samuel Wagstaff Jr”, *Art Theory: Texts, Writings & Manifestos*, <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/interview-with-samuel-wagstaff-jr-tony-smith>.