

16. Cavell's Importance for Philosophical Aesthetics

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Stanley Cavell was a prolific writer—the author of seventeen books and countless essays—and a famously stimulating teacher, but it would be impossible to convey in a short piece like this what made his writing and teaching inimitable.¹ Instead, I will limit myself to trying to explain a bit of what I think is so important about Cavell's work in aesthetics.

For one, in an age of academic specialization—which was well underway when he began his career, but has accelerated ever since—Cavell's writings on film, on music, on literature, were impossible to categorize. Yes, they discussed traditional problems in the philosophy of art (e.g. the objectivity of taste, the expressiveness of music, authorial intention, etc.), but they also contained a lot that was not part of the dreary diet of mid-twentieth century analytic aesthetics or even philosophy as the discipline then understood itself: the meaning of modernism in the arts, the nature of marriage, the relation of skepticism to tragedy and melodrama, and much, much more.

It wasn't that Cavell was not interested in the boundaries that philosophers typically try to draw around their field—it was precisely that he was fascinated by philosophy's obsession with distinguishing itself from poetry, or from religion, or from psychotherapy, its need to distance itself constantly from what it could nonetheless never stop talking about. Cavell was convinced this exclusion revealed something important about the nature of modern philosophy, and he saw in it an echo of the characteristic gesture of high modernist culture (e.g. Clement Greenberg), that of distinguishing true art from mere kitsch.

1. An earlier version of these remarks appeared on the blog "Aesthetics for Birds" on June 28, 2018.

This leads to a second way in which Cavell's thinking in aesthetics was original: the connections he drew between traditional problems of philosophy and issues in the rest of culture. His very first book, and one of his best, is a collection of essays titled *Must We Mean What We Say?* Like all of Cavell's works, it is difficult to summarize, but one of its main themes is the connection between the problems that were exercising analytic philosophers at the time—whether language is always “public” or can be “private” to what extent linguistic meaning is “conventional,” whether we can ever know what another person is thinking or feeling—and issues that arose in the practice of the arts themselves: whether an audience can share an experience of a work, or whether we are left to our own private fantasies; whether the traditional art-forms were still ways of creating art, or could now only produce banal copies; under what conditions art can disclose an artist's experience, and whether it has to.

One of Cavell's most lasting contributions to the philosophy of art is that he showed how interwoven philosophy and the arts have been for the past century or two, and how deeply philosophical much of that art has been—not in the sense of advancing theses or arguments, but in Cavell's more Socratic conception of philosophy as the activity that is ready to put anything, including itself, in question.

The third and final way in which Cavell's work was deeply important is that, again refusing to simply accept established academic boundaries, he brought all of his philosophical and critical intelligence to bear on an art-form that in 1971 (when he published *The World Viewed*) he thought had been neglected or condescended to by others in the academy: movies, especially Hollywood talkies from the 1930s and 40s. In a series of books and articles Cavell showed that if we are willing to take our experience of these movies seriously, to devote to them the kind of attention we would devote to any serious work of art, we will see how *philosophical* they are, how deeply invested they are in moral questions of friendship, reciprocity, education, of what makes a human being distinctive and what makes a life excellent—in what Cavell calls *moral perfectionism*, a tradition of moral thinking he identifies with the American philosophers Emerson and Thoreau, as well as figures like Montaigne and Nietzsche.

I will conclude by quoting a long passage from what may be my favorite of Cavell's books, *Pursuits of Happiness*, an examination of five Hollywood movies from

the 1930s and 40s he identifies as “remarriage comedies.” In it, Cavell discusses the wonderful scene from *The Awful Truth* in which Jerry (played by Cary Grant) forces his way into the home of the music teacher of his estranged wife, Lucy (played by Irene Dunne), expecting to find her in the music teacher’s arms. Cavell writes:

We know enough by this time of the practice of this kind of film to consider the sudden discovery of Lucy in front of the piano as the door flings open not as the surprising revelation that she is not after all engaged in an erotic form of life but that after all she is. Then it is her singing (whatever that is) that has been primarily felt by Jerry to be something beyond him, out of his control; not her singing teacher, who (whatever he is) is patently a secondary fiddle. Jerry, at any rate, is knocked to the ground by her performance here. His aplomb everywhere else is perfect. Lucy’s strategy in her sister routine will require that he make the connection between her publicly singing a proper recital piece in a ladylike manner and her privately singing an improper piece in its appropriate manner. The epitome I say we are given of the life of marriage behind doors, for us to imagine, of marriage as romance, as adventure—of the dailiness of life, its diurnal repetitiveness, as its own possibility of festivity—is the moment of Lucy’s response to Jerry’s discomfiture as he tries to make himself inconspicuous at the unanticipated recital and winds up on the floor in a tableau with chair, table, and lamp. The spectacle he makes of himself starts a laugh in her which she cannot hold back until after she finishes her song but which pushes into her song to finish with it, its closing cadence turning to laughter. The moment of laughter and song becoming one another is the voice in which I imagine the conversation of marriage aspired to in these comedies to be conducted. We heard Lucy speaking to Aunt Patsy of the grand laughs she and Jerry have had. (All she will tell him, or warn him of, visiting him at his apartment, before becoming his sister, is that his ancient poem to her, which she is about to recite, will hand him a laugh.) At the musicale we are privileged to witness one of the grand laughs. This princess is evidently neither unwilling nor unable to laugh, indeed she generally seems on the brink of laughing. The truth is that only this man can bring her laughter on, even if

he is sometimes reduced to poking her ribs with a pencil. This may not be worth half a father's kingdom, but she finds it, since he asks, worth giving herself for.²

2. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 262-63.