

Stanley's Taste:

On the Inseparability of Art, Life, and Criticism

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Stanley Cavell closes *Contesting Tears* with a chapter titled “Stella’s Taste: Reading *Stella Dallas*”, devoted to the 1937 movie, directed by King Vidor, which Cavell compares to the other movies he has studied in the book and finds “to be the most harrowing of the four melodramas to view again and again.”¹ Cavell’s reading of this movie is organized against what he calls the generally “accepted view” of the film where there are two key interpretive moments: in one, Stella, the protagonist, on vacation with her teenage daughter, Laurel, at a fancy hotel, tries to impress Laurel’s new friends by dressing up and ends up making a fool of herself, in a spectacle of bad taste; Stella then finds out what people thought of her and realizes she has embarrassed Laurel, eventually deciding to drive her daughter away from her, towards her father (Stella’s now ex-husband); this takes us to the second key moment: the final scene, where Stella anonymously watches her daughter’s wedding from the sidewalk, through a window, and walks away, which is generally seen as confirming Stella’s sacrifice, representing the dissolution of motherhood — hence, of her identity.

“My thought is that the pressure of this interpretation is excessive”² are Cavell’s words about the “accepted view” and he easily points out how enough proof exists to make such a reading inadequate. His main argument reiterates the fact that Stella knows exactly the effect particular clothes will have on people: in different scenes she is shown to be an expert in judging the appropriateness of clothes, which is incompatible with the idea that, in the hotel scene described above, she somehow is not aware of what Laurel’s friends will think of her. Cavell claims that Stella’s plan to alienate her daughter is already underway, that Stella is consciously putting on an

1. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1996), 200.

2. *Ibid.*, 201.

act, having already realized that Laurel wishes for different things than she does and will need to be pushed away in order to find them. The final scene would then show us a Stella not sacrificing her identity but further stating it, having let her child marry into the world she wanted but that was simply not to Stella's taste.

This interpretation is overall more convincing than the "accepted view," and manages to account for more elements of the movie and comes closer to a general coherence. However, in wanting to contradict the traditional interpretation of a pathetic Stella with a consciously deliberating one, Cavell too has laid an excessive interpretative pressure on the movie.

One scene that Cavell doesn't analyze raises serious problems for his interpretation (i.e., that Stella is trying to push her daughter away). Immediately after being humiliated by her mother, Laurel starts packing, wanting to go away. Stella tries to stop her and accuses her of being spoiled and not letting her mother have any fun. How are we to read this as a *continuation* of Stella's rejection of her daughter? If Stella is indeed aware that she is driving her daughter away, pleading with her to stay would be strangely sadistic and of no use to her plan. Besides, even if we concede that Stella is acting when she dresses up and we put that scene side by side with the one that comes later (where she is generally recognized to be acting [in her house, pretending to be in love with a man her daughter hates]), there is nothing in the hotel room scene that can compare to the sort of cheap vaudeville these other two "acting sequences" evoke.

Why should Cavell, an impressively acute critic, who says that "any reading of a film must [...] account for the frames of the film being what they are, in the order they are in,"³ feel the need to leave a particular collection of frames out of his reading of *Stella Dallas*? My point is not to claim that Cavell is misreading the plot or the characters in this movie, but to propose instead that the movie has definite incongruities in terms of plot and character psychology and, so, calls for a different type of reading.

In several passages from *Contesting Tears*, Cavell associates the group of melodramas he reads to the comedies he studied in *Pursuits of Happiness* and states

3. "What Becomes of Thinking on Film?: Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan," in *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), 6.

that he is “questioning the idea of film, especially the Hollywood film, as a homogeneous, and transparently popular art.”⁴ This is partly an answer to why his reading of *Stella Dallas* glosses over incongruities in the movie’s plot and characters — because it is part of Cavell’s project to consecrate Hollywood productions as serious art. Another part of the answer has to do with Cavell stressing the continuity between the type of philosophy he relates to and the movies he values: “my effort to preserve that philosophy, or rather to show that it is preserved [...] in works of lasting public power — world-famous [...] films.”⁵

All these explanations, from the inclusion of *Stella Dallas* in a larger line of movies to the effort of showing a particular type of philosophy at work in those movies, are cases of broader, previous convictions or agendas determining the reading of one particular object — *of theory overcoming criticism*, if you will. Not only do I think this is happening in “Stella’s Taste: Reading *Stella Dallas*,” I also believe such an overcoming of criticism by theory is inherent in Cavell’s own conception of criticism.

I trust Cavell to mean the following reflections apply to criticism in general, not just of movies; but it is still amid his writings on film that I find his concept of criticism more interestingly discussed, namely in the introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness*. Early on in this text, Cavell underlines the continuity between art and life that makes criticism necessarily subjective and personal: “to take an interest in an object is to take an interest in one’s experience of the object, so that to examine and defend my interest in these films is to examine and defend my interest in my own experience.”⁶ My suggestion is precisely that the idea of “defending” is not innocent in this formulation, pointing to a confirmatory tendency that is characteristic of the author’s conception of criticism.

Cavell writes we ought to be “guided by our experience but not dictated to by it,”⁷ but his own description of the process of criticism lets us see that this balance is hardly attainable. While telling us of “checking one’s experience” as “the sense at the same time of consulting one’s experience and of subjecting it to examination,” with

4. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 197.

5. *Ibid.*, 220.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

7. *Ibid.*, 10.

the purpose of “learning neither to impose your experience on the world nor to have it imposed upon by the world,”⁸ the author admits there is a “philosophical catch.”

The catch, Cavell says, is that you already need to trust your experience in order to check it, something he doesn’t explain in too much detail, but that I take to mean that, if you want to test your experience with the object as reference, you have to start by trusting that the experience somehow is of that object, that its characteristics depend on the object and are not just random idiosyncratic impressions. This is in tune with what Cavell says about our trust in our experience being “expressed as a willingness to find words for it”: finding words for an experience means you believe there is something to be described and a right way to do it, that you have given it a meaning that excludes other meanings, one necessarily determined by your own ideas and taste, by who you are.

Put simply, in Cavell’s model, once you try to check your experience through criticism, you must start by trusting that your experience is of the object, which means, as we have seen, that you believe there are reasons (in the object) for your experience being what it is. Your examination of the object hence becomes looking for those reasons, a practice determined by the will to confirm your experience (defend it), which leaves little space for revising it and changing your mind, so that criticism becomes particularly prone to being absorbed by previous ideas and theory.

Cavell’s reading of *Stella Dallas* in light of remarriage comedies represents one such case, and, I believe, Cavell finds it harrowing to view precisely for this reason. In passages where he says “[i]n subjecting these films to the same burden of interpretation that I expect any text to carry that I value as highly,”⁹ Cavell associates liking a movie with being able to interpret it deeply, though it isn’t clear whether he likes a movie because he can interpret it or the other way around. It doesn’t seem too far-fetched to suggest that he in fact finds *Stella Dallas* “harrowing” precisely because he has imposed his experience on the world and has, in the end, failed to interpret the film satisfactorily.

8. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 12.

9. Cavell, *Contesting*, 15.