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Cavell and History

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Grounding Cavell's work within the historical forces that shaped it is a curious task that each of the contributors to this issue is up to. We begin with a magisterial overview of Cavell's writings on film and beyond (particularly his reading of George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944)), in multiple languages (counting footnotes), by Miguel Gomes Amorim. The historical lens here is certainly not linear, but *centripetal*, compounding layers of irony by building on Cavell's insistence that we read gas as allegorical of film and hence of spirit, all three being ethereal — hence to read film as, ultimately, unable to achieve what philosophy has longed to do (that is, to join phenomenal and noumenal worlds) — though perhaps through historical re-visitations (hauntings), rather than dialectical uncovering, comes the true good of film. Next, we have an investigation into film's indebtedness to opera by João Pedro Cachopo, who reminds us that according to Cavell even skepticism has more to do with a loss of voice and expressiveness, and *hence* the world, and that because of this trajectory of disillusionment, an agonistic battle between opera and film, in pursuing different means to reclaim that expression, ensues. Though João reminds us the latter (film) could not exist without the (failure of the) former.

Moving away from film and toward philosophy, Peter Fosl similarly argues for skepticism's indebtedness to David Hume, trying to infuse a Cavellian debate on skepticism with greater Humean purchase than perhaps is currently the norm in Cavellian scholarship. And from philosophy onto American studies, Rachel Malkin apprises us of the prevailing social, cultural, and intellectual climate of the 1960s and 70s, particularly at UC Berkeley (where Cavell was affiliated until 1962), and, subsequently, Harvard (which included, for Cavell, a stint at Tougaloo College during the "Freedom Summer" in Mississippi). And lastly, the ghosts and echoes of Vietnam haunt Robert W. Tate's Cavellian close reading of war sloganeering, past and present (i.e., "Support Our Troops"). From film, to opera, to philosophy, to American studies,

to ordinary language, Cavell belongs in and amongst many historical threads, or, perhaps many historical threads are worth picking up when attempting to historicize Cavell. We have merely scratched the surface here.

With best wishes for continued meet and happy conversation,

SÉRGIO AND AMIR

***(And if cinema can do what Kant could not do,
then where does that place us?):***

**Five Remarks on Two of Stanley Cavell's
Parenthetical Questions, or,
The Remains of the Spectator's Condition**

MIGUEL GOMES AMORIM

Of course — it is more or less the point of the enterprise — I begin with afterthoughts.

CAVELL, *Philosophical Passages*

[T]he underlying subject of what I take criticism to be is the subject of examples. I suppose it is the underlying subject of what I take philosophy as such to be.

CAVELL, *Themes Out of School*

I am assuming, that is, that criticism is inherently immodest and melodramatic [...].

CAVELL, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*

If there is melodrama here, it is everywhere in [Wittgenstein's *Philosophical*] *Investigations*.

CAVELL, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*

At any rate, a theory of criticism will be part of a personal attachment (including a theory of one's attachment to theory, a certain trance in thinking).

CAVELL, *Pursuits of Happiness*

[A]s if the origins of philosophy were hardly different in age from the origins of movies.

CAVELL, *In Quest of the Ordinary*

(What cloud of philosophy?)

CAVELL, *The Claim of Reason*

And the question is raised.

It is not then answered. There is no answer, of the kind we think there is. No answer outside of us.

CAVELL, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Because I evidently require such clouds of history in order to adumbrate my conviction about these topics, let me at least avoid the appearance of thinking I have established more than is here.

CAVELL, *The World Viewed*

Cynics about philosophy, and perhaps about humanity, will find that questions without answers are empty; dogmatists will claim to have arrived at answers; philosophers after my heart will rather wish to convey the thought that while there may be no satisfying answers to such questions in certain forms, there are, so to speak, directions to answers, ways to think, that are worth the time of your life to discover. (It is a further question for me whether directions of this kind are teachable, in ways suited to what we think of as schools.)

CAVELL, *Themes Out of School*

So another question has arisen: What will it mean to be the reader of such a writer?

CAVELL, *The Senses of Walden*

(If you do not ask me, I know; if you ask me, I do not know).

CAVELL, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

What is film?

CAVELL, *The World Viewed*

Then I would like to say that what I am doing in reading a film is performing it (if you wish, performing it inside myself). (I welcome here the sense in the idea of performance that it is the meeting of a responsibility.)

CAVELL, *Pursuits of Happiness*

Because what I want in writing philosophy [...] is to show that whatever discoveries are in store, they are not mine as opposed to yours, and in a certain sense not mine unless yours.

CAVELL, *Philosophical Passages*

What I found in turning to think consecutively about film about a dozen or so years ago was a medium which seemed simultaneously to be free of the imperative to philosophy and at the same time inevitably to reflect upon itself — as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition. And then I was lost.

CAVELL, *Themes Out of School*

What is film? What is a film?

CAVELL, *Contesting Tears*

[Thoreau's] problem — at once philosophical, religious, literary, and, I will argue, political — is to get us to ask the questions, and then to show us that we do not know what we are asking, and then to show us that we have the answer.

CAVELL, *The Senses of Walden*

If we have earned the right to question it, the object itself will answer; otherwise not. There is poetic justice.

CAVELL, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

The question remains: What makes philosophy possible?

CAVELL, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

1. A moving image of skepticism before Kant

Stanley Cavell's philosophical-historical definition of cinema as "a moving image of scepticism"¹ finds what could very well be its most extraordinary contour in the context of his 1988 Postscript to "Naughty Orators: Negation of Voice in *Gaslight*," a reading of George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944) first presented as a conference in Jerusalem (1986).

Explanation of the connection between gaslight and spirit may be taken as the tenor of the explanation given by the cook Elizabeth when Paula, drained, manages to scream down the stairwell for Elizabeth to come up. Entering Paula's room and, in response to Paula's question, assuring her that there's no one in the house to cause any dimming, Elizabeth adds: "But the gas comes in pipes; and I expect there gets more gas in the pipes at some times than there does at others." Paula sees the possibility: "Yes. Yes. I suppose that could explain it." It does not explain the ensuing noises, however, and it does not really in itself match what calls for an explanation: it does not connect the specific conduits between the seen and the unseen. (And can film do what Kant could not do?²

1. "Film is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist — even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes." Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film (Enlarged Edition)*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 188-189. For the return of this definition in Cavell, see "What (Good) is a Film Museum? What is Film Culture?" (1983), in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 110; and "What Photography Calls Thinking," in *Cavell on Film*: 118. For a (too) brief commentary on the definition's implication in Cavell's thought on film, see William Rothman & Marian Keane. *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2000), 68.

2. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 75. Cavell is alluding here to Kant's distinction between nomenon and phenomenon presented in *Critique of Pure Reason*. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: Unified Edition (with all the variants from the 1781 and 1787 editions)*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, intr. Patricia Kitcher (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996). For a preamble to the logic and implications of this distinction, see Rudolf Eisler. *Kant-Lexikon, II*, trans. Anne-Dominique Balmès and Pierre Osimo (Paris: Gallimard/Tel, 2011), 745-748. Regarding certain placements of Kant in Cavell's thought, a longer study would have to confront the vast question of a certain reconfiguration of Kant through Emerson, as well as Kant with Poe. See Cavell. "Emerson's Constitutional Amending: Reading 'Fate,'" in *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Oxford & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995), 20, 29, 32; "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)", in *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 122. In "Knowledge as Transgression. *It Happened One Night*," Frank Capra's film

Cavell raises this extraordinary question in the context of a description of the “paranormal” phenomena provoked by Gregory (Charles Boyer) in order to drive his wife Paula (Ingrid Bergman³) mad, and alongside this peculiarly interrogative connection of Kant and cinema reconfigured as a revision of the film’s “allegory of spirit,”⁴ there also lingers the suggestion that this allegory could say something (maybe even a lot) about the parenthetical question. On the other hand, what is markedly philosophical about the film’s events becomes clearer the moment one acknowledges that the parenthetical question rises before a narrative of detours conceded as an allegorical, and hence political, melodrama.⁵ As a posthumous and parenthetical diversion in the

also presents a peculiar opportunity to reconfigure the issue of Kantian conditions. See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 99. In another direction, it would also be relevant to confront Cavell’s Kant with the severe reappraisal of *Critique of Pure Reason* conducted by Maurizio Ferraris. See Ferraris, *Goodbye Kant! Cosa resta oggi della Critica della ragion pura* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004).

3. For Carlos Clarens, *Gaslight* is above all concerned with “the basic premise of a couple bound together by madness as much as by marriage vows.” See Clarens, *George Cukor* (London: Secker and Warburg/British Film Institute, 1976), 79.

4. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 73. Regarding the question of allegorical functions, it would be necessary to study the vast implications of the recurrent rhetoric of the allegory in Cavell’s thought. *Contesting Tears* includes one of several examples concerning cinema and allegories: “I have formulated the field of feminine communication effected by the film screen, as allegorized by the lit window at the end of [King Vidor’s] *Stella Dallas*, as a search for the mother’s gaze.” See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 214-215. For two other examples of allegorical placements, see Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 147, 181.

5. Although the question of history does not seem to occupy a preeminent place in Stanley Cavell’s thought, the diversified recurrence of its issue is constant throughout all of his books, from the use of the term “history” to the very relevant meditations on slavery and the atomic bomb (it remains however to be seen if those allusions and references are enough to (re)compose Cavell’s thought as a historical one). As a set of examples, *The World Viewed* is particularly relevant. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, xx, xxiv, xxv; 4; 8, 11-12, 21, 25, 36, 48, 56, 71, 60-62, 66, 72, 81, 105, 110, 114, 165, 167, 195, 197, 210, 214-215, 217-218, 225, 230. With particular relevance to any reading of Cavell’s reading of *Gaslight*, the following considerations from the “End of the Myths” chapter have a particular weight in relation to Ingrid Bergman’s performance. “One recalls further that the leading women of the Bogart character — Mary Astor, Ingrid Bergman, Lauren Bacall — while two of them have been among the most desirable public women of our time, are each possessed of an intelligence that gives them an independence from men, hence makes them worth winning, worth yielding independence for.” See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 63.

Later on, Cavell very precisely connects the issue of a star’s filmography (let’s say, a certain *politique de l’actor et de l’actrice*) with “the internal history of the world of cinema”: “(The outlaw past underlying the Bogart character is only the purest instance of a familiar route: the interpretation of lawman and outlaw winds through figures as various or distant as James Cagney and Lloyd Nolan and Howard Duff. Their histories become part of what the movies they are in are about. So an account of the paths of stars across their various films must form part of the internal history of the world of cinema.)” See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 71. These remarks also lead in the direction of *Contesting Tears*, particularly when it comes to Ingrid Bergman’s photogenesis: “So the question becomes: How has this star, this human figure of flesh and blood, call her Ingrid Bergman, called upon the camera to lend her this transfiguration? Part of the answer would be to say what a star is, what it is about such human beings that invites this favorable photogenesis. It is not knowable a priori, but this film should be consulted on the matter.” See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 70.

reading of an “allegory of sprit,” the question “(And can film do what Kant could not do?)” has therefore already been exposed to a system of thought regulated by the issue and definition of cinema as “a moving image of skepticism,” i.e., a condition that cannot be mastered by either rules or means, Kant or cinema (itself), without sooner or later drawing them into further questions (as well as, inevitably, categories),⁶ but which also implies that no strains of this question can preclude a historical role for its allegorical value (an ordering similar to a history conceding itself a further gesture, in this particular case in the form of a Postscript). And that is to say that as a certain contour of this “allegory of sprit,” the parenthetical question could also be displaced as an allegory of an allegory (a spirit of a spirit?) and be repeated under the aegis of cinema as “a moving image of skepticism” (for instance *as if* there were no essence of this allegory other than the one displaced alongside Cavell’s history of reading *Gaslight*).⁷

The question, therefore, implies not only what will become of this “allegory of sprit” as its end in the context of a re-reading of *Gaslight*, but also the possibility of raising other questions before this parenthetical one; for example: 1) How can cinema be delineated by orderings when its cases can be altered, deformed, displaced, decomposed, and reformed by conditions that no longer obey a strictly cinematographic status?; 2) How does in fact a ghost story survive (by) (itself) as an allegory, and can its end survive besides a posthumous re-inscription without reclaiming its narrative condition? 3) What happens to the gas-like traces of the parenthetical question, particularly if one disregards the silliness of what some would feebly term “the pure vision of a film” (one that very likely knew as little about its own history as it did about

As for the relation of cinema with the political, only one quote among many possible ones: “The myth of movies replaces the myth according to which obedience to the law, being obedience to laws I have consented to and thus established, is obedience to the best of myself, hence constitutes my freedom — the myth of democracy. In replacing this myth, it suggests that democracy itself, the sacred image of secular politics, is unliveable.” See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 214. It would however be necessary to consider if this gesture of substitution should not also imply the refusal to use the term “myth,” unless its use is too dependent upon Cavell’s history as a (strict) spectator.

6. The issue of categories and allegories in relation to Film history is presented in Amorim. *A Catalogue Fatigue Sampler for an Im-pertinent History of Cinema, take one* (unpublished, 2013); “Notes for the re-inscription of Plato’s *The Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics* before Film Theory.” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 69/3 (2013), 583-610.

7. In that sense, it would also be necessary to reconsider *Gaslight*’s repositioning in other books. See Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 134-136; *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 102-118, 208, 285 (in this instance as a counter-shot to John Stuart Mill).

a supposed history of cinema as a whole, since it is far too obvious that any proposed purity remains a puerile trend)?

If the question “(And can film do what Kant could not do)” is indeed a possible actualization of Kant’s philosophy through cinema, then it not only concerns Cavell’s *Gaslight* re-reading as an “allegory of spirit,” but also directs the figure of gas according to which the film organizes itself as it leads each of its repositions in the direction of a “spectral” agent interrupting female sanity (particularly when this possibility is interfered with by the parenthetical detour of the question). The question not only provides an immeasurable pause in the Postscript, but works as if it were a suspension which, related to gas, also turns it into a condition which bears the question (and which up to a certain point counter-inscribes *Gaslight* “itself”). But if the question that this Postscript bears is indeed a detour through the “figure” of gas, it also complies with the matter of the question designating a philosophical-historical pause for cinematographic possibilities alongside the issue of a gas that, although it does not belong to the significant traits of the visible in a strict sense, does indeed belong to the traits of Cavell’s reading of it (at least within the corpus presented in *Contesting Tears* as a set of pauses and interruptions).

Alongside the “figure” of gas, the parenthetical question belongs to those traits of Stanley Cavell’s philosophy (one could almost be tempted say, (almost) an affirmatively conventional materiality) which, as the suspension of philosophically determined writing, remain accessible for its reading beside both *Gaslight* and cinema as “a moving image of skepticism” (a definition which, without remaining the same, can be repeated, declined, and inflected by certain (nearly) pornographic markings of the melodrama). The question thus concerns not only a “melodramatic” pause that announces no ready(-made) answer, but also complies with the shots in *Gaslight* where the question of gas assigns to this re-reading the status of both a parenthesis and a melodrama displaced before and within the question. (The parenthetical question does not imply or mean a digression analogous to a footnote in the so-called main text, rather the condition of a re-reading marked by a detour in which gas can be inflected as a repetition — a gesture, therefore, that comes into consideration not so much as a final revision but as a bearer of its cinematographically historical possibilities).

2. Before the spectrator's condition

Taking into consideration another parenthetical question in the Postscript, the entire movement of the film can also be described as a gesture proceeding from what could be termed *the spectrator*.⁸

The extent to which, or sense in which, such domestic melodramas are ghost stories — a matter coming to another head, in Ibsen, in *Ghosts* — is laid out in the question the detective asks the constable after they have followed Gregory only to have him disappear into the fog, like a ghost: “You don’t suppose he could have gone into his house do you? [...] Why should a man walk out of his own house, all the way around the corner, just to get back where he started from?” If we translate this as: “Why would he wish to enter his house unseen?” the answer is irresistible: in order to haunt the house, which is a way of inhabiting it. Here the path is opened for considering Paula to be responding to lowering lamps and noises in the attic as to a ghost story, or ghost play. (Then where does that place us?)⁹

The probing anxieties about a suspicious act that may very well turn out to be an excuse to become a ghost at one’s so-called own house — but would that imply, or at least provide, the means or the ends of this “allegory of spirit”? — and concern the functions of gas as it turns Paula into the “recipient” of gaseous repetitions, but also prevent her from fully being (there) for others, and, in particular, the spectrator(s) implied in the question “(Then where does that place us?).” As a renewal of Cavell’s reading, this other parenthetical question also expands his definition of cinema with-

8. In several moments of his books, Cavell concedes the possibility of the reader as a fantastical figure with implications that ought to be amplified in the direction of the cinematographic spectator. See, e.g., Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 184. The implications of this possibility are developed in a work-in-progress titled *A Brief Cinematographic Critique of the Spect(r)ator’s Reason*, where some examples from the recurrent gesture of haunting in Cavell’s thought are considered alongside formulations from the early media reception of cinema after its so-called invention by the Lumière brothers, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Gilles Deleuze, Laurence Rickels, and Enrico Ghezzi. The issue of the fantastical reader in Cavell, on the other hand, leads into one of several considerations regarding Sigmund Freud’s take on the Copernican revolution. The implications of this gesture are developed in another work-in-progress titled *Candidates, Castings, And Variants for a Permanent Copernican Revolution*.

9. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 73-74.

out concluding it, particularly if one considers this melodrama as a rhythmic sequence of gas traces displaced in-between (nearly) nothing, fire, and its extinction. Furthermore, what could be termed *the melodrama of the spectator* announces through this other question a peculiar re-entry into the film, for the spectator stands before a re-reading of *Gaslight* he (it?) was unable to conclude once and for all.¹⁰ A reading of gas as the condition for this other question, therefore, can be stated as a re-reading that aims at this “allegory of spirit” but only as the pause in which the melodrama of the spectator conditions this act in order to assert its (re)condition without any horizontal end(s) for both questions. At the same time, this gesture as a skeptical claim is amplified in the typographical space of the parenthesis by a movement that can no longer be dominated by straight intentions, since the question of the spect(r)ator is crossed by gas as a condition to which it is exposed, even as it is split apart.

Within the parenthetical question, both *Gaslight*, gas, and the spectator are displaced alongside what the articulation of the question could not manage as subject or theme (or which, in another sense, it cannot re-state without reclaiming a possible answer), therefore preventing the thematically formal illustration of a gas whose oddity can only mark the suspension of any gaze. By means not only of both parenthetical questions but also of what Cavell terms “variations,”¹¹ every element of this re-reading of *Gaslight* retrospectively becomes the condition for both a suspension and a suspended relation in which the “variations” retain the gesture which they pervade (this relation of the suspension of their relation to both the reading and the parenthetical questions thus remains able to be affected by its themes and movements as a consequential problem). The “variations” are also a “variation”: they suspend and give themselves up, hardly different from the spectator’s disfiguration in a medium of both ghostly and mundane designation (in a way, the spectator questions his (its?) possibility while articulating the exorbitant theme of gas as both surplus, ascent, distance, spatial and temporal indetermination *for* a melodrama re-cast as an allegorical trait).

10. A gesture somewhat dissimilar from Fredric Jameson’s claims about his spectatorship signature: “I may also say that this kind of analysis also resembles Freud’s mainly in the way in which, when successful, it liquidates the experience in question and dissolves them without a trace; I find I have no desire to see again a movie about which I have written well.” See Jameson, *Signatures of the visible* (London: Routledge, 1990), 3-4.

11. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 73.

Furthermore, the re-entry of the question between cinema and Kant, as well as the virtual impossibility of closing both the two parenthesis and the 1986 reading (let's say, the space in-between both these questions and Cavell's re-reading of *Gaslight* as a *counter-crypt*), are already indicated on the near side of other statements concerning the film.¹² And if the parenthetical questions remain at the edge of both visibility and readability, that happens because at the very least they are concerned with the activity of gas as it makes common cause with the house as a marital space and impart their dispersed effects without assembling them into the identifiable unity of a form. The counter-crypt thus makes common cause with the gas as the stalling of parenthetical questions in their positing, as well as with the accident of cinema as a philosophical-historical instance where Cavell's brand of skepticism can remain displayed. This way, the questions make common cause with *Gaslight* since they are concerned not only with what, in a certain "Kantian" reading, seems to remain inaccessible, but also with a ruptured and partial cinematographic haunting of cinema by philosophy. (The re-reading can be interrupted, no doubt, but only because *Gaslight*

12. Not only the references to the Foucault-Derrida Cartesian *polemos* (Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 61-65), but particularly, in view of the history of Cavell's thought, J.L. Austin's "Other Minds." See Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers: Third Edition*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 76-116. For references to Austin's "Other Minds," see Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 39, 58; *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 49, 132-133, 224, 240; *Pursuits of Happiness*, 119; *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 51, 68, 83, 161; *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 97; *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 201; *Cities of Words*, 80; *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 195; *Little Did I Know: Excerpts From Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 320, 359. It would however be necessary to infer if references to "other minds" which do not explicitly allude to Austin's text are independent from that frame. In this regard, see *The Claim of Reason*, 86, 425; *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 119; *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 55; *Contesting Tears*, 90.

In *The Claim of Reason*, the issue of alterity is very precisely asserted as a historical issue: "The idea is that the problem of the other is discovered through telling its history. Then how could this history be recounted; what would it be a recounting of?" See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 468. In another direction, "the history of the other" ought to be confronted with the following definition of history: "I might ask how it is that we have recovered from such outbreaks of irrationality, which dot the religious history, i.e., the history, of the Judeo-Christian world" (*The Claim of Reason*, 422). For the minimal elements in the Foucault-Derrida dossier see: Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* [1961] (Paris: Tel/Gallimard, 1977), 56-59; "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu" [1972] in *Dits et écrits I, 1954-1975*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald with Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Quarto/Gallimard, 2001), 1113-1136; "Retour sur la Première Méditation de Descartes" [1973], ed. Philippe Artières et al, *Cahiers de l'Herne: Foucault* (Paris: L'Herne, 2011), 92-94. On Derrida's side, see "Cogito et histoire de la folie" [1964], in *L'écriture et la différence* [1967] (Paris: Seuil, 1979) 51-97. This *polemos* was later restaged as Derrida & Freud vs. Foucault in "«Être juste avec Freud» : L'histoire de la folie à l'âge de la psychanalyse". See Derrida, *Résistances de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 89-146.

also provides this interruption in order that the second parenthetical question as the condition for a spect(r)ator can support the counter-crypt of both an indissoluble closure and a rational reason for gas — as if both were to be interrupted not by an act of arbitrariness, but only by an interval from which no final meaning for an autonomous spectrator may be adjoined.)

On the other hand, one could also consider that the parenthetical questions precede the re-reading as the borderline position of the spectrator in order to request both its contour and the issue of shots that concern a cinematographic thought. In that sense, the counter-crypt regards history as a conditional allegory, and since its condition has been contracted as both the measure for its survival and disappearance, this interval, in order to be itself at all, must indeed materialize itself as an “allegory of spirit.” Furthermore, since this provision of the counter-crypt before an allegory is (almost) immanent, at least if it has to be there for the remains of the film, it also complies with its subtraction before the precarious possibility of a history for an allegory. (If it were not the subtracted delay of its transience, gas as an allegory could never “be,” since only under the condition that it be slightly more than gas as an allegory can it survive as the condition for the two questions’ counter-crypt — after all, its condition is only given retrospectively by its ending *as* history, maybe even before the end of the means for history presented in the counter-crypt as an allegorical re-entry into cinema).

3. Before the signature effect of an auto(cine)bio(thanato)graphy

Since the rupture of the first parenthetical question is preceded by the reconsideration of an “allegory of sprit,” it also provides a certain disclosure concerning the belated recognition which is imparted by it, particularly as it is linked to the recognition of the economy of both the 1986 Jerusalem conference and the events of *Gaslight*.

The allegory of spirit through images and consequences of gaslighting may, if it does not put one off, put one on to wanting some (further) explanation of the connection. (The founding connection, for the work represented in my text, is always the fate of spirit as the fate of voice; so that strangulation and vampir-

ism — the victimization, respectively, of the aunt and of Paula — are psychically linked thefts, say of freedom, or separateness, difference.)¹³

Since this “allegory of spirit” provided the reading of *Gaslight* with conditions to which Cavell did not hesitate to attribute the impact of symptomatically historical moments,¹⁴ the Postscript would have merely had the slight significance of recollected intentions, were it not that it is factually grounded in the conference’s text and could be re-read as a further occasion to work out the film. But it is not only *Gaslight*’s events that are conjured up in it; more precisely, it is their condition as it survives through what Cavell (re)cites as his (its?) re-reading’s counter-crypt: a cinematographic condition of gas-like effects, or, in short, of cinema before (its) history. (What speaks in both parenthetical questions as the signature effect of the spectator named Stanley Cavell concerns cinema in regard to a case such as *Gaslight*, but does so since the film (still) can be shown beyond itself.)

The Postscript, reciting a previous reading which in a way designates itself at (as?) the limit of a phenomenal cognition concerning, but not only, the issue of a ghostly gas, therefore contains this “allegory of spirit” as the condition for the two parenthetical questions that it must (re)cite in order to recompose itself as if its conditions were limited by a fictional status. And since gas in *Gaslight* can indeed be regarded as an allegorical figure, its occurrences as partings *from* this film do not reduce it to a ghostly *ghost film* (of (redundant) ghosts, as if they could be reduced to a single referent within a historically describable context), but are misaligned before the counter-crypt as if this “allegory of spirit” were more than a referential, maybe even reverential, end misplaced as the withdrawal of the film’s apparent theme. It therefore concerns not only a film which seems to be “about” gas and ghosts, but stands for the trace of a cinema that, in the wake of Kant’s philosophy as read by Cavell, comprises a counter-crypt that is no longer, or maybe even not yet, death or the condition of the film “itself.”¹⁵ The two question’s counter-crypt, as if detached from

13. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 73.

14. *Ibid.*, 76.

15. In this direction, it is certainly not accidental that another extraordinary moment concerning Cavell’s approach to cinema takes place in the last pages of *Little Did I Know* in the form of a rapprochement between Howard Hawk’s *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and Maurice Blanchot’s *L’Écriture du désastre*. See Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 545-546; and Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980). This gesture, on the other hand, urgently needs to be amplified according to

itself, concerns both the end of this “allegory of spirit” and the condition that it outlasts, both as a departure from the possibility of a meaning reduced to gas and its eventual return (or: both the subtraction of the spectrator and the trace he (it?) leaves behind,¹⁶ except and very precisely as a parenthetical question).

The Postscript rephrases the conference but does not reduce all the cinematographic instances that could be imagined, foretold or anticipated before (“Kantian”) pasts that cannot be exceeded by a further (strictly cinematographic?) future of, and for, cinema as a philosophical question. The two questions therefore remain before the history of a spectrator, one whose skepticism also concerns the re-entry of finitude, and, regarding both the film and the conference, what remains of their disappearance (as) (and before) the Postscript. (As he re-reads his conference, Cavell also survives its historical context so that he can comply with an almost endless series of revisions as moments of a life dedicated to the (necessarily) provisory auto(cine)bio(thanato)graphy of a spectrator).¹⁷

As a particular textual instance, the Postscript provides the way to an allegorical condition that has overtaken both cinema and history (extended both into what cinema, *Gaslight*, and the conference are meant to say), and doubles (as) a re-reading that splits its elements into a gas-like outline confronting itself with what is meant in it as the (re)citation of irreducibly parenthetical questions (not forgetting other cinematographic cases that may be concerned with it as pathways to “the whole of

what Cavell considers to be a peculiarly skeptical trait in Blanchot’s thought (*Little Did I Know*, 528), and furthermore ought to take into consideration the only three films explicitly referred to by Blanchot throughout his writings: Frédéric Rossif’s *Le temps du ghetto* (1961); Marguerite Duras’ *Détruire, dit-elle* (1969); Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). See Blanchot, “Le cours du monde” [1960-1964] in *Écrits Politiques 1953-1993*, ed. Éric Hoppenot (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 121; “Détruire”, in Maurice Blanchot *et al*, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris, Albatros, 1975), 100; “N’oubliez pas!” [*La Quinzaine Littéraire* n° 459, 16 March 1986], in Blanchot. *La Condition critique. Articles, 1945-1998*, ed. Christophe Bident (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 433; “L’écriture consacré au silence” [*Instants* n° 1, 1989], in Blanchot, *ibid.* 433. In an interview published in the issue of *Cahiers de l’Herne* focusing on Blanchot, Jacqueline Laporte describes the writer as someone with quite classical tastes in terms of cinema. See Jacqueline Hoppenot (Paris: L’Herne, 2014), 102.

16. “Les films ne parlent que d’absence présente.” See Cavell “Le cinéma colle à la peau de l’Amérique: Entretien avec Stanley Cavell (par Antoine de Baecque),” *Cahiers du cinéma hors-série: Le siècle du cinéma* (November 2000): 58.

17. A spectral autobiography recomposed in-between cinema and films. “Le temps était venu de produire des réponses qui signifieraient quelque chose. Soudain j’ai eu besoin de cela. C’est alors que j’ai commencé à aller au cinéma seul.” See Cavell, “Le cinéma colle à la peau de l’Amérique: Entretien avec Stanley Cavell (par Antoine de Baecque),” 59.

“Je n’ai plus cette impulsion proprement physiologique qui me poussait à *aller au cinéma*. Je vais désormais *voir un film*.” See Cavell, “Stanley Cavell: un philosophe au cinéma (entretien par Jean-Loup Bourget et Marc Cerisuelo),” *Positif* 464 (October 1999), 190.

cinema,” whatever that could possibly mean and include). The fact that the Postscript counter-inscribes the questions among other instances of textual hauntings (Kant, Ibsen,¹⁸ Freud, Austin, Derrida vs. Foucault...) and, moreover, that structurally it is (almost) nothing other than a self-proliferating reciting of a (previous) reading, also implies its condition as a (benign?) “self-vampirism” as soon as it is read in relation to “itself.”

4. Before further allegories

This suggestion is confirmed by Gregory’s last accusation of Paula, that her madness is inherited from her mother, who, he claims to have discovered, died in an insane asylum — himself now the fabricator of a ghost story, fictionalizing Paula’s history as well as her perceptions. (In not considering Gregory’s own story, I am not considering the extent to which he seems to come to believe his fabrications.) Paula said to Gregory the morning after their wedding night that her mother died in giving birth to her, and that she never knew her father. It is a very questionable tale, not to say a haunting one, since Paula’s “aunt” might have had her reasons for telling Paula the story: it could cover such a fact as that Paula’s mother was indeed mad; or the fact that Paula is the “aunt’s” child, whom it would have been most inconvenient for a famous actress, in a secret liaison with a royal figure, to acknowledge as hers (as theirs?). But the question for us is what Paula thinks of the story, why she speaks of it as knowing no more than these few words about so massive a matter of her life. She attaches great feeling and significance to the memory of her aunt’s going over for her, on special occasions, the stories associated with her collection of theatrical mementos; but the child seems not to have asked about, nor to have had, mementos associated with the figure she calls her mother. As if she does not feel she has the right to know something, or as if he already knows something. Now consider again: Who does Paula know to be in the attic? And before all: Who did she know was there before she knew? And who

18. See Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, trans. Michael Meyer (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1997).

am I to want to know what Paula knows — to speculate, for example, about Freud's observation, in discussing second marriages in his 1931 essay "Female Sexuality," that a woman's problems with her (first) husband will repeat her problems — Freud says, "disappointments" — with her mother. (A poltergeist is a ghost that manifests itself by noises and rappings. Evidently also by thumps and scraping. It stems from a word meaning to cry out.)¹⁹

Although the "spectral" attacks directed by Gregory against his wife under the form of gaslighting can be framed as a patriarchal gesture within this "allegory of the spirit," this possibility leads Cavell not only to the recognition of a modification within a history of marital relations, but to the experience of the particular means and ends of this family history. The death of the mother as a probable cause for the exhaustion of those means alongside the stalling of marriage comes under the form of a connection between "to haunt," Paula's aunt, and a right to speculation taking its cue from Sigmund Freud's "Female Sexuality."²⁰ If one concedes that this re-reading of *Gaslight*

19. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 74-75.

20. See Sigmund Freud, *La vie sexuelle*, introduction by Jean Laplanche, trans. Denise Berger et al. (Paris: PUF, 1969), 139-155. Besides Cavell's allusion to Freud's "Female Sexuality" (*ibid*: 75), one should also take into account another parenthetical moment in the Introduction to *Contesting Tears*: "If we thereupon take as an answer to the sublimer question, What does a woman want? that what she wants is to be known, or to know that her separateness is acknowledged, we may see the epistemological mismatch for which the genders have been headed: whatever will count as her being known — and I suppose this is quite undefined — it is precisely not to be satisfied by her having at once to tell and not to tell what she knows. At best this changes the subject." (19-20). And: "In thus raising the question, What does the woman want to know and to be known? The suggestion is lodged that the answer may be more than men can imagine on their own. (Should I rather say?: what the feminine wants known is more than the masculine can imagine. This seems at once trivial and evasive.)" (*Contesting Tears*, 23).

As a preliminary approach to this (very likely) endless question, see Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). For its counter-shot, see Felman, *Le Scandale du corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou, la séduction en deux langues* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), as well as the reissue of the English translation and its replacement in-between a foreword by Stanley Cavell and an afterword by Judith Butler. See Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Cavell, "Foreword to *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*", in Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, xi-xxi; and Judith Butler, "Afterword", in Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 113-123. Stephen Mulhall's introduction to Cavell's reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, "Prologue: The Avoidance of Love (The Abdication Scene)" (from *Must We Mean What We Say?*) presented in *The Cavell Reader* rightly places the issue of gender and skepticism as a *de facto* recurrent concern in Cavell's thought. See Cavell, *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 22-23.

Furthermore, one should also pursue the relation between that question and the issue of genders and skepticism as presented in the chapter from *Contesting Tears* focusing on Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: Moments of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*" (*Contesting Tears*, 101), and then reframe it in-between Jean-Luc Nancy's peculiarly

displaces the appropriation of events by Gregory in regard to the authoritative stance of a patriarchal insanity, then the husband's measures do conform to the power to project and control through “strangulation and vampirism” and must give way to the (nearly) incalculable effect of gaslighting. In this way, what is at stake is not only this “allegory of sprit,” but also the means for allegory as a category of appropriation whereby the shifty lines of recognition dislocate the projection of gas²¹. But since this “allegory of sprit” as the revised history of a reading does include the two parenthetical questions, then the means for further questions must have been inserted all along into a context that has never been completely covered by its allegorical stance since it exceeded the limits of its outset and efficiency according to a range that could no more be defined by this “allegory of sprit” than the social, and also allegorical, infrastructure of that to which that context was explicitly related to. (However, one should not disregard the possibility that this new wave of questions (“Who does Paula know to be in the attic? And before all: Who did she know was there before she knew? And who am I to want to know what Paula knows”) has been exposed to the possibility of addressing what in every film inscribes *a priori* the possibility of further questions that, even without programmed directions, ought to remain effective as cases of, and for, “a moving image of skepticism.”)

The attic as the secret space for a “spectral” marriage, one that no longer speaks (much), or which, instead of speaking, only allows for the chatter against which Elizabeth’s explanation can be heard, works as a sort of block, however much it is intended to maintain this marriage’s history as an allegory, and contains its spectatorship since it itself is (re)constructed out of disintegration (at least before the film as both an allegory for history and the deferral of its philosophical-historical

inverted take on Jacques Lacan’s somewhat hilarious formula, *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*, and Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin’s programmatically consensual approach. See Jean-Luc Nancy. *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (Paris: Galilée, 2001); and Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin, *Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel: Deux leçons sur «L’Étourdit» de Lacan* (Paris: Fayard, 2010); and Jacques Lacan, “L’Étourdit” [1973], in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 449-495. (In a further turn of the screw, all these aspects would need to be reconsidered alongside some scattered considerations from Fredric Jameson and Jean-Luc Nancy regarding the endless issue of pornography.) For Jean Domarchi, “[s]i Cukor s’intéresse tant à la femme, c’est parce qu’elle est *le problème numéro 1 de l’Amérique* (aussi important, en tout cas, que celui de la ségrégation).” See Domarchi. *George Cukor* (Seghers: Paris, 1965), 57.

21. A point to be reconfigured according to Cavell’s remarks on Freud and Heidegger in relation to the translation of *The World Viewed* into French under the title *La Projection du monde*. See Cavell, *La projection du monde: Réflexions sur l’ontologie du cinéma*, trans. Christian Fournier (Paris, Belin, 1999); “Conclusion”, ed. Sandra Laugier and Marc Cerisuelo, *Stanley Cavell: Cinéma et philosophie* (Paris: Presses de Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2001), 294.

definition). The parenthetical questions destined to set a limit to it pass alongside *Gaslight*, but only in such a way that, while available for history as an allegory set up within a domestically limited sphere of affects, they also comprise a (nearly) uncontrollable net of “connections” whose complexity doesn't allow for the final (re)cognition of the motives or grounds for Gregory's actions. The attic would then be another counter-crypt *for* this “allegory of sprit” as an allegory *of* history, since the crypt contains a counter-crypt — or since Kant stands before cinema as both its possibility and (privileged?) spectator — and vice-versa (or: the crypt can only stand before its counter-crypt; after all, if something remains to be seen in-between the questions, it follows that the possibility of history proceeds from the counter-crypt as it works out, as well as through, this re-reading of *Gaslight* without turning it into a funeral urn, and while thankfully still offering a condition for both philosophy and cinema without a (final) answer.)

5. And then no closure before two parenthetical questions...

But the dimension Elizabeth's explanation invokes of gas coming in pipes, and of having more or less gas put into the pipes, and not ones joining merely the rooms within this house, but one's linking this house with numberless other houses, is the dimension of a social organism in which this house functions, bound in the networks of dependence of a vast city. Hence the dimension is an allegory of those features of (modern) life that Gregory can depend upon, without planning, that support the deference and secrecy his plans require — the obedience of servants; the nightly visits to a “studio” where he does mysterious, unshareable work; power to exclude all other people and all other places from his marital privacy. I do not have to say that his occupations are, allegorically, characteristic of the society that supports them to observe that his evil is, for all its exotic trappings, utterly, unutterably, unoriginal — like the preoccupations of melodrama.²²

22. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 75-76.

As a historically allegorical explanation provided by Elizabeth (Barbara Everest), “the dimension of gas coming in pipes” implies itself as part of a “social organism” in order to bring about the rotation of historical life as a social cycle. Gregory's tricks as acts of unoriginality thus induce a certain impression of theatricality: not because they are performed only as a restaging of what has passed into history, but rather because they act upon its condition in order to turn it into what has passed for history. This “vampirism” re-enters as alteration so that it draws its work under its spell and the allegory articulated in *Gaslight* therefore includes its own, and necessarily improper, *recitation*, particularly because once the (apparent) end of the film is reached, so is the condition of its spectral predictability as the end of a (still) rational, consistent, and sequential (ghost) story of history.²³

23. A longer version of this text is part of a work-in-progress titled *Essays on Re-applied Catallegory Fatigue*, and takes its place alongside the following issues: cinephilia's precariousness as a form of cinephagia and addiction; the place of Plato's *The Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* in film theory; Gilles Deleuze and the issue of “science-fiction” regarding some films from Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, and Jean-Luc Godard; Fredric Jameson's politico-cinematographic allegories; Manny Farber's considerations on cinematographic space. See Amorim, “*Catallegory* fatigue re-entries before an introductory *negative space*, or, Here and there space remains the place for cinema”. *Comparat/ive Cinema* 4, “Manny Farber: Systems of Movement,” (July 2014).

Romantic Affinities?: Cavell on Opera, Film, and the Claim of Expression

JOÃO PEDRO CACHOPO

I.

In “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” a chapter of *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994),¹ as in a relatively recent essay entitled “Opera in (and as) Film” (2005),² Cavell develops a compelling argument about the link between these two art forms. According to him, opera and film represent two historically distant attempts to come to terms with the same “cultural trauma,” one he characterizes as “having to do with a crisis of expression, a sense that language as such, reason as such, can no longer be assured of its relation to a world apart from me or to the reality of the passions within me.”³ Such a crisis has a name: it is called skepticism.

It comes as no surprise to those familiar with Cavell’s work, namely with *The Claim of Reason* (1979), and his books on cinema — *The World Viewed* (1971), *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), *Contesting Tears* (1996), and *Cities of Words* (2005) — that skepticism and the manifold efforts to overcome it are among the major *Leitmotive* of Cavell’s thought.⁴ Likewise, it is well known fact that for him Shakespeare’s (tragic) theatre and Descartes’s (solipsistic) philosophy were crucial manifestations of — and, concomitantly, attempts to appease — the increasingly generalized anxiety, which came of age around the transition between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries,

1. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 129-169.

2. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” in William Rothman (ed.), *Cavell on Film* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 305-318.

3. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 306.

4. It is the ambition of art (especially of theatre and cinema) and philosophy, from Shakespeare’s later oeuvre to Hollywood’s comedies and melodramas of the thirties and forties, passing through the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, to overcome such a crisis. The opposition to skepticism is actually what brings art and philosophy together, inasmuch as they both suffer from, and try to remedy, the oppressing feeling of incommunicability.

about the actual powers of language and reason to express the intricacies of human experience and to uncover the complexities of the world around. The same applies to opera, which Cavell insists should be understood as both a symptom and an attempt (historically coincident with that of Shakespeare's later comedies, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* in particular) to appease the malady of skepticism. In Cavell's own words, from the "Overture" of *A Pitch of Philosophy*:

[O]pera's issues can be seen to be a response to, hence a continual illumination of, the divisions of self, the suffocation of speech, and the withdrawal of the world that have preoccupied philosophy since the advent of skepticism in Descartes, which is to say, explicitly since the generation after the invention of opera and the construction of the works of Shakespeare.⁵

Alongside philosophy, opera and film have thus at least this point in common: they both respond to that "traumatic crisis of expression,"⁶ which Cavell explicitly construes as a "*historical break in Western history* in which conditions of a catastrophe of human understanding came together, in which, for example, language as such comes to seem incapable of representing the world."⁷ So viewed, the link between opera and film appears to be intrinsically historical — though incapable of being explained in historicist terms (i.e., by tracing lines of causality between socially and historically defined cultural facts). Their affinity instead lies, to follow Cavell, not in the circumstance that they share a set of *unhistorical* qualities as multimedia art forms, but in the fact that they are as it were subterraneously bound to each other as symptomatic responses to the same *historical* drama: the advent of skepticism that marks the dawn of western modernity, with consequences spanning the centuries to follow.

Yet film provides not only a later, but also a qualitatively different, "happier, anyway less fatal"⁸ response, by virtue of which cinema may be seen as both an inheritor and a competitor of opera. Cavell's reading of the scene of Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds goes to town* (1936), in which the protagonist shows himself unwilling to support opera financially — as his recently deceased uncle used to do — offers a condensed version of

5. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, viii.

6. Cavell, "Opera in (and as) Film," 306.

7. Cavell, "Opera and the Lease of Voice," 139 (my emphasis).

8. *Ibid.*, 135.

his argument regarding the agonistic affinity between the two genres. In this scene, Frank Capra would confess “film’s sense of affinity with opera, often expressed in an impulse of competition with opera.”⁹ Opera, Mr. Deeds seems eager to claim, is admittedly a wrong show to put on. But the reason for this view, with the correlative intimation that film in turn is the right show to put on, is less financially driven, according to Cavell, than one is inclined to think at first sight. At issue in this scene is arguably not “that movies are in some obvious sense economically more viable than operas,”¹⁰ but that Capra allegorizes film’s own “claims to inherit from opera the flame that preserves the human need, on pain of madness of melancholy, for conviction in its expressions of passion.”¹¹

Regardless of the viewpoint taken, it seems indisputable that the way in which Cavell understands the relationship between opera and cinema could not be without consequences to the understanding of their historical unfolding as art forms. In other words, not only is their link historical (in the above-explained sense), but the disclosure of it also prompts a certain understanding of both opera and film that is charged with historically meaningful consequences. In this essay, though I will not remain silent about Cavell’s thoughts on opera, I will mainly focus on film.

To render my purpose as clearly as possible, I permit myself to draw attention to a passage in “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” in which Cavell anticipates the reader’s perplexity and asks: “Why go to film to raise the question of opera? Why not to opera directly?” The reader of this article is much more likely to ask the same question in its inverted sense: *Why go to — Cavell’s view of — opera to raise the question of — and discuss Cavell’s thoughts on — film?* I can answer this question by adding to Cavell’s response that *if* “what happened to opera as an institution is that it transformed itself into film, that film is, or was, our opera,”¹² as Cavell compellingly claims, then an inquiry is worth pursuing into film’s *claim of expression* that seriously takes into account that music is what in opera embodies “the flame that preserves the human need [...] for conviction in its expressions of passion.”¹³ How did film transform, while appropriating, such ethereal flame?

9. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 305.

10. *Ibid.*, 306.

11. *Ibid.*, 307.

12. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 136.

13. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 307.

My purpose in this piece, without losing sight of the previous question, is then less to further clarify how Cavell understands cinema in its generality — which is one of the most debated topics in Cavellian scholarship — than to ask how Cavell’s insight into the agonistic affinity between opera and film may be brought to bear on a broader debate on film’s operatic inheritance in relation to the use of music — be it operatic or not — in cinema. This will lead me to a brief appraisal of Terrence Malick’s recent work (especially *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *To the Wonder* (2012)), in which the use of Romantic music is in my view conspicuous enough to deserve critical reflection.

II.

As for opera, Cavell is clear enough regarding the relevance of music as the means through which an overcoming of skepticism, however precarious it might have been, took place: “Nothing less than such a trauma [that of skepticism] could meet the sense of language as requiring as it were a rescue by music.”¹⁴ At the dawn of the seventeenth century, music alone would have been able to reassure the modern subject of her or his ability to convey the intricacies of inner passion or pain. In opera, the human being endowed with language would have regained so to say a voice — one that, while taking hold of her or him, is, and is not, her or his own voice (as if vulnerability to the alienating power of music were the price to pay for the rescue of human communication from the narrow scope of ordinary language).

Historically seen, Cavell’s take on the birth of opera — one that stresses its relevance as an artistic phenomenon that, similarly to film, could not have taken place in any other period of history — seems to be confirmed by the otherwise anodyne fact that the myth of Orpheus haunted the history of opera from its very beginning.

That Monteverdi’s first opera, as well as the two that preceded his initiating masterpiece, and Gluck’s masterpiece a century later, which brings the aria to the musical level of the recitative (a point I accept from Joseph Kerman), all work from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is almost too good to be true in establishing the myth of

14. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film, 306.

opera, of its origins — the story of the power of music, epitomized as the act of singing.¹⁵

Cavell thus reads the myth as a parable of skepticism. When Orpheus looks back at Eurydice — to reassure himself of her presence — that is precisely when he loses her for good. In the myth, music finds itself at the heart of such parable, in which it plays a redemptive role. Nothing can bring Eurydice back, and the feeling of her loss cannot be expressed by words alone. It demands the help of music. In fact, in opera, the rescue of language by music is inextricably linked to the singing voice. Although Eurydice is irremissibly gone, it is as if her spirit survived — so to speak as music — in the moving songs conceived by Orpheus's wounded genius.

But how about film? Where are we to find the antidote against skepticism in the case of the art of moving pictures? What exactly, in cinema, plays the role that music does in opera? What is — put another way — the counterpart of operatic music in film, thanks to which it managed to find a path out of the prison of linguistic/existential finitude? As I previously underlined, my aim is not to elaborate on Cavell's view of film, but rather to discuss the consequences of his insight on the affinity between opera and cinema for questioning the importance of expression in film. So, admitting with Cavell that opera, thanks to the transfigurative power of music, allowed for an overcoming, however precarious it might have been, of skepticism, what does, in that case, play the role — the expressive, anti-skeptic, romantic role — of music in cinema? One might answer this question in a variety of ways. At least three: by means of an analogy, of a metaphor, or else literally.

The first answer consists in stressing that the expressive qualities of moving images are somehow parallel — analogous — to the aural expressiveness of music. This answer decisively emphasizes the visual nature of cinema, the sense that cinema has essentially to do with the power of image. However counterintuitive the equation between the expressiveness of moving images and moving sounds might seem today, the truth is that it lends plausibility to the fact that cinema showed itself fascinated by opera right from the beginning (since the period of silent cinema). Cavell acknowledges precisely this early sense of affinity when he recalls that “[e]ven in the silent era of film, Cecil B. DeMille made a film of *Carmen* as an opera, as if to declare that the expressive

15. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 139.

powers of silent film are equal to those of music”;¹⁶ or when he points out, as he retrospectively accounts for his interest in the link between opera and film, that “the connection I would go to draw between film and opera was to analogize the camera’s powers of transfiguration to those of music, each providing settings of words and persons that unpredictably take them into a new medium with laws of its own.”¹⁷

The second possible answer — in which one is to resort to a metaphor — is in no way less Cavellian. If anything, it is at the closest to the singularity of his work on film, with its recognizable emphasis on Hollywood’s golden age, especially on a set of movies from the 1930s and 1940s, which Cavell tries to interpret in their specificity by claiming that they form two interrelated genres: the “comedy of remarriage” (see *The Pursuit of Happiness*) and the “melodrama of the unknown woman” (see *Contesting Tears*). In both these genres (or sub-genres), the female character is the trigger for action, and the key to grasp what is at stake in the film. In Cavell’s words:

I have been working out the thought that film — judging from the genres of comedy and of the melodrama whose affinities I have traced elsewhere — is, or was, about the creation of the woman, about her demand for an education, for a voice in her history. In the comedies this happens by way of something there represented as the possibility of marriage; in the melodramas it happens in the rejection of what in them is pictured as the option of marriage.¹⁸

In both cases, what interests Cavell the most — and matters to us here — is, as he puts it in the Introduction to *Contesting Tears*, “the creation of the woman — the new creation of the woman, the creation of the new woman, the new creation of the human.”¹⁹ As if women were, metaphorically put, the privileged protagonists of an universal overcoming of skepticism through film, thus playing the same role as music in opera. Already in opera, women were significantly assigned a crucial — if tragically mortal — role. As Cavell maintains in the wake of Catherine Clément (whose book *L’Opéra ou la défaite des femmes* was translated into English as *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*),

16. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 307.

17. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 137.

18. *Ibid.*, 134.

19. Cavell, *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5.

they eventually die, so to speak, “because they sing,”²⁰ because men hear in their voice “what they want and want not to hear”²¹ — a situation that Cavell deems parallel to the “self-torment whose shape is skepticism, in which the philosopher wants and wants not to exempt himself from the closet of privacy, wants and wants not to become intelligible, expressive, exposed.”²²

The difference between opera and cinema, as regards the role of the feminine, thus consists in the fact that whereas in opera the flight from the ordinary is without return to the female character, thus prompting the diva to die of her own singing, in film her reinvention — with a more or less happy outcome — succeeds in breaking the chains of inexpressiveness, in aptly transcending the narrow confines of human communication.

The third answer to the question as to where, in film, the source of expression lies (admitting that it lies in music in the case of opera) reads like a tautology. In fact, one could answer that question as simply as to claim that the “equivalent” of operatic music in film is nothing else than the *music composed, adapted, rearranged for, or simply used (quoted) in, film*. In fact, without ever being an isolated element, music is arguably one of the chief means at hand of filmmakers to enhance the expressive power of cinema.

The ways in which music is used in cinema, notably for expressive reasons, have been receiving a great deal of attention in recent years. In addition, it should be mentioned that long before the appearance of film music studies, Adorno and Eisler jointly wrote a pioneering book, *Composing for the Films* (1947), which provides a background for later discussion and raises questions that would be later developed in various directions.²³ I will not go into details about the many aspects of this debate, but note that a recurrent trope in the field consists in isolating Wagner as a key figure to think the interrelation of opera and film through the lens of the use of music in cinema. Scores like those of *Star Wars* or *The Lord of the Rings* are often referred to as Wagnerian on account of the sense grandiose, epic, overwhelming feeling they instill in the viewer/listener. But is this the best interpretation of Adorno’s remark that to think

20. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 132.

21. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 132.

22. Ibid.

23. See, for instance, Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (eds), *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

of the relationship between opera (especially Wagner's) and film amounts to postulate the "birth of film out of the spirit of music"²⁴? As far as I am concerned, I think that the recognition of the name of "Wagner" on the sole ground of style (as a synonym of Teutonic grandiosity in music) is not only simplistic but also potentially misleading. I'll return to this theme later.

So we have three answers, three ways of grasping, as it were, the essence of the expressive power of cinema: by drawing attention (1) to the homology between the expressive powers of moving image and music, (2) to the embodiment of the claim of expression in women's willingness to change their lives and find their own existential path, (3) to the acknowledgement of music's expressive function in film (similarly to opera). Despite their differences, these answers do not exclude each other. Cavell himself gives an example of their coming together when he characterizes women's existential journey in comedies and melodramas as one having to do with both a change in their appearance as well as with an upheaval in their lives. In this case the *analogy* that equates the expressive powers of moving images with those of music is what lends visibility to the *metaphor* according to which the woman succeeds in overcoming the circumstances that condemn her to inexpressiveness, insofar as her education and self-discovery coincide with her reshaping her own image.

By the same token, Cavell's pronouncements on the use of music in films are rare, at least compared with his analyses of how many movies allude to opera in general, or (quite often and in the most pregnant instances) to one opera in particular. In fact, these later references are not only important to interpret the film as such, but seem to provide an invaluable clue to ponder the subterranean competition between film and opera. This is what happens in *Moonstruck* (1989) and *Meeting Venus* (1991), which Cavell discusses in "Opera in (and as) film" with an eye on their respective references to Puccini's *La Bohème* and Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. According to Cavell, they are paradigmatic of "the category in which a particular opera enters into the substance of a film, where the competition between an opera and the attention given to it in the film becomes an essential part of the film's subject; or to say it otherwise, where to understand the relation between the film and the opera to

24. Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 102.

which it weds itself sets the primary task of the understanding of the film.”²⁵ Be that as it may, the fact remains that the legacy of opera has also made its way into cinema through the use of music.

III.

In keeping with the previous reflections, and to bring this conversation a bit further, it is perhaps timely to turn to Terrence Malick. As the reader is likely to know, Malick graduated in philosophy at Harvard, having been close to Cavell since the sixties as both a student and a friend. Besides this, he apparently faced the dilemma of choosing between the career of a filmmaker and that of a philosopher (he even published a translation of, along with a comment to, Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reason* [*Das Wesens des Grundes*] before starting his studies on cinema more seriously).²⁶ This said, if I bring Malick into discussion here, it is less due to the affinities between him and Cavell that the above-mentioned facts suggest, than because his use of music (mainly of romantic music) in his two most recent films (*The Tree of Life*, and *To the Wonder*) seems to embody — perhaps, I reckon, too literally — the *claim of expression* that Cavell describes in his writings on film.

Thus, if one wonders how the use of music (notably of pre-existing music) may contribute to the strengthening of the expressive power of cinema, and if one is in search of examples, one may easily become persuaded that the quotations of a huge amount of compositions in Malick’s recent films (by J. S. Bach, Haydn, Berlioz, Dvorak, Mussorgsky, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Respighi, Gorecki, Shostakovitch, Rachmaninov, Lupicka, Part, Rataavara, among others) corresponds to a possible actualization of Cavell’s ideas. In these films (as already in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*), music seems to be at the service of the exteriorization of a certain *Stimmung*, one that Malick finds better captured — if one looks back to the previous list of names — in Romantic music... Like the voice-off — through which the inner thoughts of the characters become audible — music seems to play an incantatory role in a perfect

25. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 312.

26. See Thomas Deane Tucker and Stuart Kendall (eds), *Terrence Malick. Film and Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

match with breathtaking images of nature and people (running, dancing, fighting, playing...) against the background of natural, rural or urban scenery. Put otherwise, in many of Malick's films, music enhances the expressive power of images in a quite conspicuous way.

This said, the truth is also that the more music contributes to the expressiveness of the film, the more the "intrusive" power of music comes to light — that is, the more it becomes apparent that the expressive and the manipulative aspects of music may eventually overlap. There is a scene in *The Tree of Life* in which Smetana's *The Moldau* is heard for about three minutes. The use of this piece is anything but arbitrary. In fact, the musical depiction of the course of the river — sometimes serene, other times turbulent — seems to offer a parable of the course of life, driven — as the film itself intimates — by the conflicting forces of "nature" and "grace." The symbiosis of image and sound, for the sake of expressiveness, finds in this scene a paradigmatic example. By the same token, all this seems to be at the service of a certain worldview. Incidentally, one that not only hangs on the dichotomy between nature and grace, but that also suggests that redemption lies in choosing the path of grace, of acceptance, of spirituality.

These remarks lead me to one last hypothesis: that what Wagner is blamed for — a certain totalization of artistic means, aimed at producing an overwhelming impact over the spectator that will ultimately get him/her to adhere to a certain worldview — is not without similarities with what Malick tries to achieve in using music the way he does in these films. This hypothesis prompts a lot of questions, not the least of which is whether Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* actually represents a totalizing, authoritarian, or proto-fascist (as Lacoue-Labarthe suggested)²⁷ moment in the history of opera. A case can be made that in Wagner's work the heterogeneous, the unsubsumable, and the undecidable play a much more crucial role (as Badiou claimed)²⁸ than is often admitted. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the strengthening of the expressive power of one art — leading, in the limit, to the attempt to convey the complexity of human experience as such — tends to go hand in hand with the attempt to articulate as closely as possible its different components (the aural, the visual, the linguistic, and so forth).

27. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta. Figures de Wagner* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991). English-language edition, *Musica Ficta: Figures of Wagner*, trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

28. See Alain Badiou, *Cinq leçons sur le "cas" Wagner* (Paris: Nous, 2010). English-language edition, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

It is precisely this insight that might make us further investigate the political stakes and consequences of assuming that expression – thanks to which art would take hold of the spectator, the viewer, the listener – is what art is all about. Cavell, to be totally fair, insists less on the normative weight of such a claim of expression than on its usefulness as a descriptive tool (in the face of the unfolding of the arts and particularly the affinity between opera and cinema). As for Malick, one might probably say that he often appears to be more Cavellian than Cavell himself. In fact, a certain quest for expressiveness seems to have dictated the most intimate law of his films.

In the meantime, drawing on Cavell's emphasis on the expressive core of the arts, we are left with an unattended parallel between Wagner and Malick, with what I suggest could be seen as a romantic affinity: the will to bring to the limit the expressive power of a medium in order to endow that medium with the capacity to give visual, aural, intelligible shape to both the inner and outer sides of human experience. In this regard, rather than taking sides or providing answers, I allow myself to include me among those who are still in doubt, still in search of a better understanding of the promises and deeds of music in both opera and cinema, still willing to bring further the conversation about the joys, the challenges, and the ruses of artistic expression.

Cavell and Hume on Skepticism, Natural Doubt, and the Recovery of the Ordinary

PETER FOSL

One curious aspect of Stanley Cavell's investigations into skepticism is his relative neglect of one of philosophy's most important skeptics, David Hume. Cavell's thinking about skepticism is located in relation to Wittgenstein, Kant, Emerson, Austin, and others. But while Hume is occasionally mentioned, those encounters are brief and generally dismissive. In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," for example, Cavell remarks that while "Hume is always a respectable place to begin,"¹ Kant is "deeper and obscurer" (MWM, 88). The important Cavell scholar Timothy Gould follows Cavell in this, writing that: "Hume's tactic of playing billiards as a relief from the melancholy of reflection and skepticism is a relatively unsophisticated strategy, compared to some that I know of."²

Except, perhaps, for the idea that Kant is more obscure, I think this assessment of Hume to be a mistake on Cavell et al.'s part, as I think there are important and helpful resources to be culled from *le bon David* for those of us working through the constellation of topics Cavell has done so much to clarify and to confront. Cavell's, like Gould's, discounting Hume so quickly, and in my view thoughtlessly, is, I suspect, a casualty of the twentieth century's dominant readings of Hume either as a kind of proto-positivist, as a psychologizing naturalist, more recently as a realist, or, as we will see later, a "paltry" empiricist. In this essay, in conjunction with another I have produced, I hope to go some distance towards both remedying the neglect of Hume in Cavell studies and correcting those misleading readings of Hume.³ In par-

1. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002/1969), 86. Hereafter, "MWM."

2. Timothy Gould, *Hearing Things: Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11.

3. Peter S. Fosl, "Scepticism and Naturalism in Cavell and Hume," in *Stanley Cavell and Skepticism*, a special issue of the *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 5 (2015): 29-54;

ticular, I wish here to compare and contrast Hume and Cavell along two axes central to each of their thoughts about skepticism: (1) the naturalness (and unnaturalness) of skeptical doubt and (2) the recovery or attainment of the ordinary in the wake of skeptical doubt. One might regard these as, respectively, moments of loss and return. Let's begin with the loss, the naturalness of loss, one might say the loss of naturalism.

1. *Skeptical Doubt as Natural*. One of the dimensions of human life that Hume finds impresses itself on us in unbidden ways is skepticism. Michael Williams has argued that in the context of ordinary language skeptical doubts are “unnatural” and not compelling, without a means of getting off the ground, or as Cavell might put it, without a way to respond to a “reasonable” question.⁴ But both Cavell and Hume — in what I think is a crucial similarity between them and one that aligns them against many of the critiques of skepticism that interpret it as mere confusion — regard the rise of skeptical doubts, as in a fashion, natural. Hume writes that “sceptical doubt arises naturally”⁵ and that it, “both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur'd” (T 1.4.2.57, SBN 218).

Now, indeed, those doubts arise, for Hume, only in the solitary context of “profound and intense reflection” (T 1.4.2.57, SBN 218), a context different, as Timothy Gould breezily observes, from the region of life where Hume says, “I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther” (T 1.4.7.9, SBN 269) — an account, I think, fairly described as portraying the meaningless and not-compelling quality (if not exactly unintelligibility) of skeptical inquiry. Hume similarly also renders the scene of skeptical inquiry as of a different “sphere,” other to what he terms “common life” (T 1.4.7.13, SBN 271).

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4. Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979; new edition 1999), 131. Hereafter, “CR.”

5. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2007), 1.4.2.57 [Book 1, Part 4, Section 2, Paragraph 57], SBN [Selby-Bigge-Nidditch edition page] 218. Hereafter, “T”; originally published 1739 (Books 1 & 2) and 1740 (Book 3).

Hume, of course, declares that in opposition to extreme forms of skeptical doubt: “I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people” (T 1.4.7.10, SBN 269) in the contexts of common life. Though in a sense skeptical doubt is a malady that cannot be cured, Hume calls upon the traditionally therapeutic effects of “nature,” which “suffices to that purpose [i.e., of dispelling doubt], and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium” (T 1.4.7.9, SBN 269). It is just this sense of nature as a therapeutic defeater of skeptical doubt, in the face of which skepticism is in Strawson’s characterization “powerless” and unintelligible, that has led so many important interpreters to read Hume as anti-skeptical and a realist.⁶

But there is a countervailing demand of nature, not so commonly quoted, that Hume identifies in fact as the “origin” of his philosophy (T 1.4.7.12, SBN 271) — and, not irrelevantly, of his skeptical doubt. Hume writes that:

At the time, therefore that I am tir’d with amusement and company, and have indulg’d a *reverie* in my chamber or a solitary walk by a river-side, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally *inclin’d* to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation [...]. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition [...]. (T 1.4.7.12, SBN 270-71)

There is something, according to Hume, natural in the sense of being necessary as well as unbidden about this sort of reflection for him: “even suppose [...] curiosity and ambition shou’d not transport me into speculations without the sphere of common life, it wou’d necessarily happen...”, since “’tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects which are the subject of daily conversation and action” (T 1.4.7.13, SBN 271). Moreover, as the trajectory of

6. Norman Kemp Smith, “The Naturalism of Hume,” *Mind* N.S. 14 (1905): 149-73; 335-47; Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941); Peter Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Routledge, 2008), use of “powerless,” 13; John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a sense of the realist or “New Hume” interpretation, consult Rupert Read & Kenneth A. Richman, eds., *The New Hume Debate: Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Book 1 of the *Treatise* testifies and in what David Macarthur calls “Hume’s insight,” naturalistic epistemological investigations themselves lead to skepticism.⁷

Hume appreciates, as Cavell does, that there is nothing more human than the refusal or the wish to transcend or the impulse to speculate beyond the diurnal, the everyday, the ordinary and common; and indeed it stands prominently among Cavell’s criticisms of recent philosophical critiques of skepticism that, unlike those of early modern philosophers, they do not take the naturalness of skepticism seriously. Cavell affirms the naturalness of the loss he wishes to redress, the denial he wishes to confront, the reasonableness of skeptical questions about our best cases, and the feeling of a kind separateness or alienation from others and the world:

But when the experience created by such thought is there, it is something that presents itself to me as one, as I have wished to express it, of being sealed off from the world, enclosed within my own endless succession of experiences. It is an experience for which there must be a psychological explanation; but no such explanation would or should prove its epistemological insignificance. And I know of no philosophical criticism which proves it either. (CR 144)

The moral [i.e. that “I can never know”] is a natural, inevitable extension of the conclusion drawn [i.e. that “in this best case I don’t know”] [...]. The step from the conclusion about this object to the moral about knowledge as a whole is irresistible. It is no step at all. The world drops out. [...] What “best case” turns out to mean can be expressed in a major premiss: If I know anything, I know *this*. (CR 145-46)

The irresistible extension of skepticism has produced a sense of being sealed off and of being able only to look at the world from the outside (an idea implicit in philosophers sceptically speaking about an “external” world) that has “become [...] natural” to us. Cavell finds the modern mind exploring it in film, as if we have come to view the world on a cinematic screen in the perceptual theaters of our minds: “Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling un-

7. David Macarthur, “Naturalism and Skepticism,” in Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (eds.), *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004), 108.

seen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self.”⁸ Hume affirms just this sort of way of conceiving perception, if not exactly the self, when he writes, “The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations” (T 1.4.6.4, SBN 252-53).

Cavell does, however, qualify the naturalness of this sense of loss and distance to the world by writing about the basis for skeptical conclusions (e.g., that “we do not know the existence of objects”), if it makes sense to speak strictly about skeptical conclusions,⁹ that:

I want to show several things: that it [i.e. the basis of skeptical conclusions] is *not* fully natural, and that it is not *fully* unnatural [...].

It is not the philosopher’s choice to produce this basis. Given his context and object and his question reasonably asked, *the basis is as determined by ordinary language* as the kind of basis we can offer about an Austinian object is. So the basis is not absurd. But it is not fully natural either [...]. (CR 161)

The naturalness, and thence unchosen quality, of partially unnatural skeptical inquiries is rooted for Cavell, it turns out, in the ordinary itself. That skeptical conclusions emerge naturally from the ordinary is, indeed, one reason why Cavell finds the “actual” everyday (*alltaglichen, Umgangssprache*), and not (only) skeptical philosophy, to be as “pervasive a scene of illusion and trance and artificiality (of need) as Plato or

8. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980; original edition 1971), 102. Cavell carries on in this passage discussing the depths to which cinema exhibits our skeptical despair (anticipating his 1981 *Pursuits of Happiness*): “It is our fantasies, now all but completely thwarted and out of hand, which are unseen and must be kept unseen. As if we could no longer hope that anyone might share them — at just the moment that they are pouring into the streets, less private than ever. So we are less than ever in a position to marry them to the world.”

9. Of course, Cavell’s example here, as well as others in the CR are only in qualified ways properly understood as skeptical propositions, since skepticism, understood in both the Pyrrhonian and Academic traditions, does not advance truth-claims, even negative truth claims. Without qualification, these conclusions are not skeptical but negative dogmatic assertions, or perhaps argumentative gambits meant to balance against contrary dogmatic claims (e.g., that “we do know the existence of objects”). That there may be possible modes of assertion consistent with skepticism (forms of assent, approval, yielding, living according to appearance, etc.) is a controversy Cavell elides here. And so we might understand his analysis to be limited to a specific understanding of skepticism — e.g. skepticism of the sort expressed in Descartes’s “Meditation I.”

Rousseau or Marx or Thoreau had found.”¹⁰ While for Hume skepticism results from a careful philosophical scrutiny of the general bases of human knowledge claims (i.e., reason and the senses), for Cavell the very conditions of the possibility of meaningful language — crucially, ordinary language as well as philosophical knowledge claims — bear within them skeptical potential such that they are also simultaneously and necessarily conditions for the possibility of the emergence of skeptical doubt. For Cavell this means that skepticism is not the product of a specific language game (call it the philosophers’ or epistemologists’ language game) but of language *überhaupt*, of humanness itself.

Those conditions for the possibility of meaningful human life generally that are also the source of the skeptical malady’s incurable persistence are “criteria” *per se*. As Wittgenstein shows, meaningful human life depends upon shared criteria for talking, writing, thinking, and acting; but in Cavell’s assessment, it is of the nature of criteria themselves to open the possibility of skeptical doubt. The most general criteria of human life by their very nature as criteria open “gaps” or yield to the opening of gaps between world, word, self, and others from which skeptical doubts emerge. This is so even for the criteria that no recognizably human being could “fail to know” (MWM, 96), that underwrite what Wittgenstein calls the “grammatical sentences” framing the essence of humanness and the essences of things in the human world, the criteria that make possible what have come to be called Wittgenstein’s not-meaningfully-doubtable “hinge” propositions.¹¹ Cavell writes that:

the skeptic’s denial of our criteria is a denial to which criteria must be open. If the fact that we share, or have established, criteria is the condition under which we can think and communicate in language, then skepticism is a *natural* possibility of that condition, it reveals most perfectly the standing threat to

10. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 46. Hereafter, “NYUA.”

11. On “hinge” propositions see Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*: “the questions that we raise and our doubts depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. [...] That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted. But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just can’t investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put”; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, edited and translated by G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1972), §§341-43, hereafter “OC.” Curiously, Cavell says he had not read, had not forced himself to read, *On Certainty* by the time *The Claim of Reason* was written.

thought and communication, that they are only human, nothing more than natural to us.¹² One misses the drive of Wittgenstein if one is not [...] sufficiently open to the threat of skepticism (i.e., to the skeptic in oneself); or if one takes Wittgenstein [...] to deny the truth of skepticism. (CR 47)

Shared criteria make it possible for humans to agree. But criteria are necessarily “open” in the sense that the application or projection of criteria in new contexts in ways that sustain agreement is an ongoing affair for which we must assume responsibility, which cannot be justified by anything beyond ourselves, and which may always and already (I wish to say) stand vulnerable and open to disruption or misalignment.¹³

I may not follow you in future applications of words and in future deeds. You may not follow me. Our judgments may fall out of attunement, our lives may fall out of sync, and we may find ourselves at a loss in how to talk and act in the world. Hume’s rowers may no longer find themselves able to row together (T 3.2.2.10, SBN 315). Instead of holding another’s hand, I may find I can go no further and can do no better than to “turn my palms outward, as if to exhibit the kind of creature I am, and declare my ground occupied, only mine, ceding yours” (CR 115). In any case, “Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine, the other yours.”¹⁴

Appeal to shared criteria can be disappointing, as it offers no “proof” of a scientific or deductive sort for the reality of, say, others’ minds and their pain; and in

12. The idea of “denial” here may be inconsistent with classical forms of Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism, too. I think other formulations, however, commonly accepted or, better, enlisted by skeptics remain consistent with Cavell’s point — formulations, for example, such as “destabilizing” criteria, subjecting criteria to skeptical “*epochē*” or “suspension” or “doubt.”

13. If writing in unqualified ways about skeptical conclusions distances Cavell from ancient skepticism, acknowledging the openness of criteria may be a way to align Cavell’s thought with it, at least that of the ancient Pyrrhonians, who advocated adopting a posture of being “zetetic” or open. Zetetic openness is, according to Sextus Empiricus (fl. late 2nd century), one of the characteristic ways Pyrrhonian skeptics practice skepticism. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, in *Sextus Empiricus*, edited and translated by R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1.3.7 [Book 1, Chapter 3, line 7]: “The Sceptic School, then is also called ‘Zetetic’ from its activity in investigation and inquiry.” Hereafter, “PH.”

14. “If C. L. Barber is right [...] in finding that the point of comedy is to put society back in touch with nature, then this is one ground on which comedy and tragedy stand together [...]. The tragedy is that comedy has its limits. This is part of the sadness within comedy; the emptiness after a long laugh. Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine, the other yours”; from “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear,” in Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; the 1987 edition was *Six Plays ...*), 110. Hereafter, “DK.”

this disappointment there are “natural” reasons for finding the appeals OLP (ordinary language philosophy) makes empty and the universality of its voice a sham (CR 90). We may, in fact, wish it to be so. It is insufficient, therefore, and even dangerous on Cavell’s account to demand a philosophical conclusion that will purge the scene of skepticism — under the false pretense that skeptical doubts are unnatural, that reason is always local, that the epistemologists’ context is a false or “non-claim” context, that language includes indubitable “hinge” or “framework” propositions to settle our doubts, that we possess innate “clear and distinct” ideas certified by God or common sense or *nous*, that the transcendental conditions for the possibility of something preclude doubt, etc., etc., etc. Skeptical doubt and its avoidance of meaning for Cavell—its possibility at the very least — are rooted in the natural meaningfulness of human existence itself.

2. *Nature and Recovering Ordinary, Common Life*.¹⁵ Paul Grimstad points out, rightly I think, that Cavell’s disappointment with empiricism and what he regards as its “paltry” understanding of experience is a disappointment with representationalism — in Kant’s, Descartes’s, Locke’s, and others’ portraying the objects of experience *merely* as perceptions — a criticism drawn long beforehand by Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-96) and two hundred years later by Cavell’s teacher, ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin (1911-60), against Hume and the positivists.¹⁶ Once one adopts a representationalist position such as Descar-

15. One might figure this recovery as Cavell’s and Hume’s therapeutic project. Wittgenstein, of course, is well known for advancing a model of philosophy as therapy; see, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Rush Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953; revised 2001), §133, hereafter “PI.” Romanticism, with which Cavell also aligns himself, is also commonly understood to prescribe turning to the natural world in therapeutic ways. See James F. Peterman, *Philosophy as Therapy: An Interpretation and Defense of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophical Project* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). The ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics, too, presented their practice as a kind of therapy, and so it is perhaps no accident that Sextus Empiricus’s is associated with empiric medicine.

16. Paul Grimstad, “Emerson Discomposed: Skepticism, Naturalism, and the Search for Criteria in ‘Experience,’” 163-76 in R. Eldridge and B. Rhie (eds.), *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: The Consequences of Skepticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011). See also Thomas Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) and J. L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962). Reid writes: “qualities must necessarily be in something that is figured, coloured, hard or soft, that moves or resists. It is not to these qualities, but to that which is the subject of them, that we give the name body. If any man should think fit to deny that these things are qualities, or that they require any subject, I leave him to enjoy his opinion as a man who denies first principles, and is not fit to be reasoned with”; Reid (1785), 18: Essay 1, Chapter 2, “Principles Taken For Granted.” And Reid appeals to nature, too — but not, as Hume does, to the natural relations among ideas; rather for Reid, the appeal is to a natural relation between words and things: “That without a natural knowledge of the connection between these [natural] signs and the things signified by them, language could never have been

tes's and Locke's "Way of Ideas," an approach to experience ultimately rooted in Gas-sendi and the atomist tradition,¹⁷ skepticism is a natural, even logical, result: "for all the glory of transcendental idealism, it still requires that things in themselves drop out of the picture (to this gift from Kant Cavell has replied: 'thanks for nothing')."¹⁸

Early modern representationalism, according to this kind of OLP criticism, prejudges and distorts our relationship to the world and to others by establishing from the outset a metaphysical "gap," a "lack" that is purportedly always already present and can never be overcome. If one's starting point is that human beings perceive only perceptions, rather than external objects, one will never reach others and the external world — and Cavell wishes to reach others and the world, to restore ourselves to the world and to the community we have always already inhabited (where else could we be?). Cavell writes in "An Emerson Mood," seeming to balance or oscillate among individual, collective, and universal voices¹⁹ — ordinary language philosophers', his, everyone's: "What the ordinary language philosopher is feeling — but I mean to speak just for myself in this — is that our relation to the world's existence is somehow closer than the ideas of believing and knowing are made to convey" — especially ideas of believing and "knowing" as they are defined by epistemologists and early modern philosophers working through the Way of Ideas.²⁰

invented and established among men; [...] which we may call the natural language of mankind"; Thomas Reid's 1764 *An Inquiry in to the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. D. R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 51, from Chapter 4, Section 3 ("Of Natural Signs"), paragraph 35. Cf. Reid on the same page (1764): "And if mankind had not these notions by nature, and natural signs to express them by, with all their wit and ingenuity they could never have invented language"; 51 (Section 2). For a similar, more contemporary view of the relation between language and the world compare Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy: Wittgenstein-Austin-Cavell, Writings on Ordinary Metaphysics* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004).

17. Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; expanded edn. from *Savonarola to Bayle* in 2003), 99ff., 141ff.

18. Grimstad, "Emerson Discomposed," 165. Cavell's gratitude for Kant's exchanging things themselves for phenomena is expressed in his "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant (Terms and Conditions)," in Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 69. Hereafter "ETE"; cited at Grimstad, "Emerson Discomposed," 250n13.

19. The very politics of speaking for others is problematized by Linda Martín Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Culture Critique* 20 (1991-92): 5-32; and also by R. M. Berry, "Is 'Us' Me?' Cultural Studies and the Universality of Aesthetic Judgments," 30-46 in R. Eldridge and B. Rhie (eds.), *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011). Cf. n32 below.

20. "An Emerson Mood," ETE 22 (compare MWM 96). This passage also appears in "The Ordinary as the Uneventful," *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 192-93 (hereafter, "TOS"), the repetition apparently confirming Cavell's enduring satisfaction with the passage. In addition, at TOS 193, Cavell goes on in a passage shortened in ETE: "This sense of, let me say, my natural relation to existence is what Thoreau means by our being next to the laws of nature, by our neighboring the world, by our being beside ourselves. Emerson's idea of the

Cavell is fascinated by his/our “natural relation to nature” or “natural relation to existence,” that “intimacy with existence, or intimacy lost” (ETE 23; TOS 193) among people and between people and the world that modern epistemology and modern skepticism deny. Across his career, especially through his naturalism, Cavell has explored that intimacy — its recovery as well as its loss — offering an account, or perhaps more accurately an accounting, that he thinks Wittgenstein and Austin, even in their “formidable attack on skepticism” (TOS 192), failed to provide (as well as an explanation in response to Hume’s “failure” to explain the character of skeptical doubt, MWM 61). Cavell signals this project in remarks such as this from his 1989 *This New Yet Unapproachable America*: “Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s attacks on philosophy, and on skepticism in particular — in appealing to what they call the ordinary or everyday use of words — are counting on some intimacy between language and world that they were never able satisfactorily to give an account of.”²¹

Hannah Arendt points out in “On Humanity in Dark Times” that in some contexts the very stating of something is meaningful only because what is named has been denied or is in question.²² So, for example, in the U.S. Civil Rights movement, it was meaningful for African Americans to proclaim, “I am a man!” precisely because that standing had been denied or problematized. That Cavell names the “ordinary” and Hume “common life,” similarly, is meaningful because both philosophers have found it to have become lost or threatened or refused and wish to recover it so as achieve what Cavell calls, in “The Uncanniness of the Everyday,” a “resettlement” (QO 176). Cavell sets before himself, then, the labor not only of exploring, interrogating, but also in some fashion of restoring the intimacy between inquirers (the meaning of the Greek *skeptikoi*) and the world as well as each other, rectifying a kind of loss at the hands of epistemology he, like Hume, confronts — a special kind of alienation expressed in terms of modern skepticism. Cavell writes, as if in response to a commonly imagined Hume: “I understand ordinary language philosophy not as an effort to reinstate vulgar beliefs, or common sense, to a pre-scientific position of emi-

near is one of the inflections he gives to the common, the low, as in the passage from *Nature* beginning: ‘I ask not for the great, the remotes, the romantic... I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.’”

21. Quoted by Russell B. Goodman, *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 91; NYUA 81.

22. Hannah Arendt, “Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts on Lessing,” 3-23 in *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1968); originally published 1959.

nence, but to reclaim the human self from its denial and neglect by modern philosophy [...]. My hopes are to suggest an answer in the arena of traditional philosophical skepticism, and to suggest that the Wittgensteinian view of language (together with an Austinian practice of it), and of philosophy, is an assault upon that denial” (CR 154).²³

But Hume does not just aspire to reinstating “vulgar” pre-philosophical beliefs. In his 1779 *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* he writes (in the voice of Philo) that “if a man has accustomed himself to sceptical considerations on the uncertainty and narrow limits of reason, he will not entirely forget them when he turns his reflection on other subjects” — even though we may wish to forget skepticism’s lessons.²⁴ It is central to Hume’s thought that our response to loss of a skeptical kind may be well or poorly considered, perhaps we might say less or more forgetful.²⁵ Skepticism emerges naturally for Hume through philosophical reflection when people depart from the customs and habits of common life, underwritten by the press of natural propensities. Skepticism is lived, if not radically “cur’d,” conversely, for Hume by a

23. At TOS 192, Cavell similarly writes: “It was always being said, and I believe it is still felt, that Wittgenstein’s and Austin’s return to ordinary language constitutes an anti-intellectual or unscientific defense of ordinary beliefs. While this is a significantly wrong idea it is hard to say what is wrong with it.” In his essay, “Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture,” Cavell as if following this thought writes: “It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein’s practice if we translate the idea of bringing words back as *leading* them back, shepherding them [back to their *Heimat*] [...]. But the translation is only a little better, because the behavior of words is not something separate from our lives, those of us who are native to them, in mastery of them. The lives themselves have to return”; section on “Everydayness as Home,” Part I of NYUA, 34-35.

24. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1947), I.8. 134; hereafter “D” (originally published 1779). That we may wish to forget, that we often flee skeptical philosophy’s acknowledgment of finitude was called to my mind by an anonymous reviewer quoting the 1976 Preface to the Updated Edition of MWM: “If philosophy is esoteric, that is not because a few men guard its knowledge but because most men guard themselves against it” (xxvii).

25. Writing about the importance of not forgetting the lessons of skepticism while also acknowledging the inevitability of that “fault,” Hume cautions his readers about his reluctant and occasional slipping into dogmatic forms of expression: “On such an occasion we are apt not only to forget our scepticism, but even our modesty too; and make use of such terms as these, ’tis evident, ’tis certain, ’tis undeniable; which a due deference to the public ought, perhaps, to prevent. I may have fallen into this fault after the example of others; but I here enter a caveat against any objections, which may be offer’d on that head; and declare that such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other” (T 1.4.7.15, SBN 273-74). Might Hume have been alluding in this important reference to not forgetting at the closing of Book 1 of the *Treatise* to the way Sextus Empiricus describes skeptics’ non-dogmatic use of language as a form skeptical “recollection” (*hypomnema*), the remembering only of appearances (e.g. PH 2.10.102). In this Sextus may be contrasting skepticism, perhaps in an ironic way, with Plato’s description of dogmatic knowing as recollection (*anamnesis*). Plato himself, in a passage that fascinates Derrida, contrasts *anamnesis* unfavorably with mere *hypomnema*; see Plato, *Phaedrus* (275a), and Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” *Tel Quel* 32 & 33 (1968): 18-59.

reflective return to the natural and customary common life (nature and custom being the Pyrrhonian guide or “criterion” for skeptical practice).²⁶ Returning to common life for Hume, however, is not just surrender to what cannot be resisted; common life for Hume is to be “methodized and corrected”²⁷ in light of skepticism on the basis of reflectively generated standards (e.g., “general rules” of a “second influence”; T 1.3.13.12, SBN 149-50). Hume’s “blind submission” (T 1.4.7.10, SBN 269), therefore, is less blind than his well known remark suggests and shelters within itself an acknowledgment (though not quite a transcendental argument) that the press of the natural in common life constitutes the very condition of the possibility of thinking, acting, and meaning. It underwrites the “legitimate ground of assent,”²⁸ the “title” for reason’s authority (T 1.4.7.11, SBN 270), since reason cannot establish its own warrant, even the warrant or “authority” of skeptical arguments themselves (T 1.4.1.12, SBN 186-87).²⁹

Strawson is struck, along just these lines, by Hume’s recognition that “’tis vain to ask Whether there be body or not? That is a point we must take for granted in all our reasonings” (T 1.4.2.1, SBN 187), concluding from this that Hume understands natural beliefs to be basic to the “framework” of any possible epistemological investigation and therefore immune to skepticism.³⁰ Hume for Strawson is schizophrenic; the skeptical

26. Sextus Empiricus, whom Hume will largely follow in this, describes the Pyrrhonian “fourfold” criterion for life this way: “Adhering, then, to appearances we live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive. And it would seem that this regulation of life is fourfold, and that one part of it lies in the guidance of Nature, another in the constraint of the passions, another in the tradition of laws and customs, another in the instruction of the arts. Nature’s guidance is that by which we are naturally capable of sensation and thought; constraint of the passions is that whereby hunger drives us to food and thirst to drink; tradition of customs and laws, that whereby we regard piety in the conduct of life as good, but impiety as evil; instruction of the arts, that whereby we are not inactive in such arts as we adopt. But we make all these statements undogmatically” (PH 1.11.23-24).

27. Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 12.25, SBN 61. Hereafter “E.” Originally published in 1748.

28. A phrase Hume uses in his 10 March 1751 letter to Gilbert Elliot. For a discussion of how this important phrase plays out in debates about Hume’s skepticism and realism, see John P. Wright, “Scepticism, Causal Science, and the ‘Old Hume,’” *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10.2 (2012): 123-42: “What is key in this response for our present discussion is the fact that Hume contrasts these weak tendencies with the strong and universal propensities of the imagination which make us believe in our senses and experience. These latter provide us with what, in his letter, Hume calls ‘a legitimate Ground of Assent’” (129). For Hume’s phrase see J. Y. T. Greig, *The Letters of David Hume: 1727-65* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 155, Letter #72.

29. Don Garrett has established an influential interpretation of Humean naturalism a long these lines through what he calls Hume’s “title principle” for reason; Garrett *Cognition and Commitment*, 234-37.

30. Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism*, 11. Not considering the possibility of a naturalism that is also a skepticism (perhaps strangely given the title of his book), Strawson reads “an unresolved

Hume arguing independently from Hume the naturalist. In this interpretation, though, Strawson somehow ignores the first sentence of the paragraph he cites, where Hume affirms himself a skeptic at the same time he acknowledges the existence of body: “Thus the *sceptic* still continues to reason and believe, even tho’ he cannot defend his reason by reason” (emph. mine). Contrary to Strawson’s account, then, Hume’s naturalism is a skeptical naturalism that implies “no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of” the epistemological powers of his “judgment” (T 1.4.7.15, SBN 274). We might say, therefore, that for Hume upon a skeptical acknowledgment of the natural pivots philosophy’s education about what he calls “true philosophy,” true skeptical philosophy.³¹

Skepticism arises naturally for Cavell with a loss of the alignment expressed in shared criteria and a related sense of gap, of being sealed off. The sense of gap can spring from a wish or a misconceived, even morally dubious, project: “this *sense* of gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a ‘stranger’ to, ‘alienated’ from) those shared forms of life, to give up responsibility of their maintenance” (CR 109). Suffering this alienation, people are realigned and re-attuned, for Cavell, by reminding them through examples of their agreement, by carefully reading their words and expressions, by resisting the natural disappointments of human epistemic life, and by acknowledging the agreement already presupposed by human forms of life, including by doubt: “the gap between mind and world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human ‘convention’” (CR 109).³²

tension in Hume’s position” that results in “two Humes: Hume the skeptic and Hume the naturalist; where Hume’s naturalism [...] appears as something like a refuge from his skepticism” (12). For Strawson’s Hume: “Our inescapable natural commitment is to a general frame of belief and to a general style (the inductive) of belief-formation” (14). Quassim Cassam quotes Strawson describing his account of Hume here in a later autobiographical essay thus: “In common with Hume and Wittgenstein (and even Heidegger) I [Strawson] argued that the attempt to combat such doubts by rational argument was misguided: for we are dealing here with the presuppositions, the framework, of all human thought and enquiry”; Peter F. Strawson, “Intellectual Autobiography of P. F. Strawson,” in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson* (Chicago and Lasalle: Open Court, 2008), 17.

31. See Donald W. Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume’s Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): see especially Chapter 2, “The Dialectic of True and False Philosophy”; and Chapter 7, “True Philosophy and the Skeptical Tradition.” Wittgenstein, also distinguishes his practice from something akin to false philosophy, writing in *Philosophical Investigations* of breaking off [*abzubrechen*] from something like false philosophy (or at least from the relentless and futile self-questioning of philosophy) through a “real discovery” that “gives philosophy” something like Pyrrhonian *ataraxia* (“*die Philosophie zur Ruhe* [quietude or rest] *bringt*”), PI §133.

32. Cf. Donald W. Livingston, *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Consider also Wittgenstein’s usage of general agreement (*die Menschen überein*)

The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, of weighing scales or columns of figures. That a group of human beings *stimmen* in their language *überein* says, so to speak, that they are mutually *attuned* top to bottom. (CR 32)

This sort of harmony early modern naturalists and others are apt to conceive (or imagine) as a metaphysical fact (the flip-side of conceiving people to be metaphysically and totally alien or different from one another);³³ but for Cavell human alignment is not an enduring fact but a continuing “task,” one that sustains an unsponsored and contingent achievement, and one that may be motivated by an aspiration to moral perfection: “One can think of romanticism as the discovery that the everyday is an exceptional achievement. Call it the achievement of the human” (CR 463).³⁴

Paradoxically, for Cavell people can only achieve attunement and “return”³⁵ and (re)convene by acknowledging, among the various natural dimensions of human existence, “separateness” from each other, distance from the rest of the world — finitude. More paradoxically still, the very effort to overcome that separateness, distance, and finitude through argument and metaphysics deepens and rarefies them. In the recognition, then, of natural human finitude, including the natural dangers of skeptical loss, there lies the possibility for a kind of paradoxical gain, what Cavell calls “an intimacy of difference” (PoH 103); for, as it is with divorce and (re)marriage, “not till

as well as “form of life” (*Lebensform*) in the singular, perhaps indicating the human form of life shared universally: “So you are saying that human agreement [*die Übereinstimmung der Menschen*] decides what is true and what is false?”—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use [*in der Sprache stimmen die Menschen überein*]. That is not agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] in opinions but in form of life [*der Lebensform*],” PI §241.

33. Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy*: “It is with the existence of criteria that ordinary metaphysical reminders can begin and with them that we find not madness but silence, the silent harmony that makes possible all that we do” (32), “A silent harmony of humans and the world stands firm amidst our talk and action” (33).

34. In the essay, “Makavejev on Bergman,” Cavell illustrates his understanding of the role nature plays in the formation of meaning when he compares directors as if he were comparing (1) poorly educated realists and skeptics against (2) his own OLP way of discernment: “The former [1] seek to fix or to flout significance, perhaps to suggest that significance is necessarily private or public or arbitrary or infinite or nonexistent. The latter [2] propose significance as the intersection of nature and history, as a task of continuous and unfolding interpretations, each felt as complete and each making possible the next, until a human form of life fits together”; TOS 117.

35. Cavell, “Postscript to ‘The Investigations’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself,” 275–79 in Mario De Caro and D. Macarthur (eds.), *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 277.

we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves” (NYUA 36).³⁶ Call it the *Walden* paradox.³⁷

It is to those who accept this condition of human existence that the writer accords the title of traveler or stranger [...]. Here is another underlying perception, or paradox, of *Walden* as a whole — that what is most intimate is what is furthest away; the realization of “our infinite relations,” our kinships, is an endless realization of our separateness [...]. (SW 54)

If the first step in what Cavell calls philosophy as “education for grownups” is to take inventory of our estrangement from ourselves, the “second step is to grasp the true necessity of human strangeness as such,” and with it “the opportunity for outwardness” (SW 55). We are separate but not, however, for Cavell, as for Derrida, always and already totally “other” to one another (radically and metaphysically alien), lacking the capacity really to know, or understand, or really to commune with one another. We can already acknowledge our being separate but not totally “other” because worries about separation would not themselves be possible without human beings already sharing a meaningful language and human criteria. Separateness, therefore, does not entail absolute difference but rather the necessity of outward expression and the need to read it.

Cavell’s appeal to shared criteria and natural agreement may seem analogous to Strawson’s appeal to our epistemological background “framework,” but the Cavellian gesture differs from Strawson’s because it does not aspire to purge human life or inquiry of skeptical doubt. Fear of separateness and the confrontation with separateness to which philosophy brings us may account for the human wish to flee, but to

36. Cavell here quoting from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854). The phrase “an intimacy of difference” appears in Cavell’s essay, “Knowledge as Transgression,” on Frank Capra’s 1934 film, *It Happened One Night*; PoH 103.

37. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for the following thought along these lines: “The danger of reading Cavell on skepticism is the propensity for his views on what accounts for skepticism, what ‘living it’ entails, to be misconstrued. [...] Where it is often thought that we get into trouble by failing to accept our finitude, [...] accepting our finitude is not to put an end to skepticism — but to acknowledge it in a certain way, in a sense, to cohabit with a fair amount of fear and trembling, and dread, for *life*.” Why that is so stands for me still as a persistent question — why the difficulty of that acceptance, why we both wish for and flee exposure and intimacy, why they remain for us both among the grounds of our epistemological and moral demands as well as a cause for profound anxiety and dread. The answer is, as I am inclined to argue, just the terms of our natural separateness and finitude — the human fate skeptical philosophy acknowledges.

deny our separateness and the persistent possibility of skeptical loss through epistemological argument or metaphysical posits (or even through appeals to the everyday or to nature in the way Strawson et al. conceive nature) transforms our skeptical human finitude into an epistemological problem and deepens the vulnerabilities it exposes.

Speaking together face to face can seem to deny that distance, to deny that facing one another requires acknowledging the presence of the other, revealing our positions, betraying them if need be. But to deny such things is to deny our separateness. And that makes us fictions of one another. (SW 65)

Denying the separateness of our finitude deepens it and totalizes it in the same way Derrida, despite his pretensions to the contrary, extends rather than subverts the early modern metaphysical condition. As Cavell puts it: “The necessity of the task is the choice of finitude, which for us (even after God) means the acknowledgment of the existence of finite others, which is to say the choice of community, of autonomous moral existence” (CR 464).³⁸

Both Cavell and Hume then find skeptical doubt to be natural; and they both appeal to what they find, what impresses itself, as natural dimensions of human existence in order to recover the ordinary (in Cavell) or common life (in Hume). Neither philosopher, however, thinks that skepticism can be completely overcome or purged or resolved, even by the natural. For Cavell, the potential for skeptical doubts is intrinsic to the very criteria that make human language, thought, and action possible. That is, the very conditions for the possibility of meaning make meaning vulnerable to skepticism. Sustaining meaning requires ongoing expression, re-reading, and re-agreement. For Hume, the natural impulse to epistemological thinking and the natural trajectory of epistemological thinking are toward skepticism. Natural relations of ideas provide the “cement of the universe,” but those relations are unsponsored and contingent, always subject to potential rupture. Since neither reason nor the senses can refute skeptical doubt, human beings must accept an ongoing fragility and openness to their inquiries as well as the potential for doubt. That Cavell and Hume reach

³⁸. I am grateful to Dr. Chiara Alfano for the helpful suggestions she has offered me on Cavell, skepticism, naturalism, and separateness.

such similar conclusions through such different philosophical approaches not only enriches an understanding of the dynamics of skeptical thinking. It may also point to something of the “truth of skepticism.”

American Experience: Cavell's Paths to Film and Transcendentalism

RACHEL MALKIN

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 pre-

occupied 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-previouslly-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 co-existed 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 dis-

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.

tion for 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

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.

again until 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

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.

worked 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 Move-

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.

ment 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

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.

about immediacy sets him too apart from them. Just as Cavell's vision of community 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

44. Kael, “Trash,” 349.

45. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 29.

46. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 11.

that 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.

The “War,” the “Troops,” and the Grammar of “Support”

ROBERT W. TATE

Not too long ago, at a lighthearted social gathering, I stumbled into a conversation on the United States’ martial presence in the Middle East. The person with whom I spoke is a friend of a friend, a young man with a military background. I do not share these ties. We were struggling to find our feet with one another. And despite our best efforts at civility, our talk was taking a turn for the tense.

When we sensed that a skirmish was about to ensue, the young man moved for a preemptive termination: “Don’t you support our troops?” he asked. It is difficult to tell whether his question sought my agreement or my capture. The latter possibility of seizure and subjection registers the customary force and effect of the locution, “Support our troops.” Often, to use this expression is to refuse to participate in certain discussions (if not to prevent a dialogue from even getting off the ground). In these cases, the phrase works to intimidate, threatening discredit or worse to those who pursue particular topics.¹ The former possibility of parley and accord points to a more charitable reading. In this light, the young man’s question becomes a diplomatic gesture — an attempt to bridge the gap or, at least, to keep the peace. A suitable translation might be, “Very well, you do not support our government’s foreign policy; do you at least support the soldiers who serve our country, the men and women who labor to protect you, the U.S. civilian?” This could be the starting point for an exchange, one to be continued in perhaps a more appropriate arena. Of course, the criteria of appropriateness for the circumstances and parties of such an exchange remain flexible, open to projection and to debate.²

1. I am grateful to the anonymous reader of my initial submission to *Conversations*, who pointed out that “to pose the question ‘Do you support our troops?’ is a not an invitation to conversation, but an express denial of conversation.” I have worked in my revisions to expand on this distinction, exploring the possibility of sustaining a dialogue after this question has been posed.

2. Cf. Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 180-2.

Regardless of whether it was a denial or an invitation, his question at that moment laid several options before me. Decorum pressed me to say, “Yes.” My younger, more careless self might have tagged on a mocking “Sir” to this “Yes” — might have even thrown down an emphatic “No.” My older, humbler self might have rested on candor, electing to pause, look the man in the eye, turn up my palms, and say, “I don’t know.” What I in fact did — as I often do when I lose my social bearings — was attempt to be clever: “How exactly does one oppose the troops?” I asked in return.

The military man smiled. This appeared to be the end of the matter. The more I think about his reaction, the more it strikes me as a merciful one. He rightly could have dismissed my reply for what it was: an evasion of a question that was asked seriously. And even if I could not have refrained from responding to his question with another question, I could have reoriented our conversation with the right question: “What do you mean by ‘support?’” — or, better still, “What do *you* mean by ‘support?’” But each of us could feel the discomfort of the audience that was gathering around our discussion. To prolong it, we knew, would be indecorous.³

The substance of our exchange lodged in my mind like a splinter. I kept revisiting it, turning it over, playing out alternative endings, trying to soothe its irritations. To be sure, the expression “support our troops” has never sat well with me. But my conversation with this man revealed linguistic and ethical entanglements that I had not yet recognized. I recalled Noam Chomsky’s criticism of the phrase. It fell short of untying these knots. Even so, testing Chomsky’s position may be a productive gambit: [...] the point of public relations slogans like “support our troops” is that they don’t mean anything [...] that’s the whole point of good propaganda: you want to create a slogan that nobody is going to be against and I suppose everybody will be for because nobody knows what it means because it doesn’t mean anything, but its crucial value is it diverts your attention from a question that does mean something — “Do you support our policy?” — and that’s the one you’re not allowed to talk about.⁴

3. As above, I want to bracket the questions of convenience and appropriateness. One may very well say that a difficult conversation such as this one is seldom if ever harmonious with the niceties of a polite gathering — and that we have a (civic) responsibility to have it out anyway. Still, I think it fair to admit that if we insist on fulfilling this responsibility at every opportunity, we may find ourselves no longer attending many parties.

4. Noam Chomsky, “On Propaganda: Noam Chomsky Interviewed by Unidentified Interviewer, *WBAI*, January 1992,” *Chomsky.Info: The Noam Chomsky Website*, accessed July 5, 2014,

There is little doubt that people have used the utterance “support our troops” propagandistically. It can distract its audience from grave and crucial details. It can confuse the details themselves. But to say that it doesn’t mean anything rings false. When we resist polemics and listen to people such as that young man, other uses of the phrase — applications that exceed the conceptual boundaries of propaganda — may show themselves. Even if they do not, our willingness to continue speaking, to go on with one another, depends upon our abilities to attend thoroughly and precisely to why someone has been tempted to take language “on holiday.”⁵

These uses mark the coordinates for an important inquiry. What can the statement “I support the troops” accomplish, even when it proves to be senseless? Under what circumstances can one say, “I support the troops, but not the war,” and mean it? What must any of us mean in saying that we support the soldiers who fight our country’s wars?

In asking what the expression “support our troops” not only means, but also does in concrete situations, I call for the methods of ordinary language philosophy. These methods moor our understanding of a word or concept to the context of its application and the history of its use. What I referred to above as the right question — “What do *you* mean by ‘support?’” — similarly summons the approaches of ordinary language philosophy: this query arises from the sort of entanglements that occur when we employ or analyze a sign without a clear view of its history in situated speech-acts. Cavell describes the nature of this confusion with a vital distinction:

[Wittgenstein] undertook, as I read him, to trace [...] the ways in which [...] we are led to speak “outside language games,” consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have [...]. What is left out of an expression if it is used “outside its ordinary language game” is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what

<http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/199201--.htm>. For the sake of clarity, I have altered this transcript’s punctuation.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Rev. 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §38: “philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.” Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 56e: “Don’t *for heaven’s sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.”

they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost.⁶

Talking nonsense has less to do with an utterance's semantic content, less even to do with an utterance's pragmatic implications, and more to do with "our confused relation to the words" we are uttering.⁷ Cavell sheds light on what most disturbed me when recalling my conversation with the military man. In response to his question of whether I support the troops, I could have answered in the affirmative without entirely feigning conviction. Still, I would have done so with puzzlement and unease — not because I do not know what "support" means, but because I do not know what I would mean in saying it there and then. I would be lost with my words.

Thus, in order to survey the grammar of "support," we need to review not only its denotations, but also the everyday circumstances in which we say that we support someone.⁸ We say that we support people when we espouse their actions or enterprises. In this sense, to say, "I support the troops, but not the war," is to contradict oneself. This contradiction becomes less obvious when we speak of supporting people in terms of their principles. We can embrace certain aspects of a military ethos — the virtues of honor, courage, and loyalty, for instance — but here we are not supporting the troops so much as supporting the values that they strive to embody. We say that we support people when we provide sustenance or the means to an end. These resources can be psychological — a boost of morale or a show of solidarity. Generating this form of support is arguably the basic purpose of the "Support Our Troops" slogan with its color-coded ribbons. (For those who use the motto with this intent — say, people whose loved ones are soldiers — it is difficult to see this function as propagandistic.) The resources we supply can also be physical or financial. In this sense, every taxpayer in the United States supports the troops. However, as recent events have shown, even this support may be mislaid once "our troops" become "our veterans."⁹

6. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 207.

7. James Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," in *Philosophical Investigations* 21:3 (1998), 247-8.

8. I acknowledge, in the contexts of "Drone Warfare" and the so-called "War on Terror," grammatical investigations of "troops" and "war" are likewise in order. But in the interests of brevity, I limit my remarks to "support."

9. The fiscal realities of "supporting the troops" call to mind the issues of "tacit consent" that Cavell discusses in relation to theories of the social contract à la Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (Cf. Stan-

Let us summarize. We can support people by standing beside their words and their deeds, although standing beside someone does not entail our agreement. We can support people by providing resources, mental or material, with or without stipulations. And is there not a larger range of diverse, yet interrelated examples? Our interpersonal lives show us that support can come in countless forms: listening to someone and offering advice; listening to someone and refraining from offering advice; helping someone to avoid an error; allowing someone to commit an error and to learn from it; forgiving someone for an error when s/he acknowledges it; forgiving someone even in the absence of confession and contrition.

Admittedly, these latter significations do not constitute the conventional use of the expression “support our troops.” They are not yet part of its history. For those who would like to see the phrase deployed in these ways, it falls to those language-users to make it so, to justify new applications to a language-community, to extend the expression’s history with a new story. In following Wittgenstein’s guidance, we would initiate this process by locating the *heimat* — the home, native land, or homeland — of the phrase “support our troops” and of the word “support”: “When philosophers use a word [...] and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever used this way in the language in which it is at home [*Heimat*]? What *we* do is bring [*führen*, “lead”] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”¹⁰ The phrase “support our troops” may be at home in its use to silence dissent, but this use hinges on employing the word “support” in a way that is conceptually confused and, to some extent, exiled from its *heimat*. This sort of exile or expatriation can occur with remarkable ease — indeed, disquietingly so, as the ease of estrangement is often proportional to the difficulty of returning. To rediscover the native lands of our words, we must practice what Cavell characterizes as a kind of “shepherding”:

ley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 49-69; Cf. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 22-8). Fittingly, Cavell recalls a similarly questionable slogan, “Love it [America], or Leave it,” to illustrate the (also questionable) idea “that when you express dissent from some action of your government you are withdrawing from membership in society and the protection of its laws” (64). There is far more to be said here with respect to civic engagement and civil disobedience. For instance, even citizens who vehemently protest their government’s policies can be seen as consenting to those policies inasmuch as they participate in and benefit from public services. Whether they *should* be seen as such—in what way, to what degree, under what circumstances, and so on—are inherently disputable concerns. Suffice it to say that we need not conflate “support” with “consent,” however much one may overlap with the other in particular cases.

10. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116.

It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein's practice if we translate the idea of bringing words back as leading them back, shepherding them; which suggests not only that we have to find them, to go to where they have wandered, but that they will return only if we attract and command them, which will require listening to them. But the translation is only a little better, because the behavior of words is not something separate from our lives, those of us who are native to them, in mastery of them. The lives themselves have to return.¹¹

To shepherd our words back home, we have to "attract and command them," and we do this by "listening to them," allowing them to show us where and how and why they have alienated themselves from reality. And since our words are inextricable from our lives, we therein shepherd ourselves back to reality, back down to earth, "back to the rough ground."¹² The roughness is at once our source of mobility and of difficulty — of traction and of drag, as it were. It is, at bottom, the only livable habitation we have. So think of the person who urges his or her fellow citizens to "support the troops." This person may be a U.S. soldier. S/he may be a relative or friend of a U.S. soldier. (And s/he may even nurse a fair amount of ambivalence regarding the U.S. military's customs and operations.) If one opposes this institution and its activities, how does one begin to respond to this person — begin to be responsive to this person — without a bad-faith affirmation? It is unlikely that any productive conversation would ensue if one were to begin by castigating this person for using an inane expression with a propagandistic history. (Yet it has to be said, when someone uses this phrase to avoid or deny genuine dialogue, exposing it as such a move may be just the right place to begin.) The ordinary language philosopher as shepherd would first have to attend to the grammar of support in this person's life — would thus have to attend to *this person* (a form of acknowledgment).¹³ S/he may even find that this person is using "support" to mean something like love or forgiveness. The ordinary language

11. Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 34-5. Cf. Stanley Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event," in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 194-9.

12. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

13. My emphases on attention are indebted to the teaching of Toril Moi in her Fall 2014 seminar on ordinary language philosophy and literary theory. Her forthcoming book on the subject should stimulate conversation for years to come.

shepherd would have to start there, in a particular zone of exile, before leading the flock back to a shared home — back to a common ground where the dangers of using “support” are recognized and where “love” and “forgiveness” are seen as more salutary alternatives. Leading language back to its homeland can thus be a crucial means of recreating the homeland itself. There will be cases when we want to use “support” and bring its full sweep of meaning into play. And there will be cases in which these meanings begin to muddle and mislead us, such that it is preferable to employ different words and concepts altogether. Despite my efforts to renovate “support,” I am inclined to take the latter course of action in the context of the U.S. military. For if I am asked again, “Do you support our troops?” I feel I could only say, “I am a United States citizen,” which is to say, “With our troops, I share citizenship.” My life as a civilian is constitutively connected to their lives as soldiers. We are accountable to and responsible for one another.