HOW MOVIES THINK: CAVELL ON FILM AS A MEDIUM OF ART

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Stanley Cavell's writing about movies, from the more theoretical and general *The World Viewed* (1971) to the later works on specific genres (*Pursuits of Happiness*, *Contesting Tears*), has a unifying theme: some movies as (successful) art investigate conditions of accomplished selfhood and interest in experience in medium-specific ways. This claim is explained and defended by explicating the details of the medium-specificity of the moving photographic image (and its history of uses) and by focusing on Michael Verhoeven's film *The Nasty Girl* (1990). Though the very ideas of accomplished selfhood and interest in experience naturally prompt some suspicion in a commercialized, pluralistic society, our responses to some movies show that we continue to aspire to a life that embodies them.

The main title of this essay is 'How Movies Think'. This title claims that some movies manage to address some of the deepest and most important problems of human life – problems of selfhood, of meaning in experience, and of social conflict, among many others – in ways that are specific to the medium of moving photographic images. The subtitle then implies that Stanley Cavell's work on movies is particularly pertinent to this topic. While a number of philosophers – for example, Stephen Mulhall on the *Alien* and *Mission Impossible* movies,[1] Paisley Livingston on Ingmar Bergman,[2] and Thomas Wartenberg[3] on a range of films – have looked seriously and productively at philosophical thinking in and through films, Cavell's work remains larger in scope, more articulate about the ontology of film as a photographic art, and more attentive to how images are used artistically to address problems of human life in innovative ways than these other studies.[4] Yet Cavell's large argument about the powers of film as art to engage productively with important issues about human life remains little understood. In particular, he is sometimes dismissed as a naive realist about the ontology of film, and his critical readings of films are often both misunderstood as overwhelmingly plot-

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[1]   Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, 2nd ed. (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2008).
[2]   Paisley Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[3]   Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[4]   See my review essay on Wartenberg's book 'Philosophy In/Of/As/And Film: Thomas Wartenberg's *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*', *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 3, no. 1 (2009): 109–16, followed by Wartenberg's reply ('Response to My Critics', 117–25) to my remarks along with those of Cynthia Freeland ('Comments on Thomas Wartenberg's *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*', 100–109) for an airing of the issue about the importance of the artistic use of images to original (rather than merely illustrative) thinking in films.

oriented and left unconnected to his more general remarks about film as photographic art.[5]

One important point to begin with is that Cavell's thought about movies is not directly concerned with all things that are rightly called movies: not with *Shrek*, *The Little Mermaid*, or otherwise digitally produced or drawn movies, and not so much with movies where special effects, matte paintings, chromakey composition, and the like are predominant features of the way images are presented; that is, not with movies as spectacle. Of course the borderlines here are very rough, with lots of overlaps; nowadays, almost all photographically produced commercial movies incorporate some special effects, matte paintings, and so forth. The questions concern rather what is central to the production of the movie as a whole and how the significance of the images is achieved. Cavell's thought is concerned principally with centrally photographically based movies, that is, movies wherein the exposure of film stock[6] to light rays emanating from things and persons that are of our world is central to the significance and interest of the movie as an artistic achievement. Certain makers of photographic movies have discovered how to use moving photographically produced images as a medium of art, and it is the nature of that discovery and of those artistic achievements that are of central interest to Cavell.

To say this, however, is not to say that Cavell regards film as an essentially documentary or reproductive medium; it is not to say that he favours a simple-minded Bazinian view of film as against Eisenstein's emphasis on montage and other directorial decisions. In fact, Bazin's views, on which Cavell draws extensively, are substantially more complex than any naive realism, and Bazin

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5   See, for example, Laura Marcus, 'Cinematic Realism', in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 195–210. William Rothman, along with Marian Keane, has done much to produce a more comprehensively integrated reading of Cavell on film. See William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's 'The World Viewed': A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), and William Rothman, 'Cavell on Film, Television, and Opera', in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 206–38.

6   Or more recently, the digital recording of light rays. While film stock's ways of registering light are distinctive and open to significant artistic-expressive uses, most of the points about photographic capturing of reality transfer also to at least digital image *recording*, though not to CGI production, which is quite another matter. It is noteworthy that, like cartoons, CGI feature films have so far been most successful when in the registers of fairy tale or fantasy. For a useful investigation of the similarities and differences (especially with regard to continuous shooting) of digital recording versus film-stock recording, see the PBS documentary *Side by Side: The Science, Art, and Impact of Digital Cinema* (dir. Chris Kenneally, Los Angeles: A Company Films, 2012), first aired on US television on 30 August 2013, after a première at the International Filmfestspiele Berlin, 15 February 2012.

explicitly incorporates in his theory the significance of both director's decisions and symbolic meaning.[7] Bazin does argue that film (like photography) to some extent involves 'a mechanical reproduction in which man plays no part'.[8] But Bazin's point here is just to emphasize where decisions are made and how photography and film differ from painting. Unlike painting (and ignoring cropping and other darkroom editing), once the camera is aimed, the film stock chosen, and the aperture and the shutter speed are set, then the film stock receives and registers light rays reflected from its subject matter automatically, without the intervention at that point of the human hand. The film stock registers at that point what the camera has been aimed at. Film then adds to this mechanical capturing of subject matter the capturing of motion, thus solving 'the problem of movement'.[9] These two points – mechanical reproduction (subsequent to photographers' decisions) plus solving the problem of movement – then have the consequence that film 'completely satisf[ies] our appetite for illusion'.[10]

Crucially, for Bazin this is a psychological fact about our experience of film. The psychological concern to capture or render likeness is one of the two tendencies that have given shape to all plastic art, according to Bazin. The other is the aesthetic-symbolic tendency to express the meanings of things. Once freed from the psychological 'obsession with likeness', the plastic arts, and film in particular, were able to turn to the essentially aesthetic ambition of art: 'namely the expression of a spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended the model', so as to achieve 'the preservation of life by a representation of life'.[11] This latter, aesthetic aim – 'the primordial function of art' – is already partly, but only partly, achieved in mummies buried along with corn and terracotta statuettes, or in cave paintings that present 'a magic identity substitute for the living animal [in order to] ensure a successful hunt'.[12] According to Bazin, 'the great artists, of course, have always been able to combine the two tendencies'[13] that give shape to all art: the psychological tendency to duplicate reality and the aesthetic tendency to represent continuing meaningful life symbolically. The point of Bazin's emphasis on photography's and then film's automatic satisfaction of the psychological need

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[7]   André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' (1945), in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9–16; reprinted in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Meta Mazaj, and Patricia White (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 310–14. All subsequent citations refer to this edition.

[8]   Ibid., 312.

[9]   Ibid., 311.

[10] Ibid., 312.

[11] Ibid., 312, 311.

[12] Ibid., 311. The influence on Bazin of Hegel's account of artistic practices as rooted in the worshipful representation of life, as in ancient Egyptian burial practices, is evident here.

[13] Ibid., 312.

for the duplication of reality – an automatism that is operative, Bazin admits, only after the photographer's 'selection of the object to be photographed […] and the purpose he has in mind' – is that photography and then film are able 'to present [the object in a situation, an aspect of the world] in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love'.[14]

In presenting the object by means of 'a kind of decal or transfer', the photographic and filmed image takes on 'the irrational power to bear away our faith',[15] specifically the power to make visually palpable and to sustain a faith that the world continues beyond or without us as a locus of life where things mean something. This power will be effectively achieved, however, only when the photographic duplication of reality is coupled with the aesthetic-symbolic-expressive rendering of things as meaningful to human subjects. In film, according to Bazin,[16] this is better accomplished stylistically by means of 'invisible montage', which involves 'the creation of a sense or meaning not objectively contained in the images themselves but derived exclusively from their juxtaposition', in contrast with either 'intellectual montage' or 'montage attraction', where the meaning is only intellectually or associatively generated by the director-editor, rather than being derived from the juxtaposed images themselves, that is, by following the meanings of the things that are photographed.[17] That is, in invisible montage the meaning is derived not only from formal or perceptible features of the image, but also from (a) what the image is an image of (the real subject in the world that the photographic image captures and presents), and (b) the realistic, subject matter based arrangement of photographic images of things as an action is followed by the camera. This is a critical, stylistic judgement on Bazin's part about the conditions of artistic success in filmmaking. Bazin names Griffith, Flaherty, and in general the directors of first-generation Hollywood 'talkies' influenced by the need to follow a moving singer or dancer as among the early masters of invisible montage or what we have come to know as traditional or dramatic editing. Eisenstein and Kuleshov, despite some powerful moments, are by contrast criticized as less artistically successful practitioners of intellectual or associative montage. Bazin further lists seven genres of American film which use dramatic editing and became prominent in the period from roughly 1927 (the first sound-synchronized feature film) to 1940: (1) American comedy, (2) the burlesque film (for example, the Marx

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14   Ibid., 313.
15   Ibid.
16   Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema' (1950–55), in *What is Cinema?*, 23–40; reprinted in Corrigan, Mazaj, and White, *Critical Visions*, 314–24. All subsequent citations refer to this edition.
17   Ibid., 315, 316, emphasis added.

Brothers), (3) the dance and vaudeville film (Astaire-Rogers, the Ziegfeld Follies), (4) the crime and gangster film, (5) psychological and social dramas, (6) horror or fantasy films, and (7) Westerns.[18] In each case, Bazin is struck by 'a complete harmony of image and sound' and by the effectiveness of 'analytic' or 'dramatic' editing in contrast with the expressionist-symbolist 'ambition of [associative] montage'.[19] Bazin further notes that *Citizen Kane* (1941) achieves a distinctly realist use of depth of focus, wherein the audience is required to scan a large, focused image and to choose where to direct its attention, thus mimicking the necessity of our scanning and focusing in ordinary viewing of the world.[20]

Cavell roughly assumes all this from Bazin. Like Bazin he offers critical judgements about artistic successes and failures that are achieved within the medium of film, and like Bazin he celebrates the spectacular successes of traditional editing mostly in Hollywood films between roughly 1930 and 1950. He has written about almost all the categories Bazin lists: American comedy as the comedy of remarriage in *Pursuits of Happiness*, the Marx Brothers,[21] Astaire's *The Band Wagon* (dir. Vincente Minnelli, 1953),[22] and psychological and social dramas in his treatment of the melodramas of the unknown woman in *Contesting Tears*, with incidental remarks about Westerns and gangster movies throughout *The World Viewed*.

Following Bazin, Cavell argues that movies *screen* reality; they present persons and things on film – not images of things only, that is, not what Cavell calls *likenesses*[23] as in realist painting – but things and persons themselves, albeit not in their direct quiddity in our space and time, but rather *on film*. Presentation of things on film is quite compatible with – in fact it requires – that they be presented from a point of view, with the camera placed somewhere by the director, with lighting, focus, and close-up all decided by those who are making the film rather than by the things themselves. As William Rothman and Marian Keane aptly note, Cavell's view 'is that there is an inescapable element of mechanism or automatism in the making of photographs, not that there is nothing but mechanism or automatism in their making'.[24] This view, moreover, does not require that the persons presented be other than fictional characters.

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18   Ibid., 317.
19   Ibid., 319.
20   Ibid., 320–22.
21   Stanley Cavell, 'Nothing Goes without Saying', *London Review of Books*, January 6, 1994, 3–5.
22   Stanley Cavell, 'Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise', in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 61–82.
23   Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 17. Subsequent references to this volume will be given as *WV* and with page number in parentheses in the text.
24   Rothman and Keane, *Reading Cavell*, 62.

But it does require that the fictional characters presented be embodied in the visible screen presence of a real person, a photographed human being.

Photographs, as opposed to visual images produced otherwise, present, as Cavell puts it, 'the real world without existence. […] The camera […] crops a portion from an indefinitely larger field' (*WV*, 24). This is a phenomenological remark about the experience of photographed things on film, about how that experience is produced, and about the kind of significance some experiences of this kind have had. As Stephen Mulhall notes, Cavell offers us 'a partial elucidation of what seeing a photograph of an object [and therein also of movies composed of photographs of objects] amounts to'.[25] 'A painting is a world; a photograph is of the world. […] The altering frame is the image of perfect attention' (*WV*, 24, 25). The world 'inhabited by figures we have met or may well meet in other circumstances' (either as types or as singular individuals photographed in other films) presents itself to me as viewer 'automatically, […] magically, […] without my having to do anything […], [thus] satisfying the wish for the world recreated in its own image' (*WV*, 35, 39). Cavell remarks in a note to *The World Viewed*, 'There may be possibilities open for the great sound and visual cinema of the future.[26] But in the meantime the movies have been what they have been.' (*WV*, 232n8)

Cavell, then, is interested in what some photographically produced movies have been. More particularly, he is interested in the feats of art that have been achieved in certain photographically produced movies by way of effective dramatic editing of moving photographically produced images. The home movies that my parents shot of my childhood antics contain images that share a photographic basis with, say, *Bringing Up Baby*. Both present things of our world on screen. But that there is a difference in quality of achievement amounting to a difference in kind scarcely needs comment. Likewise, Cavell notes that there are such things as experimental films (Chris Marker, Stan Brakhage) and cartoons (*WV*, 142–43). While these may achieve their own forms of success, that success will not be achieved by means of the sustained, narrative *photographic* attention to the motions of real subjects. In Rothman and Keane's useful phrase, Cavell is concerned to elucidate and respond to 'the astonishing capacities for meaningfulness that movies have discovered within the singular conditions of their medium'[27] of photographically produced presentations of things on film.

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[25]   Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 225.

[26]   Here, I take it, Cavell is gesturing towards the possibilities of non-dialogue sound film and non-photographically produced film, possibilities that have been realized, for example, in *Koyaanisqatsi* (dir. Godfrey Reggio, 1992) and in cartoons and now CGI films.

[27]   Rothman and Keane, *Reading Cavell*, 19.

In achieving their astonishing meaningfulness, photographically produced movies have established themselves as a medium of art. That movies are a medium of art is *not* a matter of their physical basis alone. It rather requires what Panofsky called 'the exploitation of the unique and specific possibilities of the new media' (cited, *WV*, 30). 'The aesthetic possibilities of a medium are not givens;' instead they are created by 'giving significance to specific possibilities of photographic presentation via framing, lighting, mise-en-scène, cutting, editing, and so on' (*WV*, 31, 32; see also *WV*, 145). These movies explore the deepest problems of human selfhood: for example, intimacy and its failure, heroism, the special beauty of some natural scenes and some persons, the odd beauty and visual interest of nearly anything in certain lights (what one might call the beauty of the world as a whole in its smallest details), and how people look at and respond to one another. Movies do this in and through photographic attention to the smallest nuances of look, glance, presence, and tone. For example, conveyances, fashions, gaits, stances, and faces may be 'lovingly studied' by film (*WV*, 43). Cavell notes that some directors use the camera 'to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight' (*WV*, 25), listing Dreyer, Renoir, and Antonioni, among others; since *The World Viewed*, we can add Malick and Herzog and Mendes.

Extending this thought just slightly, we can say that some directors also use the camera to let the being of the person happen, specifically to let the star in character manifest itself for us on film. Howard Hawks and Leo McCarey are masters of this. The frontispiece to *Pursuits of Happiness* is a still of Cary Grant from McCarey's *The Awful Truth*, accompanied by Cavell's remark, 'This man, in words of Emerson's, carries the holiday in his eye; he is fit to stand the gaze of millions'.[28] It is important that in the moment in the movie that is stopped in this still photograph the Cary Grant character, Jerry, is taking a delighted interest in something he has just arranged that is about to happen in front of him: his estranged wife Lucy (Irene Dunne) jitterbugging with her new 'country' admirer Dan (Ralph Bellamy), a jitterbug champion. Here Jerry is taking an interest in this specific woman in this specific situation, and it shows.

Art, according to Cavell, explores in its various material media how taking an interest in one's life is possible. 'Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art' (*WV*, 22), Cavell writes. To say that we wish for selfhood is to say that we often live with a sense of selfhood unachieved, in silent melancholy or quiet desperation, caught within conformities – grammars, routines, repertoires – that are not ours,

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[28] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), frontispiece page.

not alive for us, not animations for us or of us. Yet it is possible to overcome such melancholy conformities and to 'consent to our present state as something we desire, or anyway desire more than we desire change',[29] as, for example, the Marx Brothers do in their gloriously manic undoing of *Il Trovatore* in *A Night at the Opera* or as the remarrying pairs of the films considered in *Pursuits of Happiness* do. By having powers of reflection, activity, and will, we are as human persons fated to take an interest in our experience or to fail to. Photographic movies as art investigate photographically (through the photographing centrally of persons, since 1927 of speaking persons) how interest in experience may be either achieved or lost. This is why Cavell remarks that 'American film at its best participates in [the] Western cultural ambition of self-thought or self-invention.'[30] (Other art media take up this topic of human interest in experience in their own distinctive ways: in opera, for example, 'the intervening or supervening of music into the world [is] revelatory of a realm of significance that either transcends our ordinary realm of experience or reveals it under transfiguration,'[31] Cavell notes.)

An astonishing thing about movies – certain dramatically edited narrative movies between 1930 and 1960 – is that they absorb us into their perfect attentions to their subjects and into their discoveries of significances in things without any distinctions 'between high and low audiences, and between their high and low instances, […] without having assumed the burden of seriousness' (*WV*, 14, 15). This is to say that (mostly) Hollywood movies constituted for a period of time a modern art that was not yet *modernist*. In them, significance was achieved as if naturally, without paroxysms of authorial self-display and in a way that was open to being readily experienced by all, free of 'modernism's perplexities of consciousness, its absolute condemnation to seriousness' (*WV*, 118).

When one views a photographically produced movie, then – when things go well; when 'the integrity of a given work […] make[s] out the significance of a given possibility' (*WV*, 142) – the plot that is forwarded through the words and photographic images is experienced as necessary, mythical. An artistically successful sequence of automatic world projections is a means, as Rothman and Keane put it, of 'magically satisfying our wish to view, unseen, the world re-created in its own image.'[32] This means that we see the world obeying its own logic, with everything – every glance, every posture, every thing presenting itself, every word

29 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 465.
30 Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 72.
31 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 142.
32 Rothman and Keane, *Reading Cavell*, 71.

– happening by immanent necessity, without me being present to the events. To be sure, this happens only when things go well. It is a criterion of art to achieve satisfyingly felt necessity in the internal relation of its compositional elements: in music, each note requiring every other; in painting, each patch of pigment requiring every other; in poetry, each word requiring every other, or at least our feeling continuously that this is so. In movies, however, since the material medium is the world itself – things and persons themselves – presented on film, this felt necessity seems to be of the whole world or at least whatever is in this filmed portion of it, as though *its* meaning were being presented. Again, following Rothman and Keane, 'the projected world is, we might say, the past *mythically*'.[33] This is, I take it, a way of saying, as Aristotle says, that in a successful dramatic presentation, events that are possible or probable are presented as necessary. They are presented *as* the working out of the necessities of achieving or failing to achieve humanity's *telos*, where the achievement or failure happens as a result of character and in and through action in a situation. The universal – for Cavell, concrete, free human life, or achieved interest in experience, plus the kind of difference characters in actions in situations make to either achieving it or missing it– is presented in the particular, in just this sequence of human subjects in action. This is true in photographic movies, too, in virtue of their having what Cavell calls 'narration itself, whose tense is past' (*WV*, 26). But in film narration, unlike drama on the stage, the necessities include everything in the photographed world, and the *telos* that is typically in question is interest in experience, which means interest in the experience of at least some others too. Again the crucial passage about art from *The World Viewed*: 'Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art.' (*WV*, 22)

That the pursuit of this *telos* is presented mythically – in the past tense, and with everything a matter of necessity, at least when the movie is very good and has succeeded in establishing its particular narratively sequenced moving images as art – explains why Cavell has focused primarily on the two genres that have most occupied his attentions and on why the second is the inversion of the first. In the comedies of remarriage considered in *Pursuits of Happiness*, we see, as William Rothman puts it, 'a marriage between a woman and a man that also "marries" the realities of the day and the dreams of the night, the public and the private, and city and country'.[34] In Cavell's words, this amounts to 'a new step in the creation of the human,'[35] 'as if the sexual and the social are to legitimize one

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Rothman, 'Cavell on Film', 212.
[35] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 140.

another,'[36] where 'the acceptance of human relatedness [manifests itself as] the acceptance of repetition'.[37] 'It is a matter of a new reception of your own experience,'[38] where the pair 'find happiness alone, unsponsored, in one another, out of their capacities for improvising a world, beyond ceremony'.[39] Soul and body, self and other, self and experience and world, are all put together again, each a vehicle for each, out of nothing other than the full immanent logic of embodied relationship, realized in posture, word, tone, and look, all captured on film. 'Redemption by happiness does not depend on something that is yet to happen [but] on a faith in something that is always happening, day by day.'[40]

In the melodrama of the unknown woman, by contrast, 'a woman achieves existence (or fails to), or establishes her right to existence (or fails to), apart from (or beyond satisfaction by) marriage (of a certain kind) […] where something in her language must be as traumatic in her case as the conversation of marriage is for her comedic sisters – perhaps it will be an aria of divorce, from husband, lover, mother, or child'.[41] And so we see Stella Dallas turning away from the window at which she has witnessed her daughter's wedding from outside, walking towards us in the rain, alone, eyes shining and looking up, half-haunted, half-satisfied at being on her own and at having successfully let her daughter go, possessed of a power for interest in experience and for relationship that has shaped, for her, in her material situation, only a life apart.

In both the comedy of remarriage and the melodrama of the unknown woman, photographic narrative film's investigation of every visible nuance of the pursuit of interest in experience – including every visible manifestation of thought and feeling, and including communication by posture, glance, style, tone, and look – focuses in particular, according to Cavell, on the specific body of the actor. In general, Cavell finds, 'the actor is the subject of the camera'.[42] The body is taken as 'a field of betrayal'[43] to the camera and thence to the viewer (and to any character in the movie who has eyes to see). The screen performer 'is the subject of study, and a study not his own' (*WV*, 28), where 'the only thing that really matters [is] that the subject be allowed to reveal itself' (*WV*, 127). 'The distinction

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36   Ibid., 31.
37   Ibid., 241.
38   Ibid., 240.
39   Ibid., 239.
40   Ibid., 131.
41   Stanley Cavell, 'Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman', in *Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. J. H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 18.
42   Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, 137.
43   Stanley Cavell, 'What Photography Calls Thinking', *Raritan* 4 (1985): 14.

between actor and character is broken up on the screen' (*WV*, 175), so that we talk of the Humphrey Bogart movie, the Clint Eastwood movie, the Katherine Hepburn movie, the Barbara Stanwyck movie, and so on, with the sense that the same person is being studied and revealed across roles in different films. Character as type – the mythical figure of the star or, alternatively, the special presence of the character actor – is 'established by the individual and total physiognomy (of face, of figure, of gait, of temperament) of the human beings taking part in the drama' (*WV*, 175). Throughout *The World Viewed*, Cavell worries that such figures – Cary Grant and Clark Gable, Katherine Hepburn and Barbara Stanwyck – may no longer be present for us, for a variety of reasons. Technically the shift to colour, especially 1950s and 1960s Technicolor, diminished the felt realism of the camera's scrutiny of the embodied subject. In addition, by about 1960 movies began to split into 'high' self-conscious art movies, where attention is called to the innovativeness of freeze frame or angle of shot rather than to what the shot studies, as opposed to 'low' commercial movies. 'Sudden storms of flash insets and freeze frames and slow-motions and telescopic-lens shots and fast cuts and negative printing and blurred focusings' began to compete with and jostle against traditional dramatic editings (*WV*, 122); the now 'high' modernist film began to compete with and jostle against 'mere' Hollywood entertainment. (These were emergent tendencies, not absolutes. Cavell notes that Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* [1962] is a masterpiece in combining distinctive authorial presence with traditional editing [*WV*, 137–42].)

In an important article written in 1979,[44] David Bordwell contrasts along Cavellian lines the emergence of a distinctive style of art cinema (Fellini, *La Strada* [1954], Bergman, *Wild Strawberries* [1957], *Smiles of a Summer Night* [1957], Truffaut, *The 400 Blows* [1959]) that involves 'narrative irresolution and a "loosening" of cause-effect logic' in contrast with 'classical narrative cinema'.[45] Art cinema combines psychological realism, where the action has a 'drifting, episodic quality' and 'the characters […] lack defined desires and goals' and 'act for inconsistent reasons' with marked 'authorial expressivity' involving 'stylistic signatures' and 'recurrent violations of classical norms', as in unusual camera angles, pronounced camera movement, editing, and lighting.[46] Beyond the distinctive art film in the use of experimental techniques, the hyper-avant-garde film involves what Noël Carroll calls 'images to be viewed at an analytic remove, like specimens

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[44] David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' (1979), in *Poetics of Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2007), 151–70; reprinted in Corrigan, Mazaj, and White, *Critical Visions*, 559–73. All the subsequent citations refer to this edition.

[45] Ibid., 561, 560.

[46] Ibid., 561, 563.

under a microscope'.[47] Indulging in 'intense didacticism'[48] and displaying 'professional coolness, expertise with systems and technologies and controlled experimentalism',[49] avant-garde filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, and Michael Snow abandoned all content, especially narrative and visual metaphoric content, in favour of an effort 'to make the viewer aware of certain generic features of film perception', such as flickering light as such, thence leaving viewers 'little to attend to save the process of attending'.[50] Yet – or so Carroll argues in 1985 – such an effort 'appears either to have exhausted itself or ground to a halt'.[51] 'The time has come again […] to make images that are expressive and aesthetic, to make narratives and psychodramas, political and personal, that reflect first and foremost on life and the world rather than primarily on the medium and the sign'.[52] Yet how is photographic-narrative reflection on life and the world possible, if the world of human subjects photographed seems drained of significance and a matter of empty successiveness?

Once upon a time, the movies had inherited their conventions of visual presentation and emplotment as if naturally. Techniques of dramatic editing were simply taken on initially (and then developed) from following the action of song or dance; plots, character types, and comedic bits were taken on initially (and then developed) from vaudeville. But that time, with all its aching joys and dizzy raptures, is past. Worse yet, these lapses in the availability of traditional technique (plus compensatory upsurges in 'personal' authorial style) have happened, Cavell notes, 'within the last decade' – 1960–70 – insofar as and *because* 'conviction in the movies' originating myths and geniuses – in the public world of men, the private company of women, the secret isolation of the dandy – has been lost or baffled' (*WV*, 60). That is, meaning experienced by subjects within those roles is no longer available within the culture to be studied photographically and narratively. Instead, under the pressures of intensifying commodity culture and assertive individualism (with all their virtues and vices), experience becomes merely my experience, something consumed by me, not a matter of relationships to persons and objects in my world in which I might take an interest. Interest becomes subjectivized into merely felt response – a kind of tingle within – and there is nothing meaningful about experience and relationship left for the camera

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47   Noël Carroll, 'Film in the Age of Postmodernism' (1985), in *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 331.

48   Ibid., 310.

49   Carroll, 'Introduction to *Journeys from Berlin/1971*' (1981–82), in *Interpreting the Moving Image*, 234.

50   Carroll, 'Film in the Age', 305.

51   Ibid., 332.

52   Ibid., 331–32.

to investigate. Something in the culture and making itself manifest in the new, quasi-modernist techniques of film construction, Cavell reports, 'broke my natural relation to movies' (*WV*, xxix).

At the same time, by the mid-1970s (*Jaws*, 1975; *Star Wars*, 1977) producers of special effects movies became all too accomplished at furnishing subjective tingles by means of the blandishments of spectacle. Movie-going is now frequently premised, some art and revival houses apart, on the lure of the materials of the summer blockbuster – explosions or chases or special effects – rather than the photographic-narrative investigation of the significance of the real. In public culture as a whole, there is all too little trust in personal life, in social life, or even in nature. To the extent that experience has now become significantly subjectivized and cultural life drained of meaning, one may begin to worry whether Cavell's talk of human freedom, interest in experience, and the reciprocal achievement of full selfhood is anything other than merely idiosyncratic, generally empty, quasi-religious nostalgia or sentimentalism. Can such ideas any longer matter for us? And how, if at all, might movies productively take them up?

I have felt the force of these questions, and I continue to feel it. There is much to be worried about in contemporary life. There is, for me, at least a question about whether any recent actor has had or has the kind of authority and presence that Barbara Stanwyck and Cary Grant have and sometimes have with and for one another. Perhaps it provides some ground for hope that for many Grant and Stanwyck still have this authority and presence today. Three further grounds of hope for photographic narrative art are (a) the facts, noted by Bordwell (echoing Bazin and Cavell) that some major directors (Hitchcock, Truffaut, Ford) have already managed to blend distinctive authorial signatures with traditional techniques of narration,[53] and (b) the development since the early 2000s of long-form serial narrative on cable television (*The Sopranos*, 1999–2007; *The Wire*, 2002–8; *Friday Night Lights*, 2006–11; *Breaking Bad*, 2008–13), where the demands of blockbuster financing exert less pressure than on feature films. Finally, (c), the conditions of social life and of filmic art often differ significantly from social conditions and filmic practices of Hollywood.[54] Filmmakers from other traditions may discover new plot arcs and ways of focusing on filmed objects and persons that give to their films distinctive presences that are different from, though related to, what Hollywood once achieved.[55] To fill in this last point, it will help to look

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[53]   Bordwell, 'Art Cinema', 561.
[54]   Even blockbuster-oriented Hollywood continues to have its moments. Are *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005) readable as comedies of remarriage set inside the genres of, respectively, the heist flick and the action thriller?
[55]   Thanks to the editors of *Estetika* for suggesting this general formulation.

briefly at one contemporary movie that under current social conditions does have something like the authority and presence of the movies Cavell has studied at length: Michael Verhoeven's *The Nasty Girl* (*Das schreckliche Mädchen,* 1990), starring Lena Stolze.

This film has a number of features of the melodrama of the unknown woman. Among other things, a marriage is broken, and the movie ends with a woman left outside a society that has shown itself unable to house her distinctive intelligence and eros. I can neither summarize the entire plot here nor dwell on how the camera studies Lena Stolze in the role visually. But just to suggest that movies as art can still investigate what Cavell takes them to investigate, let me point to the following:

1. The movie opens with a shot that establishes the mythical character of the story: a shot of a classical statue, accompanied by a text from the *Nibelungenlied* about tales of heroes in ancient times.

2. The movie repeatedly displays an artful relation to documentary reality, as some opening shots introduce the character of Sonja as though she were appearing in a television documentary about her life. Throughout, several scenes are shot either in black and white (often those focusing on hypocrisies on the part of authorities) or with obviously artificial, projected backgrounds, as though to insist on both the presence of the camera and what the camera studies. (The plot of the movie is loosely based on incidents in the life of an actual German woman.) These techniques remind us in the course of viewing that the film is an authorially constructed object, yet they do so without significantly interrupting the overall flow of traditional narration.

3. The camera, director, and writer dwell on the protagonist Sonja's distinctive spirit or eros, shown first in her resistance to convention in the names of nature and embodied activity, as in throwing the Friday fish dinner into the river, dancing, and whistling. Sonja's difficulty is that she expects and demands that society and her energy inform and express one another. As a child, she had had an instinctive faith that this would be so, centring on the life of her family. (Early on, her mother, a teacher of religion, is shown teaching, while pregnant with Sonja, the story of Jesus throwing the money-changers out of the temple. Later a five-year old Sonja is shown beaming with pride as her father reads the Scripture lesson during a worship service.) As a child, her energy is cathected to routine and to the way things are done. She is unable to participate in making fun of a teacher, and she invariably prepares her lessons well and gives the right answers. Notably, however, she also likes to dance to rock-and-roll.

4. Sonja's instinctive insistence that her social world make sense – in particular that her energies of spirit and common social routines should inform one another – enables her at about 14 to write a prizewinning essay on 'Freedom in Europe', in which she celebrates modern European life, despite some initial hints that the world has its hypocrisies. (Taking the advice of a librarian, she passes by the fact that a military junta in Greece is part of Europe by writing 'Greece is the cradle of democracy'.)

5. When a second essay competition is announced, about two years later, Sonja chooses the theme 'My Hometown during the Third Reich', expecting to write a story of heroic resistance fighters. She comes, however, despite opposition from archival authorities, gradually to suspect that current leading figures in the town were collaborators who denounced Jews.

6. Without proof, however, Sonja is unable to complete her essay. She instead finishes secondary school and marries her physics teacher, Martin, with whom she has fallen in love. They move in next-door to her parents and have two daughters, Rebecca and Sarah, while Martin continues teaching in the school.

7. Despite her happiness in marriage and motherhood, Sonja is unable to forget about what she had begun to discover and about what it was like actively to discover important truths. 'But sometimes I had the feeling that I had failed [daß ich gescheitert bin]; that I wasn't there anymore [daß ich gar nicht mehr da bin],' she remarks. She enrols in university in order to study history and to carry on her research into her hometown.

8. As this research develops, Sonja is forced to file lawsuits for the release of documents. Even without a lawyer or any support from the town, she wins each case. As the townspeople become increasingly aware of her work, she repeatedly receives telephone threats, her cat is murdered and nailed to her front door, her apartment and that of her parents are firebombed, and she is beaten by thugs.

9. The movie focuses closely on the question of how, in such circumstances, anyone can go on at all, or whether anyone should continue with such a project. In a crucial scene, Sonja looks at a photograph of Father Schulze – a priest who had denounced Nazi policies and, contrary to law, preached in the camps, prior to his execution. As she holds the photograph, its glass cracked from the bombing, she thinks, in a past-tense voice-over that has the sound of Wittgenstein or Beckett, 'I thought: no, enough; I can't go on; I'll stop. […] No, I'll continue.'

10. The breakup of Sonja and Martin's marriage is presented as a figure of the failure of social life to satisfy the demands of spirit. Though Sonja genuinely

loves Martin and he loves her, Martin nonetheless shows himself unable to stand with her in her integrity. He fails to find happiness in her adventure, but instead leaves for Munich, settling for a mere ordinariness rather than adventure and a (potentially) redeemed ordinariness.

11. The movie ends, shockingly, with Sonja left outside the conventionalized social sphere, all but alone with her demands, intelligence, and ego. When her book is at last published, it receives very favourable reviews in leading German newspapers outside her hometown. She is then awarded honorary doctorates from Vienna, Stockholm, and Paris. At last, the townspeople once again begin to regard her as their 'dear Sonja'. Her book appears in the shop window of the pharmacist who had earlier refused to sell her eardrops for her daughter. The town officials commission a bust of her, by a sculptor who has already done Steffi Graf and Princess Stephanie, to be placed in the town hall. At the unveiling ceremony, however, Sonja abruptly screams no, she will not let them do this to her, not participate in their shit. She slaps her mother, grabs her younger daughter, and runs desperately to the 'tree of life' – a shrine tree on the top of a hill outside town.

Nearly the last words of Cavell's *The World Viewed* are: 'The knowledge of the self as it is always takes place in the betrayal of the self as it was. That is the form of self-revelation until the self is wholly won. Until then, until there is a world in which each can be won, our loyalty to ourselves is in doubt, and our loyalty to others is in partialness.' (*WV*, 160) *The Nasty Girl* tracks, I would say, the immanent logic of such a world – our world –, as Sonja finds herself forced by the world to betray her past self and its achievements – specifically, to stand on her apartness, repudiating an acceptance by others that strikes her as all too contrived. She knows that this is not – not yet – a world for her powers, a world in which she can be interested in her own experience, yet she is unable to give up the demand that this should be so, and she persists in recognizing and claiming her powers, in ways we follow and honour visually, despite continuing hypocrisies and conflicts. She is, if not quite an unknown woman, at least a woman outside, but in possession of human powers and capacities for interest that this movie investigates, in tracking their partial exercise and frustration, so that this movie achieves a full narrative photographic presentation of a subject in the world.

That a movie, that *this* movie, does this, in ways that compel continuous conviction in its words and images and in their development, from moment to moment to moment, shows, perhaps, that an aspiration to fullness of selfhood, interest in experience, and lived freedom are not quite yet dead for us, not quite as empty as all that, and not quite unfilmable, even if not wholly and

unambiguously achievable either. This is something about movies to be grateful for: that the creation of the human is still possible for us and still draws us, as that creation is sometimes presented in artfully ordered moving images.

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