

Presentation: Stanley Cavell and Cinema

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I want to begin with an old joke that, in the days before television, the English music hall comedian Max Miller used to tell:

When I was a lad, I wanted to marry the girl across the road. So I says to my Dad: 'Dad, I fancy marrying that girl across the road'. And my father says, 'Son, I have a confession to make. When I was a young lad I used to get around, and I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but you can't marry her because she is really your sister'. So, I get a little depressed, but then I pick myself up again. I get on the bus and when I get home I says: 'Dad, I want to get married to the girl that lives three streets away'. And my dad starts looking glum and says: 'Son, I've got something to tell you. When I was your age, we didn't have buses, but I had a bike, and to make a long story short, that girl's your sister'. Now I'm getting desperate. I go and buy myself a railway ticket and when I come back, I make straight for my father: 'Dad, I bet you've never been to Birmingham!'. And dad replies: 'Oh yes, I have!' So, quite crushed, I go off to the kitchen to talk to my mother. 'Looks like I'll never gonna get married, Mum!' - 'Why's that?' she says - 'Well, it seems every girl I fancy turns out to be my sister!' And Mum says: 'You go right ahead and marry whoever you want, my lad. *He's* not your father.'

I could now go on and ruin the joke by starting to explain it, or worse still by starting to explain what pertinence it has for Stanley Cavell's philosophical project. Instead, I want to come to this project, at least as it has a bearing on the cinema, by briefly characterizing another project - that of academic film studies, on whose behalf I have been asked to speak tonight.

Film Studies, ever since it entered academic life in the 1970s, and especially in the United States and Great Britain, has been in response to but also as a symptom of, the general 'crisis in the humanities'. While this crisis takes many forms, one manifestation is surely connected with the momentous transformations of a culture of the word, of written evidence and material proof, to a culture of sounds and images, where the materiality of evidence relies, for its production as well as for its reproduction on complex electronic technologies, and for its reception on the transitory sense impressions of the eye and ear. Sensing this paradigm shift in culture, students have become almost peremptory in demanding of the academy that it permits them to learn (note that I do not say: 'to teach them') about cinema, about the media, about image-culture and

visuality. But if this reflects their awareness of the 'now', their acute participation in the revolutions taking place (which, however, we rarely name as such, fearing that the word itself has been wholly appropriated by the advertising copy-writer), it also testifies to a certain continuity. Students, I would surmise, probably seek in cinema what they once sought (and occasionally still seek in literature): confirmation and a validation of self-doubt and self-exploration, as well as those moments of self-fulfilment which, in childhood, were also moments of self-oblivion, and - among the most precociously acute of unhappy adolescents - moments of intense self-alienation.

These pressures from students, combined with constraints emanating from the university institution, have within a very short space of time given the subject of film studies not only canonical texts, genres and authors - witness the extraordinary rise of Hitchcock as the canonical author par excellence, or of 'film noir' and 'horror' as canonical genres - but also traditions of hermeneutics and interpretation. Many of the textual strategies elaborated around these conjunctures are - perhaps surprisingly in light of what I have just said about a cultural paradigm shift - not fundamentally different from those in contemporary literary theory, cultural studies and even philosophy. The discipline thus reflects only partially some ultimate truth about the cinema, but responds to a more generally felt need to find for the humanities ways of talking about authors, texts and audiences that break with the modernist credo of the autonomous and self-sufficient artefact no less than with the concept of authorship as self-expression.

In respect of both 'author' and 'work', the study of Hollywood films has a special significance, obliging as it does the student of cinema to come up with, but also come up against new conditions of textual production, aesthetic reception, attributions of cultural and political meaning. For instance, 'we' the spectator, who in sociologically inspired mass media studies had traditionally been discussed as a passive consumer, as a victim of visual rhetoric (e.g. montage versus the long take), of propaganda (e.g. Nazi cinema) and commercial strategies (e.g. the Frankfurt School's dictum of mass entertainment as mass-deception), this spectator has greatly benefited - as a theoretical object - from linguistic, psychoanalytic, cognitive and phenomenological work on reader-response theory, the 'textually constructed subject' and more recently, cultural studies. In this respect, feminist theory has perhaps been one of the most successful, and certainly the most influential intervention, trying to unify a field of research, by rending apart the academic boundaries of literature, art history, and film studies.

It is here that I see Stanley Cavell's work, and his training as a philosopher, to have at once opened up possibilities of continuation, as well as introduced certain ruptures, obliging or rather inviting this young discipline of film studies to become once more reflexive, though perhaps not self-reflexive (which it has been, and often painfully so), but dialogical, conversational, one might even say, gregarious.

Cavell, for the film student, is the author of three books on film (I believe he himself has counted 'three-and-a-half books': *The World Viewed*, *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears* (the half would be *Themes out of School*). His interest in the cinema is a complex one, and he seems to enjoy the status of his work as not confined to or defined by the dominant critical doxa of the discipline, but he also sometimes - as in the preface to *Contesting Tears* - publicly worries about his standing in the film studies community. If he is not unduly concerned with the debates in recent decades over the 'cinematic apparatus' and if his interest in the cinema is different from that of, say, Roland Barthes who pondered films as our culture's last manifestations of 'le romaneseque': the experience of time charged with meaning because exemplifying a destiny, Cavell's passion for films has at once the gravity but also the diary informality of the thinkers he is most drawn to. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Heidegger's *What is Called Thinking* and Sigmund Freud's debt to Kant furnish important signposts that frame Cavell's discussion of Hollywood movies. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, a study of what used to be called 'screwball comedies' but which Cavell has illuminatingly renamed 'The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage', Cavell weaves his reflections, observations and close readings around two paradigms: one is the philosophical crux of 'the existence of other minds', and the other is 'repetition', glossed with a quote from Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*: 'the finding of the object is in fact the refinding of it', but as we know, a notion also central to both Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.

Cavell's more recent study of cinema, *Contesting Tears* explicitly takes up the same motifs, to sketch the outlines of another genre, the 'Melodramas of the Unknown Woman', comprising such classics of the woman's film (or 'weepie') as Max Ophuls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, King Vidor's *Stella Dallas*, George Cukor's *Gaslight*, and Irving Rapper's *Now Voyager*. Elsewhere, he has added Michael Curtiz' *Mildred Pierce*, Mervyn LeRoy's *Random Harvest*, Joseph von Sternber's *Blonde Venus* to the list, as well as Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Die Marquise von O.* - made into a film by Eric Rohmer, and Henrik Ibsen's *Nora*, adapted for the screen by Joseph Losey).

The 'Melodramas of the Unknown Woman' are structurally related to the 'Comedies of Remarriage' insofar as they involve a woman establishing her right to existence across a number of impossibilities, chief among which is 'man' or (in Emerson's phrase, 'nonchalant boys who are sure of a dinner'). The tragedy of these women, or indeed of 'the woman' is that she needs 'man' to be 'created', but man is a creature who is himself in all relevant respects incomplete, unformed, with an irresponsibility that spans from the 'nonchalant' to the 'villainous'. The woman's right to existence, then, takes the form of a metamorphosis in both the genres Cavell has fashioned, but in melodrama it entails a traumatic use of language (the eloquent muteness of the unknown woman inverting symmetrically the love of dialogue and the 'high embattled wit' of the couples in the comedies of remarriage). Clearly, Cavell is only partly interested in new readings of these films, and certainly not in canonical readings. Rather, in a move typical of the post-structuralist manner, he makes the reading process itself the essential part of the 'reading' he proposes (with an elegant theory of transference and counter-transference).

Interrogating his own unusual combination of disciplines, Cavell discovers in the films he has singled out an unexpected connexion, not only among the two bodies of texts. Operating yet another bold inversion of habitual perspectives, and still taking his cue from Hollywood, Cavell discovers that psychoanalysis, philosophy and cinema are all spoken from the same (male) perspective, because they share the same implied addressee: woman. They all ask 'what she knows, how she knows and how she escapes doubt about what she knows'.

Scepticism, the philosophical issue that attracted Cavell to Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy turns out to be a problem - as well as the displacement of a problem - constitutive of the male. Cavell traces it back to the Renaissance, to the break-up of the feudal order, tied to legitimacy and inheritance, grounded in the doubts expressed poignantly in Shakespearean tragedy, such as in *Othello* or *King Lear*, and articulated most nakedly in *The Winter's Tale*, which explicitly turns on the question whether men can ever really know that their children are theirs. With this formulation, Cavell seeks to rephrase not only the problem of the existence of other minds, but the issue of recognition, the search for the lost object and its miscognition which he sees enacted in the Hollywood melodramas of the unknown woman.

Returning once more to our own modernity and the cinema, I take Cavell to suggest that after Nietzsche, psychoanalysis and cinema may be two answers to the 'death of God' and to

'radical scepticism'. For if philosophy is indeed crucially concerned with what we can know, then psychoanalysis does make a contribution to philosophy, indeed can be considered as a displacement of philosophy in this respect, since the question that scepticism puts to philosophy receives in psychoanalysis a name: that of The Unconscious. Cavell has some admirably concise pages on this, and I hope I will be forgiven for not attempting to paraphrase them.

Considering the near-contemporaneity of psychoanalysis and the cinema, does this suggest that they are the recto and verso of each other? Each quite distinct (we know that Freud had no time for the moving image), but nonetheless conjoined by the fact that both are, as it were, answers to a question they were not altogether aware that it was being asked of them? Or, taking the thought one step further, could the cinema be regarded as in some sense the 'limit' of psychoanalysis, more specifically voiced in a passage from *Contesting Tears* where Cavell writes that his readings of a particular film comes to an end when he feels that psychoanalysis is called for?

What is more certain is the task Cavell which assigns to the cinema: to 'gender' both these displacements, putting the woman at the centre of the burden or in the 'path' of scepticism, but also as both origin and riddle of psychoanalysis; the 'feminization' of scepticism, so to speak, as well as of the talking cure. Might it be that instead of Oedipus encountering the Sphinx, it is the Sphinx that not only 'knows' about Oedipus' lack of knowledge, but knows that he knows that she knows? This knowledge, in melodrama, unlike tragedy, does not produce *anagnorisis*, or recognition. The woman's role in melodrama is 'to be consumed by the longing for creation, the affirmation of her unknownness'.

Repetition and Melodrama: symmetry and a-symmetry displaced in time, forever non-aligned, a special instance of the Derridean *différance*, deferral? Or is it closer to the Freudian *Unheimliche*, the Uncanny, the all too familiar made strange by returning, unexpectedly, at the wrong moment which is of course, for Freud and Lacan at least, invariably the right moment? Melodrama is all about time, about timing, *bad* timing. Or in Cavell's brilliant formulation a propos of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (as well as of *Hamlet*): melodrama is about appointments, missed appointments, dis-appointments.

But melodrama also differentiates, especially in its temporalities, and not along the binaries of 'chronos' and 'kairos' so typical of the classical literary and dramatic genres. This

makes it so modern: melodrama knows the temporality of 'too late' and the temporality of 'if only' -- both conditions of repetition, but both marking crucially the gaps that open up between an event and its return in the constitution of the subject. Melodrama knows and speaks about this repetition, but from the vantage point of a barrier, a limit. What exactly this limit is - the blockage to exchange, to 'conversation' in Cavell's terms - is what feminists and Cavell might agree to disagree. 'Female subjectivity', 'the woman's insistence on unknownness': I tend to hope that Cavell is right, because in his version, paradoxical as it may sound, the default value is dialogue, communication, not the withdrawal into radical otherness, essential difference, the blackness of the screen, the tain of the mirror.

Why this default value of dialogue? precisely because of scepticism, the (poisoned) bait laid out for the male - but as it happens, this poison, this *Gift* is also a gift - and if I understand Cavell right: a gift for both genders. The issue on which Cavell and the feminists will agree, is that these two temporalities of melodrama can also go under the name of 'nostalgia', the male's time of loss and mourning that is so useless to women, and which in turn, represents perhaps the cinema's most common currency, its own particular sweet poison of postmodernity (nostalgia, which is defined by Cavell as 'parody or avoidance').

A question that this raises, and on which I want to end, is one I am not sure whether Cavell has given us his views on: what is it that makes the cinema at once so profoundly American, and what does the cinema have to do with Cavell's other preoccupation, so eloquently put before us in the opening chapter of *A Pitch of Philosophy*: Jewish religion, Jewish ritual and the history of Jewish secular emancipation in the modern epoch?

Let me hazard a wild speculation. Wittgenstein, Freud, Stefan Zweig, the author of the novella on which *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is based - what do they have in common? Vienna 1900, Vienna up to the first world war, the Vienna of Jewish cultural and intellectual assimilation but also of Hitler's anti-semitism. (One might add the name of Otto Weininger - see Slavoj Zizek, "'What does Woman Want' and Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter*).

Or put differently. My question might be: why stop the series of displacements where Cavell locates them? Could it not be necessary, within the terms of the argument that Cavell implies, to operate other displacements, say, from woman and melodrama, women and cinema, to such additional moves as: from feminism to Jewish emancipation, from popular culture to Jewish

identity, from Hollywood to Jewish assimilation, from the Vienna of Wittgenstein, Freud and Stefan Zweig to the Hollywood of Carl Laemmle, Adolf Zukor and Max Ophuls? And beyond that (I am thinking of such by no means unproblematic, but stimulating books as Neal Gabler's *An Empire of their Own: How The Jews Invented Hollywood*, or Michael Rogin's *Black Face White Noise*) from the founding fathers of Hollywood, almost all Jewish, almost all central European immigrants, to the invention of the American Dream. By 'inventing' Middle America, were they compensating for their own cultural insecurity? When inventing America for the Americans, were they not also inventing (along with America) an idea of childhood and 'home' that has persuaded the rest of the world? Rogin's *Black Face White Noise*, on the other hand, tries to document the extraordinary contortions, reversals, negations and disavowals undertaken by Jewish entertainers, in the fields of music, dance, the movies, in order to enter the mainstream by systematically mimicking, parodying and - dare one say - even exploiting the cultural languages of those other outsiders, black Americans.

Does the cinema arise in the late C19th, in order to console us for radical scepticism or does it teach us to learn to live with its consequences? For me, as the male, the joke of Max Miller's joke is of course that what is offered as consolation by the maternal instance, the affirmation of my freedom, my right to choose is no consolation at all. Her 'Son, you go right ahead - *he's* not your father!' cements my most absolute insecurity, for it confirms my own redundancy, my being caught in the eternal recurrence, burdened with the dead weight of repetition. Worse: as soon as I follow my mother's advice and 'go right ahead' I shall be meeting my father, coming towards me on the road back from Birmingham. In this particular (tragi-) comedy of a marriage, then, the couple does not talk to each other at all, except, fatally, across the son.

Is this a lesson I can pass on to my students, keen to learn about sounds and images, as the sensory supports of their ways of being in the world? As we learn to *trust the cinema*, by recognizing in it the new 'irony' of scepticism, or of Richard Rorty's version of anti-metaphysical, anti-foundational pragmatism, but also bear in mind the Lacanian lesson of *les non-dupes errent/ les noms du pere*, does it mean popular culture need not necessarily, not inevitably be tantamount to the 'mass-deception' Adorno and Horkheimer saw it as in their Southern Californian exile? Let's just say, that to learn about repetition and difference not only from Deleuze and Derrida, but also from Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, Joan Crawford and Joan Fontaine is a lesson I gladly pass on, with thanks to Stanley Cavell.