

Wheatley, Catherine, *Stanley Cavell and Film: Scepticism and Self-Reliance at the Cinema*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, vi + 307 pp., \$118 (hardback).

Inasmuch as Wheatley's book is an enthusiastic exposition of—rather than a critical engagement with—Cavell's thought, it is difficult to review the book independently of Cavell's own work. While it is perfectly possible for Wheatley's book to be described as a lucid, elegantly written account of Cavell's thought on film, we are still left with the question of how lucid or illuminating Cavell's thought itself is. The decision to frame the book with what appear to be detailed descriptions of movie scenes that are, in fact, the author's "imaginary reconstructions of events that [Cavell] has described in interviews and his autobiographies" (3), is representative of Wheatley's wish to not only examine Cavell's thought but also pay homage to the man and his work by echoing precisely the kind of writing Cavell has become known for, one in which philosophy, memories of cinema, and autobiographical memories are intricately connected. Although Wheatley positions herself as a film scholar interested in uncovering the ways in which film informs Cavell's philosophical concerns, the book pays much more attention to the ways in which philosophy—particularly ordinary language philosophy (hereafter OLP)—and literary criticism have shaped Cavell's experience of, and writing on, cinema. This accounts for the emphasis, both in Cavell and Wheatley, on film themes and plots, character types, story types, and characters' psychology i.e., on aspects of cinema that it shares with literature and drama. The privileging of philosophy over film is also evident in the structure of the book, which is organized around several key "conceptual and philosophical principles"—OLP, skepticism, acknowledgement, moral perfectionism, and self-reliance—rather than around particular films or aspects of the film medium.

After situating Cavell's work on film in its historical and pedagogical context (Cavell's years of teaching at Harvard) Wheatley considers the reasons for film scholarship's "avoidance of Cavell"—his laborious, self-indulgent style, his (over)reliance on personal experience, his

resistance to formulating particular arguments with the intention of persuading the reader of his position, his ambivalent relationship to the Continental-Analytic philosophical divide, and his general lack of ‘modishness’ i.e. his disinterest in the dominant trends in film scholarship (e.g. postcolonial theory, race studies, globalization, gender studies, cultural studies). To her credit, Wheatley acknowledges Cavell’s complicity in “a particular brand of American liberal humanism” and various critiques of his lack of politics, especially feminist critiques of the heteronormative, patriarchal slant of Cavell’s thought. One of Wheatley’s objectives is to correct certain misconceptions about Cavell’s work, which has often been discussed as carrying on the legacy of realist film theorists like Panofsky, Bazin and Kracauer, a tradition from which Cavell, argues Wheatley, diverges in important ways, particularly in his preoccupation with skepticism.

Chapter two, which introduces us to Cavell’s concern with OLP in *Must We Mean What We Say?* already hints at Wheatley’s (and Cavell’s) tendency to conflate several different, often contradictory meanings of ‘the ordinary’. Wheatley begins by looking at the evolution of Wittgenstein’s thought from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to *Philosophical Investigations*, in which he argues that the structure of language determines our conception of reality i.e. meaning is subjective and contextual rather than propositional. Like Wittgenstein, Austin emphasizes the need to recover the ‘ordinary’ uses of language i.e. its arbitrariness, its inadequacies, and the relative nature of its ‘truth claims’, which for Austin represent only a small part of the range of utterances. According to Wheatley, OLP’s main argument—that “each instance of communication is not a matter of obeying a preexisting rule but of a negotiation with the prevailing conditions of language and the attempt to make oneself understood within them” (41)—informs Cavell’s later writings on film. It would be more precise to say, however, that OLP leads Cavell to rethink the nature of philosophy—rather than cinema—and realize its proximity to aesthetic criticism, in which the critic’s subjectivity is not discounted or concealed, and whose purpose is not to arrive at empirical judgments but to share an experience.

Wheatley's exposition of Cavell's thought fails to demonstrate the connection between OLP and cinema in a meaningful—not tautological or platitudinous—way (though this failure might be attributed to Cavell himself, whose thought Wheatley simply summarizes here). For instance, Wheatley lists a series of questions that preoccupy Cavell—having to do with intention, responsibility, and ethics—without explaining how these questions serve as a bridge between OLP and cinema. Her discussion of Cavell's reading of Fellini's *La Strada* in terms of the Philomel myth (whether Fellini intended the reference to the myth or not) does not make it clear how OLP informs debates about intentionality or what film's interest in 'the ordinary' has to do with any of this. In Wheatley's account of Cavell's analysis of the Marx Brothers' films and of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* several different meanings of 'ordinary' and 'language' become conflated: the 'ordinary' of 'ordinary language philosophy'—referring to the subjective, contextual nature of words—becomes conflated with the notion of 'cinema as a kind of language' that demands interpretation, and with cinema's privileged relationship to 'the ordinary' in the sense of 'the banal or the everyday', which Wheatley/Cavell claim is best exemplified by cinema's ability to capture motion. Cavell/Wheatley jump from discussing the ways in which words mean (OLP) to discussing the ontology of cinema (cinema as a kind of language) to the notion of the everyday/the banal, to one particular aspect of the film medium, movement, specifically small, incidental and insignificant gestures that supposedly reveal 'the physiognomy of the ordinary' (Cavell's examples include the distracted movements of characters in the trial scene in Capra's film). Neither Cavell nor Wheatley acknowledge the possibility that such gestures are intended/staged, their function being to increase the film's impression of reality. Ultimately it remains unclear how OLP's concern with 'ordinary language' is related to the idea of cinema as a kind of language; to state the obvious, language (words) constitutes only one aspect of film.

Chapter three focuses on *The World Viewed*, in which Cavell grapples with the break in our 'natural relation' to movies by exploring both how movies changed in the 1960s and how our relationship to the world changed. Most of the chapter is devoted to summarizing Cavell's

argument about how cinema became modern (the decline of established types, stars, and genres and the emergence of fragmented, ambiguous and self-reflective films) and his claim that modern cinema exemplifies, and at the same time makes visible to us, our ontological status of viewing the world as a picture from which we are screened out. Cavell and Wheatley remain ambivalent about what exactly is the way out of this alleged ‘crisis of skepticism’: they suggest that movies must acknowledge their own limits, “their outsideness to the world and our absence from it” (89), but have a difficult time distinguishing this ‘acknowledgment’ from mere self-reference. The chapter is peppered with references to ‘the ordinary’: from ‘ordinary language philosophy’, through our ‘ordinary experience of being in the world’ and the ‘ordinary practice of film-going’, to ‘ordinary cinema’ (Hollywood as the norm, from which all other cinemas are the exception) and our ‘ordinary’ or ‘natural’ relation to (Hollywood) movies, which Wheatley contrasts with the ‘philosophical’ appreciation of modern cinema. This proliferation of meanings renders the concept of ‘the ordinary’ too broad to be meaningful.

Chapter four frames ‘the crisis of skepticism’ in terms of doubting—and acknowledging—the existence of other minds in the context of *Pursuits of Happiness*, wherein Cavell discusses a series of Hollywood films from the 1930s and 1940s— ‘comedies of remarriage’—as exemplifying film’s potential to resist skepticism by foregrounding the everyday. Here ‘marriage’ represents ‘the ordinary’ while the threat of divorce—the result of a failure of acknowledgement—represents the threat of skepticism. Given OLP’s emphasis on ‘negotiation’ and the struggle to make oneself understood, to find common ground, Cavell’s choice of ‘comedies of remarriage’ to illustrate these concerns seems somewhat superficial or self-evident, which might account for some uncomfortable similarities between Cavell’s writing on acknowledgment and marriage self-help books, which similarly emphasize the need to find a shared language, to give yourself freely yet preserve your independence, to strive to be your best self, and to keep making the commitment to your partner again and again.

Chapter five examines the notion of ‘self-reliance’ in relation to ‘the melodrama of the unknown woman’, the subject of *Contesting Tears*, which Wheatley sees as marking a shift in Cavell’s thought from a concern with skepticism to a preoccupation with moral philosophy, particularly ‘moral perfectionism’, and as the first instance Cavell’s work presents us with “the possibility of overcoming skepticism outside marriage” (144). This chapter provides one of the rare occasions when Wheatley actually engages critically with Cavell’s work by acknowledging feminist critiques of his patriarchal view of the two sexes. Although Wheatley reproduces the exchange between Tania Modleski and Cavell, ultimately she defends Cavell against feminist critiques by arguing that Cavell saw these female protagonists as autonomous and self-reliant. Focusing on *Stella Dallas*, which Cavell reads as overturning “archetypal stories of self-sacrifice, revealing Stella’s story as one of self-liberation and self-empowerment” (160), Wheatley defends Cavell against the charge that he has appropriated female suffering by assuming he can speak for women, explaining that Cavell’s ‘male voice’ is actually modulated by his attunement “to his mother’s way of thinking—and to Stella’s as a reflection of his mother” (177).

Chapter six pairs the notion of ‘moral perfectionism’ with *Cities of Words*, in which Cavell revisits some of the films he discussed in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears* to explore the role of ‘teacher’ and ‘friend’ in a person’s moral education. While she is correct to distinguish Cavell’s version of moral perfectionism from Kantian universalism, virtue ethics, and cinematic ethics, Wheatley ends the chapter in typical Cavellian fashion by describing very different kinds of relationship—between Cavell and the reader, between Cavell and film, between film and the viewer, between husband and wife—in the same terms of ‘acknowledgment’, ‘moral perfectionism’ and the ‘overcoming of skepticism’, which have, by this point, lost their meaning.

In the last chapter Wheatley returns to the question of the difficulty of categorizing Cavell’s thought, which has been variously described as ‘romantic film-philosophy’, ‘philosophical film criticism’ or ‘ordinary language criticism’, terms she approves of because they acknowledge Cavell’s refusal to disenfranchise film as most philosophers working on film do. Here the

generosity of Wheatley's engagement with Cavell translates into self-evident statements, e.g. for Cavell criticism is "a matter of subjective experience," "it is an attempt at overcoming...subjectivity by communicating...what my experience of the film was to you, the reader," and "criticism is an acknowledgment of the other and a form of conversation" (246-247).

While Wheatley provides a lucid account of Cavell's work, her study does not engage in an explicitly critical manner with Cavell's thought. Some of the things this book could have provided, but did not, include 1) a critical analysis of the many conflicting and often mutually exclusive meanings of core terms like 'the ordinary,' 'acknowledgment,' 'automatism', 'language', 'skepticism'; 2) a more deliberate engagement with the ways in which Freudian psychoanalysis informs Cavell's thought on the human body on screen, 'hidden literality', 'the over-determination of meaning', 'the theatricalization of the cogito', 'metaphysical embarrassment' etc.; 3) a reflection on Cavell's ambivalent view of film as both a manifestation of the fall into skepticism recorded in the work of Descartes, Kant, Emerson, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein and, at the same time, a cure for skepticism; 4) a more in-depth analysis of the criteria according to which Cavell evaluates films and entire genres, criteria that are, for the most part, determined by a film's philosophical rather than cinematic, aesthetic, social, cultural or political significance.

Bio

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