

CAVELL ON FILM AND SCEPTICISM

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In this essay I argue that in his work on cinema Cavell subordinates the aesthetic dimension of the cinematic image to its philosophical significance since his primary objective is to demonstrate cinema's potential as a bulwark against scepticism.¹ Ironically, Cavell views photography and cinema as manifestations of the fall into scepticism only to redeem cinema as the only proof of the *cogito*, which is no longer capable of rationally, consciously, declaring itself.

While many have welcomed the growing popularity of "film-philosophy" over the last decade, others have cautioned against the subordination of film to philosophy. According to John Mullarkey, for instance,

the aim of seeing film *as* philosophy is more often than not reduced to "film as text as philosophy", in as much as the film's audio-visual matter, no less than its cultural, technological and/or commercial dimensions, are nonetheless read or interpreted from a *ready-made* philosophical vantage-point (Mullarkey 2008, 66).

Mullarkey could have been speaking about Cavell, whose writing on film, arguing that cinema has the potential to "save us from scepticism", is representative of the tendency to subordinate the *visual/representational* dimension of the cinematic image to its *philosophical/avisual* dimension. As I have argued in Trifonova 2007 the subordination of aesthetics to ontology, and the denigration of the visual in general, was a defining feature of twentieth-century French philosophy (for example, Bergson, Sartre, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Deleuze), which revived metaphysics as a kind of thinking pertaining to impersonal forces and characterized by an aversion to subjectivity that manifests itself as an aversion of the philosophical gaze away from the discourse of vision, away from the image. With his writing on film Cavell inscribes himself squarely in this Continental line of thought, which is less interested in the image as an aesthetic category than in what the image can "do" for thinking, how the image can reveal *the conditions of possibility for subjectivity* (the pre-reflective, the pure, the impersonal, the inhuman

¹ A considerably longer version of this article will appear as "The Disappearing Image: Cavell on Film and Scepticism" in *Philosophy of the Image: Presence, Absence, and New Media*, eds. Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). **Please erase this footnote.**

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or, to use Cavell's own term, the "automatic") and thus "save us from scepticism". The title of one of Cavell's most frequently cited essays, "What Becomes of Things on Film", is indicative of his interest in what the film image can tell us about our relationship to things rather than in the cinematic experience as such. Recalling Lyotard's discussion of the postmodern sublime—exemplified by Barnett Newman's Abstract Expressionist paintings—as an "event", Cavell maintains that the most "cinematic" aspect of film is never one or another technique particular to film but rather the "event" of film itself (Cavell 1984b, 173).

Cavell's major justification for writing about movies is that

art now exists in the condition of philosophy, since it has always been the condition of philosophy to attempt to escape itself, which for several centuries has taken the form of each new major philosopher wishing to repudiate the past of the subject—I mean repudiate it philosophically (Cavell 1984a, 20).

Movies promise to reveal the *condition of viewing* as such, which, in our age at least, is the condition of remaining unseen, viewing from "behind the self". Cavell invites us to think of philosophy as a certain stage in the historical development of film, a self-critical stage at which film finally begins to examine its own conditions of possibility. At the same time, however, he also maintains that philosophy is not just a stage in the history of film but its ontological basis: film exists naturally and perpetually in the condition of philosophy, which is to say in the condition of scepticism. Cavell's subordination of film to philosophy—he equates film with "consciousness" and philosophy with "self-consciousness"—becomes evident in his privileging of *doubling* and *repetition*, both of which imply self-consciousness or, in his terms, philosophy. The two film genres he singles out as both *dramatizing the threat of scepticism* inherent in the ontology of the film image and *refuting scepticism*, function precisely through doubling and repetition: the Shakespearean romance works by displacement/doubling, splitting the world into two parallel worlds (how things are and how we want them to be), whereas the comedy of remarriage is based on the notion of the repetition, re-discovery, and re-animation of marital love. Conversely, Cavell considers tragedy and melodrama inferior genres since they fail to present the possibility of another (better) world. The criteria on the basis of which he evaluates a film or an entire genre are thus determined by the film's philosophical—rather than aesthetic or social—significance, by its ability to recall the criteria or conditions of possibility for its own existence and to assuage our scepticism about the world and about the existence of other minds. In short, for Cavell ontological considerations always take precedence over aesthetic ones.

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Cavell's theory of film, like Kracauer's, performs cosmetic surgery on scepticism. Starting from Kracauer's premise that film demonstrates an "affinity" for the infinite, the indeterminate, the fortuitous, the unstaged, and the incidental, Cavell argues that film undermines its own inherent scepticism thanks to its "affinity" for *the involuntary*, *the unconscious*, and *the automatic*, all of which, in Cavell's view, describe the nature of the human in modernity and post-modernity: they are the *cogito's conditions of possibility*. Cavell reads the advent of photography and film as a manifestation of something that had already happened to the human mind—namely, *the fall into scepticism* recorded in the works of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Emerson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein—only to redeem film as *the ultimate proof of the cogito's existence*. Even as he acknowledges that film offers us nothing more than "views" of the world and throws us into scepticism—scepticism about the world, about the existence of other minds, and about our own existence—Cavell insists that film can *save us from scepticism*, inasmuch as the film camera functions as the ultimate guarantee that the *cogito* can no longer be concealed but, on the contrary, is always already on display and thus impervious to doubt.

Cavell has repeatedly voiced his desire to mend the split between Anglo-American (analytic) philosophy and Continental philosophy, as well as to establish the distinctiveness of American philosophy whose unsung founding fathers, Emerson and Thoreau, he reads in conjunction with Wittgenstein's notion of "ordinary language". His unconventional combination of Continental thought—especially Freudian psychoanalysis—and Anglo-American philosophy—specifically, ordinary language philosophy and moral perfectionism—may account for his deeply ambivalent treatment of cinema's relationship to scepticism. Cavell's discussions of the human body on film, of "hidden literality", and of the ordinary and the self-evident, are representative of the "Freudian moments" in his work. The purpose of these discussions is to demonstrate that scepticism does not pose a real philosophical problem, because the condition in which the modern *cogito* finds itself (a condition exacerbated by the invention of the camera) is one of "always already being exposed" and thus not requiring proof. The *cogito* "betrays itself" by its embodied existence, particularly through its unconscious, automatic movements and gestures, which the film camera records automatically and thus, supposedly, objectively. Conversely, in his "Emersonian moments" Cavell presents scepticism as a real threat, the overcoming of which demands an act of self-assertion. Nevertheless, as we shall see, scepticism, even in the second case does not pose a real threat, since Cavell translates the *philosophical* problem of the existence of the world and of other minds into a *psychological* problem, the struggle between individualism and conformity.

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If the battle against scepticism involves recalling conditions of possibility, how do movies acknowledge their own conditions of possibility? Cavell emphasizes that self-reference is not the only, or even the main, way in which movies acknowledge their conditions of possibility, that is, *acknowledgment is not equivalent to self-reference*. In fact, self-reference does not assure candour (hence Cavell's distaste for Godard) but feeds into scepticism by threatening to "un-theatricalize" the *cogito*. The appropriate response to scepticism is not to expose the entire world as the work of ideology by depersonalizing characters or by underscoring the ways in which they have been constructed by discourses they do not recognize as their own (as Godard does). The *cogito* cannot declare itself truthfully by making the absolute claim that it has been "constructed through and through", for this would mean that even its consciousness of this is just another external discourse, another construct. On the contrary, *the only proof of the cogito is that it does not know itself* because large "chunks" of it remain unconscious: the only proof of the mind's existence is the very fact that it does not know itself, which presupposes that there is something to be known. From this point of view, the role of psychoanalysis in the struggle against scepticism cannot be overstated:

I see [...] the advent of psychoanalysis as the place, perhaps the last place, in which the human psyche as such (the idea that there is a life of the mind, hence a death) receives its proof. And it receives proof of its existence in the only form in which that psyche can (any longer) believe it—namely, as essentially unknown to itself, say unconscious (Cavell 1996c, 235–36).

The modern *cogito* exists in the mode of having always already *betrayed* (rather than "declared") itself. Cavell develops this argument in his analysis of Poe's short story "The Imp of the Perverse", which Cavell sees as marking an important shift from the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" to Emerson's (and Cavell's own) translation of it as "I think, therefore I am destroyed". Thinking is not the only, or the purest, way in which the *cogito* declares itself; on the contrary, in Poe's tale the thought "I am safe" precipitates the protagonist's self-destruction as it becomes perverted/translated as "I am safe as long as I don't say anything" and, ultimately, into a confession of his crime, thereby demonstrating that "thinking will out, that it inherently betrays the thinker" (Cavell 1996a, 314). The *cogito* does not need to make an effort to declare itself, that is, prove its existence, because it always already exists in a "perpetual theatre" with all other minds: we live in a constant state of metaphysical embarrassment. While it might seem that self-consciousness is a prison from within which we desperately try to reach to the outside world and other minds, in reality the sheer fact of our embodiment guarantees the defeat of scepticism. The body's lucidity—the body's everyday, automatic or unconscious movements and gestures—constitutes the horizon of the

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unsayable against which we interpret the actual actions of film characters (as well as those of real people). The unsayable (the condition of possibility for saying anything) is

conveyed by freeing the motion of the body for its own lucidity. [...] It was always part of the grain of film that, however studied the lines and set the business, the movement of the actors was essentially improvised—as in those everyday actions in which we walk through a new room or lift a cup in an unfamiliar locale or cross a street or greet a friend or look in a store window or accept an offered cigarette or add a thought to a conversation. They could all go one way or another (Cavell 1971, 153).

However scripted or rehearsed a film, the actors' bodies always move in more or less unrehearsed, improvised ways which do not—cannot—perfectly match the significance of the actions they are performing. The body can never be completely fictionalized: its inherent lucidity guarantees that it will always exceed the meaning we are supposed to ascribe to it based on the script, the editing, and so on. In short, the body is the *cogito's* condition of possibility.

The sceptic assumes that my knowledge of others depends on their expressing themselves: if another person fails to express himself, or deliberately or inadvertently falsifies his expression of himself, I won't be able really to know what is going on inside him, but "he still knows". Cavell argues that the sceptic's way of reasoning erroneously presupposes that people's relationship to themselves is purely objective, that the other "knows" his own pain, that his relationship to it is purely cognitive rather than one of acknowledgment. Scepticism results from the incorrect assumption that we have access to other minds *only* through their behaviour or through their unconscious gestures. The problematic term here is "only": it presupposes another, more direct access to other minds that promises a more "authentic" knowledge of them. The problem is not that the other is hidden from me (the body as an obstacle), but just the opposite: the other is totally exposed, transparent to me—by virtue of his body—as I am to him. Shame and embarrassment are, for Cavell, ontological facts rather than feelings associated with uncomfortable or traumatic experiences one has repressed. Reading other minds through the unconscious or automatic (hysterical) bodily symptoms displayed on/through their bodies is analogous to exposing the grammatical criteria underlying the words we use: knowing ourselves in the body of the expressions we use is the same as knowing ourselves in the unconscious gestures that we-as-bodies perform.

Cinema's role in overcoming scepticism consists in automatically recording these unconscious, automatic gestures. Now that the *cogito* has become alienated from itself or pornographized—in the sense that all its wishes and desires have

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ceased to be its own but are produced for it by society, so that when it speaks it speaks someone else's language and desire—the human being survives only in the body's unconscious actions. In this context, “fidgetiness”—the body's automatic actions, gestures, or tics—emerges as the only means of self-individuation. Here lies the value of cinema as a bulwark against scepticism: by automatically (unconsciously) recording the body's automatic gestures, cinema reassures us that there is still something left of the human being, something that is not fully conscious and thus not fully rationalized/constructed. To refute scepticism, then, one must take the risk of apychism:

Call the belief in the soul psychism. Then a serious psychology must take the risk of apychism. It can no more tolerate the idea of another (little) man inside, in here, than a serious theology can tolerate the idea of another (large) man outside, up there. [...] The spirit of the body is the body (Cavell 1996b, 77).

Freud's unique contribution to the history of the idea of the body as an image of the soul/spirit was his suggestion to look at the body's relationship to the mind not simply in terms of *expression* but in terms of *exposure*, *betrayal*, and *embarrassment*, for example in his description of Dora's “symptomatic acts” as a “pantomimic announcement” (Cavell 1996c, 244).

We have seen that “the Continental line of inheritance” in Cavell's philosophy dismisses “the threat of scepticism”, which this line of thinking is supposedly based on, as a phantom philosophical problem. Let us now look at “the American line of inheritance” in Cavell's philosophy of film to see if it takes scepticism more seriously. Reading Descartes through Emerson, as well as through Heidegger's description of *Dasein* as a kind of being for which its own being is in question, Cavell takes Descartes's idea that my existence requires proof or authentication to mean that I exist only by virtue of acknowledging my existence, that is, Cavell understands “self-authentication” or “proof”, by way of Emerson, in terms of “self-reliance”. Emerson is interested in what happens if one fails to say “I am, I exist”, in moving from the possibility that I can disclaim certain actions or thoughts as not mine to the possibility that none of my actions and thoughts is mine, that “I am worked, from inside or outside” (Cavell 1996a, 301). But Emerson denies that the self can be absolutely worked by Others, reminding us that the soul is always in the process of becoming (moral perfectionism) and thus capable of liberating itself from the tyranny of conformity. Following Emerson, Cavell reformulates the problem of scepticism not as an ontological proof of one's existence (the Cartesian “I am, I exist”) but as a matter of self-individuation: to say sensibly “I exist”, he argues, is to differentiate this “I” from others to which it does not refer at the moment of declaring itself. The problem of scepticism is thus transferred to a moral/ethical plane, where *what requires proof is not my existence but my*

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individuality, my independence from others, in short my autonomy. To be the “author” of oneself means to demonstrate/enact the condition of possibility of the *cogito*—namely, its “nature” of “becoming” rather than “being”. The possibility of this self-authoring or becoming-oneself exists against the very real threat of not being oneself, failing to author or create oneself:

Emerson needs a view of the world, a perspective on its fallenness, in which the uncreatedness of the individual manifests itself, in which human life appears as the individual’s failure at self-creation, as a continuous loss of individual possibility in the face of some empowering competitor (ibid., 301–2).

Using Emerson’s account of existing in a state of fallenness or uncreatedness as “conformity”, Cavell manages to avoid the metaphysical turn (proving one’s existence by referring to an external agent responsible for my existence, God) by *psychologizing* the whole question of existence and proof, translating metaphysical questions, for example, “Do I exist?” or “Is the world real?” into psychological ones, for example, “Is my existence authentic (rather than ‘real’)?” or “Is my existence fake, inauthentic, conformist, uncreated?” He goes so far as to claim that the metaphysical question of the proof of one’s existence cannot even be posed coherently at certain historical moments in the life of the individual and in the life of the culture at large. Modernity is one such historical moment, in which modern man cannot even demand of himself to prove his own existence because he is ashamed of it:

I pause here simply to state [Emerson’s] observation that we are no longer able to announce the cogito for ourselves, no longer able, as he puts it, to say “I think” and “I am”, on our own, for ourselves. I take this to imply that we are without proof of our existence, that we are, accordingly, in a state of pre-existence, as if metaphysically missing persons. Emerson’s famous word for lacking words of our own is “conformity” (Cavell 2005, 128).

Given that Cavell translates the problem of scepticism into the problem of conformity, one would expect his refutation of scepticism to underscore the importance of the struggle to maintain one’s individuality in the face of conformity. If to stake or enact one’s existence means to be true to one’s individual nature, one may wonder what, according to Cavell, makes an individual unique. And yet, the example he gives—in his discussion of Capra’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to Washington*—raises more questions than it answers. In his film analysis Cavell aims to demonstrate that the importance of cinema lies in “returning the mind to the living body” (ibid., 127), recording thinking, which is not limited to “intellectual processes”, but is enacted in “universal fidgetiness”, the little

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involuntary gestures and movements of the human body. Cavell calls such recordings “somatograms”, claiming that they belong to what Benjamin calls cinema’s “optics of the unconscious”. In the scene Cavell analyzes, Mr. Deeds delivers a speech, in which he argues that involuntary gestures and actions are a form of thinking too, although they do not conform to the common idea of thinking as a purely intellectual act. It is not just any movements of the body, however, that qualify as “thinking” and thus as “proof” of the *cogito*’s existence. Mr. Deed’s examples of thinking (somatograms) include fidgetiness, doodling, filling in the “O” in the title of a brochure, and playing the tuba—actions that are done mostly unconsciously, or if done consciously (tuba playing) are always already accepted as somewhat eccentric rather than functional, conformist, or goal oriented:

And I take it that Deeds’ insight is that a reverse field of proof is available by way of the motion picture camera, so that while thinking is no longer secured by the mind’s declaration of its presence to itself, it is now to be secured by the presence of the live human body to the camera, in particular by the presence of the body’s apparently least intelligent property, its fidgetiness, its metaphysical restlessness. In Descartes the proof of thinking was that it cannot doubt itself; after Emerson the proof of thinking is that it cannot be concealed. [...] Am I saying that the camera is necessary to this knowledge? [...] Must I commit myself to saying that my existence is proved (only) each time the camera rolls my way? I ask a little license here. My idea is that the invention of the motion picture camera reveals something that has already happened to us. [...] We can think of what the camera reveals as a new strain either in our obliviousness to our existence or in a new mode of certainty of it (*ibid.*, 130–31).

The *cogito* is no longer self-evident, so the only proof of its existence is the body which does not even have to “try” to prove its existence, for it betrays itself in spite of itself: by recording somatograms cinema “return[s] the mind to the living body” (*ibid.*, 127). If there is a threat to speak of here, it is not the threat of scepticism but the opposite threat of *overexposing* the *cogito*:

If the price of Descartes’s proof of his existence was a perpetual recession of the body [...] the price of an Emersonian proof of my existence is a perpetual visibility of the self, a theatricality in my presence to others, hence to myself. The camera is an emblem of perpetual visibility. Descartes’ self-consciousness thus takes the form of *embarrassment*.

Paradoxically, Cavell suggests that the most automatic, arbitrary, involuntary actions or movements provide the strongest evidence of the *cogito*, which is no longer capable of rationally, consciously declaring itself. What individualizes Mr. Deeds, Cavell would have us believe, are precisely those little inconspicuous

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actions and gestures he does unconsciously, automatically. *Thus both the cause of scepticism—living automatically, in conformity, unable to declare oneself as the author of one's existence—and the refutation of scepticism—the automatic recording of automatic, unconscious movements by the camera—are described in the same terms, in terms of automatism.*

Cinema, along with the other arts, has moved into the modernist predicament “in which an art has lost its natural relation to its history” (Cavell 1971, 72). The question it has to answer is no longer “in what direction will this art develop in the future” but rather “how can this art survive?”: “A modernist art, investigating its own physical basis, searching out its own conditions of existence, rediscovers the fact that its existence as an art *is not physically assured*” (ibid., 107, my italics). The lapse of conviction in the traditional uses of its automatism has forced cinema into modernism. Insofar as modern art foregrounds the conditions of possibility for the existence of a whole range of automatisms, it functions as a bulwark against scepticism: the battle against automatism (in the sense of tradition or convention) is the battle against scepticism. The modern artist frees himself from the automatic inheritance of traditional/conventional/automatic uses of the medium, which he doesn't recognize as his (since they are prefabricated), and instead creates automatically, tapping into some subconscious or repressed sources of authenticity and individuality not traversed by the automatism of tradition. In other words, *Cavell challenges one type of automatism, that of tradition or convention, with another type of automatism, the subconscious/ unconscious which, like tradition, the artist does not recognize as “his” since he is unaware of it.* The dialectic of the “automatism” of conformity (“bad”) and the inherent automatism of the body (“good”) is reproduced in the dialectic of “automatism” referring to the nature of the photographic/film medium as such (“good”)—photographs are not hand-made but manufactured automatically—and, on the other hand, “automatism” referring to tradition or convention (“bad”).

Cavell's conflation of several mutually contradictory meanings of “automatism” demonstrates that even from the perspective of the American line of inheritance in his philosophy scepticism remains an imaginary problem. In the final analysis, Cavell's redemption of cinema from a cause of scepticism to a solution to scepticism remains purely tautological. The desire to refute scepticism can be satisfied only by *renouncing the desire for proof*, a renunciation made possible, in fact guaranteed, by the inherent automatism of the photographic medium. Cinema proves the reality of the world precisely by *not* setting out to prove anything.

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