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▶ **To cite this version:**

Sandra Laugier. The Importance of Stanley Cavell for the Study of Film. David LaRocca. Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind, Bloomsbury, pp.xiii-xvii, 2021, 978-1-5013-5191-4. 10.5040/9781501351945.0004 . hal-03741635

HAL Id: hal-03741635
https://paris1.hal.science/hal-03741635

Submitted on 1 Aug 2022

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Published in LaRocca, David, ed., Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind (Bloomsbury, 2021)
https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/movies-with-stanley-cavell-in-mind-9781501351921/

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Sandra Laugier

STANLEY CAVELL'S TEACHING AND WRITING have been on my mind nearly every day since I first entered one of his classes on film, when I arrived as a visiting student from Paris at the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University in 1984. The timing of my arrival explains why I am particularly fond of movies (and television shows) from the 1980s, even though Cavell's classes were on classic Hollywood melodramas and comedies. Little did I know that, in time, I would end up translating most of Stanley's books into French, and dedicating most of my scholarly labor to understanding, presenting, and discussing his work. Back then, I just happened to walk into one of his classes, and "he had me." I imagine something of the same effect can happen to anyone today, and it may be a reason for picking up *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*. I felt so lucky to discover a philosophy that took entirely seriously not merely film, but the power of the experience of film and its importance in my life. For me, the encounter was a turning point: Cavell's work, and Cavell on film, became the most important thing in my intellectual life, giving it continuity and me strength. The fourteen chapters collected here provide ample reason for understanding the importance of Stanley Cavell for the study of film.

All the contributors to this wonderful, collective enterprise—brought together by David LaRocca—have in a similar way encountered him and his work. Whether they are revisiting films Cavell loved or taking up the invitation to explore new films, they reveal the importance of Cavell's writing and method. Indeed, by teaching each us what importance *is*, that is, what matters to us (to me, to you, hence, to everyone), Cavell taught us how to learn from ourselves what is important—and, more particularly, how film matters. The revelation of one's own relevance, of the possibility and

the necessity of *making use of who one is*, is something that all of Cavell's readers and students owe him, and to his conception of film. Moreover, such lessons are evident to the ordinary viewer, so one need not be a professional philosopher or a publishing film critic to appreciate their implications. The chapters to follow—and the helpfully orienting Introduction—exemplify the availability of philosophy for the study of film, and the many ways that Cavell's work can be profitably taken up to manifest it.

Since memory for Cavell, and for all of us, is so intimately connected to our experience of movies, it is not surprising that, looking back now, I realize the importance of the publication of *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981; in French, 1993, Editions des Cahiers du cinema)—one of those intellectual events that invisibly transforms the intellectual and moviegoing lives of so many people. It was one of the first works by Cavell made accessible to the French-speaking public (even before his landmark, *The Claim of Reason*) and an instant classic in France: a guide to viewing Hollywood film as well as an always welcome, and once read, irreverent, wedding present.

In the mix of the chapters to follow, one must be struck by the fact of Cavell's presence on the European continent and especially in francophone Europe, the birthplace of film criticism. His ideas, and even his own words, are explicitly present in the works of the French filmmaker Arnaud Desplechin, who quotes directly from *Pursuits of Happiness* at the end of *Comment je me suis disputé . . . (ma vie sexuelle)* (*My Sex Life . . . or How I Got into an Argument*, 1996); and the final scene of *Les fantômes d'Ismaël* (*Ismael's Ghosts*, 2017) has Marion Cotillard deliver a long passage lifted straight from the end of Cavell's memoir, *Little Did I Know*. Cavell has made a similar and striking impression on the Belgian filmmaking duo, the Dardenne brothers, Jean-Pierre and Luc, in, among other places, their film *La fille inconnue* (*The Unknown Girl*, 2016). Translating Cavell's English to French, with my friend Christian Fournier—*Pursuits of Happiness* and *The World Viewed*, as well as so many of Cavell's essays on film—has been an extraordinarily rewarding experience and kindled a lifelong wonder. Of course, I am not alone—as the contributors in what follows make clear. In France, a country where Hollywood cinema has been historically beloved by film critics, filmmakers, and the public since the 1950s, the strength of support for Cavell's work—in *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Trafic*, *Positif*, and publications devoted to film—has been steady and remains so. A recent, new edition of *A la recherche du Bonheur* (*Pursuits of Happiness*) in a *poche* (i.e., a small format paperback edition) was an unexpected bestseller, and a great help to the publisher during the coronavirus pandemic.

How could Cavell's remarks on film in the 1970s and early 1980s about films from the 1930s and 1940s be a hit—and hit the heart and mind—in the 2020s? In part, I think, because the study of film, as conceived by Cavell, is about heeding a trust in one's experience. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, for example, he examines the act of "checking one's experience," which is to say,

of examining one's own experience, of "let[ting] the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it."[1] To educate one's experience so as to be made educable by it. To be interested in film *as* thought means to be interested in, and rely on, our experience in order to find the right words to describe and express it. This task is "a conceptual as much as an experiential undertaking; it is a commitment to being guided by our experience but not dictated to by it."[2] What is unique, in Cavell's reading of film as a medium, is his interpretive anchoring in the works themselves—in individual films—and his way of showing how the film (the whole film, including actors and production and cinematography and dialogue) brings its own intelligence to its making, that this intelligence itself educates us. Hence Cavell's take on the ontology of film where "the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened—like the question what becomes of particular people, and specific locales, and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film—has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us."[3]

* * * *

The importance of film lies in its power to make *what matters* emerge: "to magnify the feeling and meaning of a moment."[4] So the experience of film is what cultivates in us a specific ability to see the too often invisible importance of things and moments, and emphasizes the covering-over or invisibility of importance in our lives, of what matters to us, *what we mind*. For importance, ironically enough, is essentially what can be *missed*, what remains unseen until later, or possibly, forever.

The pedagogy of film is that while it amplifies the significance of moments, it also reveals the "inherent *concealment* of significance."[5] As Cavell writes,

> If it is part of the grain of film to magnify the feeling and meaning of a moment, it is equally part of it to counter this tendency, and instead to acknowledge the fateful fact of a human life that the significance of its moments is ordinarily not given with the moments as they are lived, so that to determine the significant crossroads of a life may be the work of a lifetime.[6]

What Cavell describes here is something else than mere attentiveness or inattentiveness or carelessness: it is a fundamental structure of experience, again, "an inherent *concealment* of significance, as much as its revelation."[7] Human experience reveals itself as defined by our cinephilic capacity for seeing detail, reading expressions. In turn, expression articulates the

concealment *and* the revelation of importance—ultimately becoming the texture of our life form, uncannily shared by film.

Yet, expression is not easily forthcoming; this is the difficulty that Cavell describes when he speaks of the temptation of inexpressiveness and of isolation, and shows the essential vulnerability of human experience. We experience "the appearance and significance" of things (places, faces, patterns, words), but only, as it were, afterward, after words. So it is that we discover importance not only through accurate and refined perceptions, but also through our suffering and misperceptions, in other words, through our failures to perceive. Because "missing the evanescence of the subject" is constitutive of our ordinary lives, and for Cavell at the core of philosophy—and of the difficulty of philosophy.[8]

Cavell matters to us all because he explains film's affinity to philosophy, not in a traditional, academic sense, but in our everyday lives: philosophy responds to the desire that drives us to film in the first place. He matters, in this sense, not only for the study of film, but way beyond it—since film is an essential part of our contemporary form of life. Films, passages of films, or movie characters that matter to us are "[l]ike childhood memories whose treasure no one else appreciates, whose content is nothing compared to their unspeakable importance for me."[9] Cavell is, to my mind, the best thinker for helping us account for the power of the film experience: the way in which our life is, for instance, also made up of fragments of cinema, which are then part of our experience in the same way as dreams or memories that haunt us. Because cinema presents these important moments to us, they become important moments in our lives. Such moments, lived in real time and in the time of film, are often unassailable and indeterminate; their meaning is not given to us while we are living them, hence the importance of reflecting on film, as if on a memory or a dream.

As Cavell puts it as early as *The World Viewed*, "We involve the movies in us. They become further fragments of what happens to me, further cards in the shuffle of my memory, with no telling what place in the future."[10] In *Little Did I Know*, Cavell's final work, he confesses the autobiographical and nostalgic hold of popular cinema on him. But his work on film is obviously, for all of us here, reunited thanks to this late, last book, the discovery and implementation of unprecedented and infinite capacities to appreciate the most diverse films—and even now and increasingly, television series; of those weak links that come from the sharing of fleeting yet deeply inscribed shared experiences. At present and in the time to come, Stanley Cavell's work stands as a reliable resource and a constant source for having new experiences and new insights. The following chapters provide occasions for thinking about how the pursuit of cinema—whatever happens to us and to the world—means the pursuit of happiness. And for thinking about the importance of Stanley Cavell and the importance of film, inseparably together.

Notes

1 Stanley Cavell, "Words for a Conversation," in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 12, 10.

2 Ibid., 10.

3 Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 182–83.

4 Stanley Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," *Themes Out of School*, 11. For more on these passages, see my "The Importance of Being Alive," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 231–42.

5 Ibid., italics in original.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., italics in original.

8 Ibid., 14.

9 Stanley Cavell, "The Acknowledgment of Silence," in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, Enlarged Edition, 1979), 154.

10 Ibid.

*Acknowledgments: This publication has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement N° 834759)