# THE STANLEY CAVELL film film film film film film film film

### The World Viewed

REFLECTIONS ON THE ONTOLOGY OF FILM

## Stanley Cavell

**Enlarged Edition** 

Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England Copyright © 1971, 1974, 1979 by Stanley Cavell. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Cavell, Stanley, 1926-The world viewed.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. Moving-pictures—Philosophy. I. Title. PN 1995.C42 1979 791.43'01 79-16670 ISBN 0-674-96196-X (paper) ISBN 0-674-96197-8 (cloth)

Printed in the United States of America

This book has been digitally reprinted. The content remains identical to that of previous printings.

#### Foreword to the Enlarged Edition

It is gratifying to know that "More of The World Viewed" will exist within the same covers as its parent work. Because both were written before I became involved, even to the limited extent I now am, with the apparatus of film study, especially with the metamorphoses of moviolas, slowing or repeating or freezing the progress of a film; because, that is to say, I wrote primarily out of the memory of films, though between the time of the parent book and the time of its offspring I had begun the practice of taking notes during and after screenings, thus altering my preparation for future writing about film, thus altering what could be written by me about it; I was always aware that my descriptions of passages were liable to contain errors, of content and of sequence. I have not attempted to correct such errors in this reprinting, wanting neither to disguise the liabilities of the spirit in which the work was composed nor to disguise the need for a study of what may be remembered in any art and for a study of how using an analyzing machine may modify one's experience of a film. The absence of both such studies helps to keep unassessed the fact that in speaking of a moment or sequence from a film we, as we might put it, cannot quote the thing we are speaking of. The fact is not merely that

#### x | Foreword to the Enlarged Edition

others might then not be sure what it is we are referring to, but that we ourselves might not know what we are thinking about. This puts an immediate and tremendous burden on one's capacity for critical description of cinematic events. The question of what constitutes, in the various arts, "remembering a work," especially in light of the matter of variable quotability, naturally raises the question of what constitutes, or expresses, "knowing a work" (is recognizing it enough? is being able to whistle a few bars necessary? does it matter which bars?). These questions in turn lead to the question of what I have called "the necessity to return to a work, in fact or in memory," an experience I try hitting off by speaking of "having to remember" ("The Avoidance of Love" in Must We Mean What We Say?, p. 314). (If you express this wish by whistling, you will have, unlike the former case in which you are expressing knowledge, to mean the whistling, which is not something everyone who can whistle can do.)

What I do about errors of memory in *The World Viewed*, having apologized in its Preface for whatever off memories crop up, is to offer a brave confession "that a few faulty memories will not themselves shake my conviction in what I've said, since I am as interested in how a memory went wrong as in why the memories that are right occur when they do." I should like to make good here on this claim in a few instances that have come to my notice.

I begin a description of the ending of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington as follows: "On the floor of the Senate, Jean Arthur kneels beside Mr. Smith's prostrate, rejected form, supporting his head in the ambiguous birth-death posture of a Pietà" (p. 54). I knew the minute my eye fell on that passage in the finished book that the Jean Arthur character never appears on the floor of the Senate, but has to remain in the gallery in a Capra passage of anguish into elation. What seems to have happened to me is that while my words captured a Christ refer-

ence that the film, and especially these concluding moments of the film, certainly calls for, I transposed the imagery in question from some other film (a reasonably sheer guess would be that it is from Fritz Lang's *The Return of Frank James*, made a year later).

Rather different explanations occur to me for such selfconfident errors as speaking "of an opening shot of Katharine Hepburn in The Philadelphia Story walking abstractedly through a room, cradling a sheaf of long-stemmed flowers, saying aloud to no one in particular, 'The calla lilies are in bloom again' (see Stage Door); of Cary Grant's response, upon being introduced to Ralph Bellamy in His Girl Friday, 'Haven't we met someplace before?' (they had, in the same juxtaposition of roles, a couple of years earlier in The Awful Truth). No doubt these lines were improvisatory . . ." (p. 124). I can imagine, responding to the depth of the improvisatory or the contingent in the nature of film, that I displaced the moment at which Cary Grant fingers the character played by Ralph Bellamy by telling a conspirator that "he looks like that movie actor, you know, Ralph Bellamy"—displaced this rather funny gag forward onto the hilarious early routine in which, as Grant is to be introduced to Bellamy, he greets heartily, as if in innocent error, an old-timer who just happens to be standing nearby. But no explanation short of a dream would seem to explain how I could have made up Katharine Hepburn's reference to Stage Door. Perhaps she did this in some film other than The Philadelphia Story (though I can't think which it might be). It remains possible—and I'd bet a pre-War dollar on it—that the film was initially released with this improvised line left in, at least in some prints.

A more galling error occurs in my reading of the final frames of Rules of the Game, forming the concluding part of "More of The World Viewed," where I remember the gentle homosexual rather than the reactive heterosexual cad to have attempted a final conspiratorial moment of gossip with the general. Here I

was still incapable of letting Renoir's sensibility provide me with a peripheral but distinct piece of learning (p. 220).

So far these errors, however annoying, or hateful, have not seemed to vitiate the interpretations based upon them, perhaps because while certain images may have been tampered with, the ideas and feelings in them have not been. A more problematic case presents itself in the course of those remarks about Rules of the Game. I say twice that Schumacher, the game keeper, has his gun, the tool of his trade, strapped to his back during the tracking shot of the beaters as the shoot begins (p. 222, p. 227). I also claim, having identified the gun as a kind of metaphor for the camera, that we are to take Schumacher in that sequence as "not so much guiding the action as following it, tracking it, filming it" (pp. 227-28). But as a matter of fact Schumacher's shotgun is not in its place on his back during the shoot; even, it now seems to me, obviously not in its expected place. One kind of unfriendly critic is apt to say: "The idea of Schumacher as some kind of surrogate for a film director or for his movie camera thus need not be thought about. And, in general, let us be sensible and speak and teach not about the reading of films (whatever that is supposed to mean) but about seeing them." What is a friendly critic to say? I hope something along the following lines.

The mistaken memory of the presence of the gun turns out to have been a response to an assertion about the gun all right, to a difference in its placement; namely a response to the absence of the gun, to its complete displacement. Of course such an explanation can be entered irresponsibly, as an excuse, with no intention of going on to test its seriousness and validity. But the best alternative to irresponsibility is not pedantry. Reading is not an alternative to seeing but (as its root in a word for advising suggests) an effort to detail a way of seeing something more clearly, an interpretation of how things look and why they appear as, and in the order, they do. In the case at hand,

the absence of the gun-camera may be taken all the more emphatically to declare that it is in its proper place, shooting this sequence. This is in line with my claim that "Octave-Renoir's absence from [the] concluding scene means...[that he] has taken his place behind the camera . . . [and] declares his responsibility for what has happened..." (p. 223). The director's implication in the figure of Schumacher is thus made as explicit and fundamental as his implication in the figures of Octave and of Jurieu, which I was more careful to detail. While this is implicit in what I wrote, I was evidently not then prepared to think its consequences through, to face more unsparingly that the most human of filmmakers still has at his command the murderous power of the movie camera, and that the measure of his humanity may be taken not alone by his identification with the heroes and workers of romance but as well by his identification with the villains of romance, those who would cast aside the romance of the world as romance has cast them aside. A reading, like any recitation, is by all means to be checked for its accuracy. It should also be thought of as an argument, something requiring a response.

When I claim that the way I was trying to read my way into the concluding frames of Rules of the Game "shows that facts of a frame, so far as these are to confirm critical understanding, are not determinable apart from that understanding itself" (p. 224), I am picking up a theme of The World Viewed that is explicit and guiding in all my subsequent thinking about film, namely that giving significance to and placing significance in specific possibilities and necessities (or call them elements; I sometimes still call them automatisms) of the physical medium of film are the fundamental acts of, respectively, the director of a film and the critic (or audience) of film; together with the idea that what constitutes an "element" of the medium of film is not knowable prior to these discoveries of direction and of criticism. This reciprocity between element and significance I

would like to call the cinematic circle. Exploring this circle is something that can be thought of as exploring the medium of film.

This is a way of specifying what at the beginning of this Foreword I spoke of as "the immediate and tremendous burden" on one's capacity for critical description in accounting for one's experience of film. Such description must allow the medium of film as such and the events of a given film at each moment to be understood in terms of one another. Because the value of such an ambition is tied to its usefulness in reading films as a whole, and because in the present pieces I for the most part read only fragments, I will append a bibliographical note of some later writing of mine that, in various ways, does something you might call attending to films as wholes. I conclude these remarks not exactly with a reading of a film fragment but rather with a fragmentary reading of a whole film, or rather with a prescription of such a reading.

It concerns Terrence Malick's Days of Heaven. I assume that anyone who has taken an interest in the film wishes to understand what its extremities of beauty are in service of; and not just its extremities but its successions of beauty. Whatever its subject will be understood to be, no one could have undertaken to explore it without the confidence that his or her capacity for extracting beauty from nature and from the photographic projection or displacement of nature is inexhaustible, which is of course a confidence at the same time in nature's and in film's capacities to provide it. This ranging of confidence is itself exhilarating and must somehow be part of the subject of the film. Shall we try expressing the subject as one in which the works and the emotions and the entanglements of human beings are at every moment reduced to insignificance by the casual rounds of earth and sky? I think the film does indeed contain a metaphysical vision of the world; but I think one feels that one has never quite seen the scene of human existence-call it

the arena between earth (or days) and heaven—quite realized this way on film before.

The particular mode of beauty of these images somehow invokes a formal radiance which strikes me as a realization of some sentences from Heidegger's What Is Called Thinking? (Harper Torchback, 1972).

When we say "Being," it means "Being of beings." When we say "beings," it means "beings in respect of Being."... The duality is always a prior datum, for Parmenides as much as for Plato. Kant as much as Nietzsche. . . . An interpretation decisive for Western thought is that given by Plato. . . . Plato means to say: beings and Being are in different places. Particular beings and Being are differently located. (p. 227)

According to Plato, the idea constitutes the Being of a being. The idea is the face whereby a given something shows its form, looks at us, and thus appears, for instance, as this table. In this form, the thing looks at us. . . . Now Plato designates the relation of a given being to its idea as participation. (p. 222)

The first service man can render is to give thought to the Being of beings. . . . The word [being] says: presence of what is present. (p. 235)

The presence we described gathers itself in the continuance which causes a mountain, a sea, a house to endure and, by that duration, to lie before us among other things that are present.... The Greeks experience such duration as a luminous appearance in the sense of illumined, radiant selfmanifestation. (p. 237)

(I do not wish to hide the knowledge that years ago Malick translated Heidegger's The Essence of Reasons for the Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.) If Malick has indeed found a way to transpose such thoughts for our meditation, he can have done it only, it

#### xvi | Foreword to the Enlarged Edition

seems to me, by having discovered, or discovered how to acknowledge, a fundamental fact of film's photographic basis: that objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves; they participate in the re-creation of themselves on film; they are essential in the making of their appearances. Objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins. Their presence refers to their absence, their location in another place. Then if in relation to objects capable of such self-manifestation human beings are reduced in significance, or crushed by the fact of beauty left vacant, perhaps this is because in trying to take dominion over the world, or in aestheticizing it (temptations inherent in the making of film, or of any art), they are refusing their participation with it.

Beyond offering this instance—whether I am right or wrong in my experience of it-as an extreme illustration of the unpredictability of what we may have to count as an element of the medium of film to which significance is given in a particular film, I offer it as a case which suggests the unpredictability of the audience for what may be taken as the study of film. The poignance of this question of audience can be brought out by thinking of the accelerating professionalization of the study of film. To ask those inside the subject, attempting to make it academically or anyway intellectually respectable, to think about Heidegger is to ask them to become responsible for yet another set of views and routines that are inherently embattled within English-speaking intellectual culture and whose application to the experience of film is hard to prove. To ask those outside the subject, those being asked to lend it the respectability of their academies, to think about Heidegger in this context is to ask them in addition to grant film the status of a subject that invites and rewards philosophical speculation, on a par with the great arts. This is no small matter, for as writers as different as Robert Warshow and Walter Benjamin more or less put it,

to accept film as an art will require a modification of the concept of art. And even if some among them grant that film is as brilliant and beautiful a subject as, say, jazz, what then? Jazz can indefinitely postpone the question of high art because its accomplishments exist in relation to music as a whole, some of which is definitively high. Whereas film has only itself for direct reference; distinctions between high and low, or between major and minor, if they are to be drawn, must be drawn within the body of film itself, with no issue postponable and none definitive until someone says otherwise. But who is to say that this status of uncertainties is less creative in principle than the status of academic certainties accorded the remaining arts whose names are great?

S.C.

Brookline, Massachusetts May 1979

Bibliographical note. The second half of "Leopards in Connecticut" (The Georgia Review, Summer 1976) consists of a reading of Howard Hawks' Bringing Up Baby; its first half considers the legitimacy of introducing film into a university curriculum and expands on relations between the writings of Warshow and of Benjamin. "Pursuits of Happiness" (New Literary History, Summer 1979) consists of a reading of Preston Sturges' The Lady Eve that expands on ideas broached in discussing Bringing Up Baby, to the effect that certain Hollywood talkies of the 30's and 40's form a definite genre that invokes narrative features established in Shakespearean romance. "What Becomes of Things on Film?" (Philosophy and Literature, Fall 1978) relates something I call "the discovery of a natural subject of film" to certain masterpieces (e.g., Bergman's Persona, Bunuel's Belle de Jour, Hitchcock's Vertigo, Capra's It's a Wonderful Life) that employ a particular mode of juxtaposition between

#### xviii | Foreword to the Enlarged Edition

sequences that clearly are and others that are not clearly meant to be taken as of an objective reality. "On Makavejev On Bergman" (in Film and Dreams: An Approach to Bergman, a volume of essays from a conference held at Harvard in January 1978, edited by Vlada Petric, scheduled for publication in 1980) attempts to read Dusan Makavejev's Sweet Movie as a whole, and fragments of his WR: Mysteries of the Organism, by characterizing something like a new principle in the way he constructs those films, specifically in the way he uses documentary footage along with fictional material.

In conclusion, a note of thanks: to Gus Blaisdell and to Arnold Davidson for helpful comments on a draft of this new Foreword.

#### Preface

Memories of movies are strand over strand with memories of my life. During the quarter of a century (roughly from 1935 to 1960) in which going to the movies was a normal part of my week, it would no more have occurred to me to write a study of movies than to write my autobiography. Having completed the pages that follow, I feel that I have been composing a kind of metaphysical memoir—not the story of a period of my life but an account of the conditions it has satisfied.

A book thus philosophically motivated ought to account philosophically for the motive in writing it. What broke my natural relation to movies? What was that relation, that its loss seemed to demand repairing, or commemorating, by taking thought? It is not a sufficient answer to point to the emergence, as part of ordinary moviegoing in America, of the films of Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini, Godard, Resnais, Truffaut, et al., because while they invited reflection they also (perhaps thereby) achieved a continuity with Hollywood movies—or, generally, with the history of movies—that Hollywood itself was losing. They were no longer foreign. Nor is it sufficient to answer that what was lost was a form of public entertainment, the need for which society and I had outgrown—as in the cases, say, of the circus and vaudeville. We have not outgrown

the need for entertainment; some movies still provide it; it was never all, or the importance, of what movies provided, any more than it is all that novels or music provide. To account for the motive in writing this book may be the most accurate description of its motive.

The immediate history of its composition is easier to tell. Every teacher knows the excitement, and chaos, in learning about a subject by undertaking to teach it. In 1963 I chose to use the movie as the topic of a seminar in aesthetics. Its pedagogical advantages looked promising: everybody would have had memorable experiences of movies, conversation naturally developed around them, and the absence of an established canon of criticism would mean that we would be forced back upon a faithfulness to nothing but our experience and a wish to communicate it. The members of the seminar, many of them literate and gifted, enjoyed the idea. But it was a failure. Or rather, what was learned was important enough, but it came from our failures. Each week I assigned one or two students the responsibility of opening the discussion by reading a two- or three-page description-nothing but description-of the film we all had seen. It turned out that the descriptions were never quite accurate, not always because some gross turn in the plot was out of order or an event had been forgotten, but often because more was described than had been shown. (For example, "The car followed her to the hotel." But in viewing the film, we had not known until later that the structure was a hotel.) After that, I noticed that almost every summary statement of a movie, whether in newspaper "criticism" or in brochures for a projected series, contains one or more descriptive inaccuracies. Is that because summaries don't really matter? Or because it is unclear what one wants from them? Only about operas, certainly not about novels or stories or poems or plays, would we accept so casual and sometimes hilariously remote an account as we will about movies.

It occurs at the highest level. Consider Truffaut's description of part of I Confess:

As it happens, Father Michael was being blackmailed by Vilette over a love affair prior to his ordination as a priest and Keller had worn a cassock during the crime. These coincidences, together with the fact that Father Michael is unable to provide an alibi for the night of the crime, add up to a strong web of circumstantial evidence against him. [François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York, 1969), p. 148.]

But Father Michael wasn't being blackmailed; the woman in the affair was. It feels as if he is, and not merely by Vilette; but that's the movie. And then, "unable to provide an alibi," taken in its usual sense, is false. Father Michael refuses to provide (what he at that stage thought would be) an alibi because it would implicate the woman. One reservation Hitchcock expresses to Truffaut about I Confess is that its essential premise of the inviolability of the confessional is not acceptable to a civilian audience. But the priest's early refusal to give an alibi, at no matter what danger to himself, works to prepare the believability of the premise.

Another failure in the seminar's work was no less pervasive, and far more disheartening. The willingness to forgo theory and criticism was too proud a vow, particularly in view of our continuing inability to discover categories we had confidence in, or to make comparisons (e.g., with the novel, plays, and painting) that really carried the weight we wished upon them. A frequent reaction to these dead ends was to start getting technical; words flowed about everything from low-angle shots to filters to timings and numbers of set-ups to deep focus and fast cutting, etc., etc. But all this in turn lost its sense. On the one hand, the amount and kind of technical information that could be regarded as relevant is more than any of us knew; on the other hand, the only technical matters we found ourselves invoking, so far as they were relevant to the experience of particular films, which was our only business, are in front of your eyes. You can see when a shot begins and ends and whether it's

#### xxii | Preface

long, middle, or close; you know whether the camera is moving back or forth or sideways, whether a figure brings himself into the field of the camera or the camera turns to get him; you may not know how Hitchcock gets the stairwell to distort that particular way in *Vertigo*, but you can see that he got it. Then what is the reality behind the idea that there is always a technical something you don't know that would provide the key to the experience?

When the term was over, I started trying to work out bits of the questions the seminar had started in me. Over the next three or four years, the writing I was doing dealt mainly with problems in the philosophy of art, with the philosophical problem of other minds, and with the experience of two plays. Questions about movies kept coming to the surface, but on the whole I kept them aside. In an essay on King Lear (later published in a collection of mine entitled Must We Mean What We Say?) I managed to suppress them entirely; but months of immersion in the idea of theater—especially in ideas of an audience, of the actor, and of the theater's enclosed and total world—had had their effect, and as soon as that essay was done I found I wanted to extend its thoughts to the work of film.

Several intellectual discoveries had in the meantime better prepared me to say what I wanted. I came to read Rousseau's Letter to d'Alembert for the first time. The accuracies in what is often taken as Rousseau's paranoia helped me to overcome a certain level of distrust I had developed about movies and about my interest in them—as though I had, in thinking about movies, forgotten what there is to distrust in the uses of any art. More specifically, Rousseau's unobtrusive obsession with seeing (it is about all "spectacle")—with our going to the theater in order to be seen and not to be seen, with our use of tears there to excuse our blindness and coldness to the same situations in the world outside, with his vision that true spectacles in the good city will permit us to let ourselves be seen without