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Abstract Title:

Stanley Cavell's Philosophical Prose: A Marriage of Philosophy and Literature

Abstract:

My paper will take as its starting point Stanley Cavell's intuition, expressed at the Paris colloquium occasioned by the publication of *The World Viewed* in French translation, that thinking about film had an effect on his "ambitions for philosophical prose" and thus left "permanent marks" on the way he writes. In particular, as he put it, the "necessity to become evocative in capturing the moods of faces and motions and settings, in their double existence as transient and as permanent, was, I believe, more than any other ambition I held, a basis of freedom from the guarded rhythms of philosophy as I had inherited it."

In thinking about film, Cavell recognized the need for prose capable of evoking film's ever-shifting "moods of faces and motions and settings" and capable, at the same time, of capturing what remains fixed in the physiognomy of the world on film (what in *The World Viewed* he calls there the "reality of the unsayable," the "unmoving ground" that makes film capable of exhibiting the world). The double existence – the transience and permanence – that for film is vouchsafed its ontological conditions became an aspiration of all of his philosophical prose, not only his writing about film. The originality and power of Cavell's view of philosophical skepticism, for example, derives from the way he evokes the onset of skeptical doubt as a scene that takes place in the world, like a scene from a film

Insofar as Cavell's ambition, like Emerson's, is ultimately to be known as a writer whose prose is the measure of his philosophical achievement, it is well worth pondering his intuition that thinking about film freed – indeed, compelled – his prose to become evocative and thereby liberated it from the "guarded rhythms" that keep most academic philosophy from swinging or soaring. In pondering this intuition, my paper will look closely at a number of passages in *The World Viewed* and other of his writings on film, and in the remarkable autobiographical fragment published in *Critical Inquiry* under the title "Excerpts from Memory."

It will be the thrust of my paper that Cavell's recent autobiographical writings express with special lucidity the conviction that his achievement as a philosopher cannot be separated from his *literary* achievement in fashioning prose that captures, in *unguarded* rhythms, the "moods of faces and motions and settings, in their double existence as transient and permanent," that are the stuff of philosophy, as he practices it, no less than the stuff of film.