Catherine Wheatley (2019) *Stanley Cavell and Film: Scepticism and Self-Reliance at the Cinema*, London: Bloomsbury, 320 pp.

As D.N. Rodowick aptly points out on the back cover, Catherine Wheatley's *Stanley Cavell and Film* will become a go-to volume both for those wanting to discover Cavell for the first time and for veteran readers looking for clarification or a novel way to approach the philosopher's work. Unlike many volumes dedicated to elucidating and initiating readers to more or less difficult authors, Wheatley's book admirably manages to combine legible exegesis with critical depth. The volume elegantly guides readers through Cavell's opus, familiarising them with key "master tones", providing a way to tune into the philosopher's theoretical nuances and stylistic specificity. However, there is no attempt here to domesticate Cavell's idiosyncrasies. Quite to the contrary, Wheatley uses the philosopher's conceptual quirks to lead novice and expert alike out of the terrain of mere illustration in order to develop an original reading. That is, *Stanley Cavell and Film* succeeds in its aim of providing entry points to film studies scholars put off by philosophical density (p. 21), while also offering an original approach to the American philosopher's writing. Wheatley does this not simply by illuminating Cavell's work on and through film; she also confronts his philosophical project more generally, with one of her crucial insights being precisely that to separate Cavell's 'film theory' from his more general philosophy sacrifices much of the incisiveness of his work.

In this way, Wheatley does not single out Cavell's contribution to film studies, even as it is amply treated in this book, but rather takes a more holistic approach and fittingly summarises Cavell's project as follows: "Cavell is not merely interested in the philosophical ideas that are exemplified or illustrated by particular films, but in the philosophical ideas that arise from the encounter between film viewer and film" (p. 27). In doing justice to the magisterial – and in a way foundational – *Claim of Reason* (1999), Wheatley manages to uncover a number of crucial connections within Cavell's project that clarify some of the densest passages in his writing on film. Furthermore, the import of Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, together with the significant and enduring influence that they have had on Cavell, is never downplayed in fear that their work might stymie or complicate the argument. For while Wheatley's work does indeed get "theoretical", the eminently philosophical issues that Cavell confronts via his conceptual companions are discussed with generosity. In other words, the pursuit of clarity, which

animates Wheatley's book, does not compress either Cavell's ambition or his reach.

Wheatley writes with confidence and flair, a task made all the more difficult by the fact that she is writing about and through Cavell, and therefore through the prism of his tone, style and cadence. Whilst critics and scholars always have to face the question of what to do with an author's original voice, juggling quotations, paraphrases and evocation, Cavell's prose presents unique problems. As William Rothman puts it, the issue is how best to preserve the evocative power of Cavell's texts in one's own sentences (Rothman 2019: 47). Cavell's writing is one that tends to tempt and to a certain extent absorb the commentator, who might eventually be led to replicate the idiosyncratic smoothness and density of his style. Wheatley, however, manages to distance herself from Cavell enough to set her own pitch, whilst remaining faithful to Cavell's voice. Take the opening sections of Wheatley's first three paragraphs:

> Imagine the scene. The year is 1933. It is a balmy summer day in downtown Atlanta. A seven-year-old-boy stands, clasping his mother's hand before a fabulous picture palace edged with gilt. Domes and minarets arise from its white brick exterior. (p. 1)
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> Another scene, some fifteen years later. A mahogany-walled classroom in Juilliard. A young man, in his early twenties, gazes out of the window. We cut to 42nd Street in its last hurrah, the late 1940s, before it becomes overrun with porn theatres and before it is reconstructed. Cinema hoardings advertise repertory films and reruns. (p. 2)
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> Jump forward another ten years to the mid-1950s. The man is now in his thirties. He hunches over a desk, surrounded by papers and philosophy books with long, weighty titles: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He seems frustrated. (p. 2)

There is here already that Cavellian mixture of memoir and musing, attentiveness to the felicitous revelations of the ordinary and an understanding of philosophy as a deeply personal adventure. And yet, the vivacity of the prose signals much more than the mere reproduction of Cavell's style. Wheatley here introduces in her own voice what matters most to Cavell: the vivid, almost hyperbolic generosity towards the philosophical significance of everyday details. What comes across in these opening passages is also a committed reader writing simultaneously with rigour and passion. In its constant merging of the philosophical and the personal, the biographical and the historical, the filmic and the

conceptual, *Stanley Cavell and Film* is "faithful to the spirit of Cavell's writing, but not always to the letter" (p. 24).

The structure of the book seems to proceed according to two parallel lines: on the one hand, it follows the publication of Cavell's works in chronological order; on the other hand, it uses this order to facilitate the elucidation and development of key concepts. The reader thus moves from Ordinary Language Philosophy – through an assessment of Austin and Wittgenstein's influence – to aesthetic criticism via *Must We Mean What We Say* (1976) (p. 42). Here Wheatley outlines the methodological significance of ordinary language philosophy for Cavell's project and introduces the question of why film matters (p. 47). It is through an illumination of Cavell's preeminent problem, namely the couple ordinary/scepticism, as elucidated in *The World Viewed* (1979), the first text of Cavell to be dedicated entirely to film (p. 61), that Wheatley then offers a first answer as to why film does matter. For, film calls attention to scepticism and allows us to investigate its moral dimension (p. 93). And this dimension emerges yet more clearly as Wheatley directs her attention to an analysis of the comedies that Cavell calls of re-marriage. According to Cavell, these comedies revolve around the sceptical question: how can we know that other beings exist (p. 97)? The answer is that we have to learn to respond to them, to acknowledge them (p. 98), to do something for them in response to their claim.

Following Cavell's quest for an appropriate acknowledgment of others, Wheatley moves then from scepticism to perfectionism, and closer to the territory of moral philosophy, through a reading of *Contesting Tears* (1996). The transition that occupies this section goes from epistemology to ethics (p. 139), from something we know to something we do. Here Wheatley also considers the link between scepticism and gender, a topic for which Cavell has received well-known criticism, chiefly from Tania Modleski (1990; 1991). The question that guides the approach is whether women escape doubt (p. 150). Acknowledging the impact of Modleski's critique on Cavell (p. 159), Wheatley finds her way around the argument ingeniously and expertly, dismissing the idea that Cavell is merely joining "passivity with the female of the species" (p. 153), and instead associating women's "display of their unknownness" to self-reliance, or a way to live with scepticism (p. 159). Wheatley then uses Cavell's work on melodrama to introduce the final movement of her volume, which focuses on friendship and finally love. Whilst I do not entirely agree that love is not "normally associated with Cavell" (p. 216) – after all both comedies and melodramas pivot around this very issue – this closing movement perfectly captures how "at the heart of all of Cavell's writing are two great loves: Philosophy... [a]nd cinephilia"

(p. 217). This insight – that love is the engine of Cavell's work – is perhaps the most important in a book full of insightful analyses. Cavell's great intuition is perhaps precisely that both film and philosophy can direct us towards love, whilst also being in themselves acts of love, expressions of love towards this world, a world in which (too) many see only doubt and (metaphysical) solitude.

Catherine Wheatley's *Stanley Cavell and Film* is simultaneously systematic and imaginative, rigorous in its philological attention to Cavell and yet full of new approaches to his work. The book's generosity and depth are set to inspire and influence many more engagements with Cavell and with film, philosophy and their bickering marriage more broadly.

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