Bearing the Beyond: Women and the Limits of Language in Stanley Cavell

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Abstract:
The American philosopher Stanley Cavell is one of the very few thinkers in the Anglo-Saxon dispensation of philosophy who addresses the role of gender and desire in our possessing language. While Cavell's oeuvre is receiving more and more attention in Europe, the issues of gender discussed in and raised by his writing are not systematically explored. Against this silence in Cavell scholarship, this paper aims to show exegetically how philosophizing about language and about sexuality are connected in Cavell's work. Systematically, I will argue secondly that for Cavell not metaphysics but concrete gender and sexual arrangements motivate the yearning for the impossible, which characterizes so much of modern western philosophy. To this end I will trace a connection between Cavell's technical discussions of Wittgensteinian understanding of language and his own reflections on gender and marriage in opera and film.

1 The American philosopher Stanley Cavell is one of the very few thinkers in the Anglo-Saxon dispensation of philosophy who address the role of gender and desire in our possessing language. While Cavell's oeuvre is receiving more and more attention in Europe, the issues of gender discussed in and raised by his writing are not systematically explored.[1] That the topic of gender is shrouded in silence is even more surprising, since in his later writings on theatre, film, and opera Cavell ponders explicitly what women can say in the face of the violence of masculine ways of knowing and speaking.

2 Against this silence in Cavell scholarship, this paper aims to show exegetically how philosophizing about language and about sexuality are connected in Cavell's work. Systematically, I will argue that for Cavell not metaphysics but concrete gender and sexual arrangements motivate the yearning for the impossible, which characterizes so much of modern western philosophy.[2] To this end I will discuss in some detail Cavell's analysis of what kind of understanding of speech and knowledge fuels skepticism as the opening gambit of modern philosophy. This discussion will make clear that for him the skeptical worry is motivated not by the structures of language as such, but by a specific form of structuring

[1] For example, gender appears only as an afterthought in Stephen Mulhall's Stanley Cavell: *Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Likewise Richard Eldridge's superb 2003 collection of essays on Cavell does not systematically explore the issue of gender (*Stanley Cavell*. Ed. Richard Elridge. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003). My *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear: A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and Religion in Modern Skepticism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2007) aims to rectify this situation.

[2] For the importance of this yearning for the impossible for the continental tradition in general and for Derrida in particular see: Dooley, Mark, and Liam Kavanagh. *The Philosophy of Derrida, Continental European Philosophy*. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007; as well as Vries, Hent de. *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.

knowledge and desire. Turning to Cavell's work on film and opera will allow us secondly to identify these forms of knowledge and desire as specifically gendered. The analysis of Hollywood comedies and melodrama will finally make it possible to examine the violent consequences of this kind of knowledge and desire for women and to characterize their powers for overcoming it.

Skepticism and Language: From Rules to Masculine Desire

Doubting without Context

3 In Cavell's analysis, modern philosophy is haunted by a form of skepticism that is characterized by a deep dissatisfaction with our ordinary claims to knowledge, and he raises the question of whence this particular dissatisfaction? Why should we need to defend our ability to answer in specific contexts the doubting question "how do you know" or why should consider ordinary and contextual knowledge to be unsatisfactory?

4 According to Cavell, the skeptical quest for knowledge results from a removal from the concrete circumstances of our practices of knowing or doubting whether something is the case. The skeptic desires epistemic *certainty in-and-of-itself*. Not the status of my claim that "I know that 'this here is a gold finch'" (to which I could answer, don't you see the color of the feathers and the beak) is in question. Rather, the skeptic transfers a question ("how do you know") out of contexts in which it can make sense into one where nothing is claimed and thus nothing can be doubted. Instead of asking "how do you know *this* or *that*," the question becomes, "how do you know in principle." Cavell considers this move to be illegitimate. The skeptic may defend it along the following lines: we can surely project the word "know" into new contexts; for example, we can move from "how do I know whether this is a gold-finch" to "how do I know whether this is a Louis XVI chair." Why not extend and generalize the projection to "how do you know whether x" and thus ask whether I can know anything? For Cavell this move however is the point where the skeptics speak as if they were outside the world of concrete contexts, phenomena, and acts of claiming. A consequence of this quest for *noumenal* knowledge (knowledge *an sich*) is that the skeptic loses his or her moorings in the phenomenal world. And in so doing the skeptic's doubt loses intelligibility itself. Without the concrete contexts within which we ordinarily asks for clarification of claims to knowledge we cannot know what doubting consists in. Yet a consequence of this radical doubt is that the phenomenal world of concrete interactions itself, the life-world of the skeptic, becomes condensed into an abstract x, and is imagined to be situated in opposition to the skeptic. Thus, Cavell writes that the skeptic deals with the world as if it were like a giant "tomato" or the

dark side of the moon (Cavell, *Claim* 237, 202). The world in its totality becomes objectified.

5 In this imagination the skeptic expresses simultaneously a vision of penetrating potency and of isolated impotence: The skeptic seems to imagine the world as a suitable object of intellectual desire, something readily available for his epistemic grasp, all the while he envisions the knowing subject as one who is (ideally) *mastering* its object. In this *master-vision* of the subject, the epistemic ideal has to be total epistemic access and access to totality. I have to know all of the object under all circumstances. Yet, at the same time, the epistemic subject is construed as being impotent *vis-á-vis* the world, because the knowing subject's position is eternally fixed as one of separation. I am isolated from the world. The same distance that makes possible the vision of mastering the totality of the world, engenders the fearful suspicion that the object of intellectual desire is perpetually removed from my grasp. The skeptic gazes longingly at the world with a desire for total epistemic control, and he experiences himself as being "sealed off from the world" (*Claim* 144).

6 The anthropologist Stanley Tambiah makes a similar point. He distinguishes two possible orientations toward the world, which we can find, to varying degrees, in all cultures. Tambiah calls them "causality" and "participation." With causality he describes an attitude toward the world characterized by a logic of opposition. "Causality," Tambiah writes, "is quintessentially represented by the categories, rules and methodology of positive sciences and discursive mathematico-logical reason. The scientific focus involves a particular kind of distancing, affective neutrality and abstraction to events in the world" (105). Individuals in all cultures are capable of relating to the world in this manner, yet modern western science has made this the dominant orientation in western contexts. Tambiah contrasts this way of relating oneself to the world and others with one that he labels "participation." Here we find language of "solidarity, unity, holism, and continuity in space and time" (109). The Ego is not positioned in opposition to the world but seen deeply intertwined with it.

7 I mention these anthropological observations to strengthen the claim that the specific epistemic position that the skeptic imagines is not simply the result of linguistic or metaphysical structures. Rather, the skeptical desire for context-independent certainty reflects a *specific attitude* toward the world and society — one of distantiation writ large, in which the world in its totality is ideally completely exposed to the skeptic's desire to know. In the skeptical imagination the causal attitude toward the world becomes free floating, disconnected from the concrete practices of scientific cultures of knowledge production. The skeptic's pose moreover is reminiscent of "a modern scene of existence as controlled by a spectator at once impossible and divine who organizes everything without ever acting or

participating," to use the words of Stefanos Geroulanos's reading of Foucault (649). Conversely, we can understand Cavell as arguing that the skeptic is motivated by a fearful rejection of what Tambiah called the participatory orientation toward world and society. The skeptic fears an epistemic position where not abstract rules but relationships determine the meaning of our words. And this is indeed the point that Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein wants to highlight: Our words have meaning only within the context of a shared life. Fully acknowledging this point however leads to an anxiety over what we can say about ourselves and over who counts as "we."

Sharing Words is Risky

8 Wittgenstein argues, according to Cavell, that the skeptical move from a concrete act of doubting to doubting in-and-of-itself is made possible because the skeptic is, as it were, bewitched, by language.[3] Our language is pliable and depends for its creativity on our ability to project a word into a new context.[4] The skeptic thinks however that this ability for projection must be governed by a system of rules. After all, we regularly produce projections of words into new contexts that others recognize and can understand. It is an "astonishing fact," writes Cavell, "that language is shared, that the forms I rely upon in making sense are human forms, that they impose human limits upon me, that when I say what we 'can' and 'cannot' say I am indeed voicing necessities which others recognize, i.e., obey (consciously or not); and that our uses of language are pervasively, almost unimaginably, systematic" (*Claim* 29). If not linguistic rules, what else could account for this "systematicity" of language?

9 Wittgenstein cautions against thinking that syntactic rules can account for the regularity with which we understand each other's words, even in new contexts. For example, with regards to the truths of logic, Wittgenstein writes, "it has often been put in the form of an assertion that the truths of logic are determined by a consensus of opinions. Is this what I am saying? No. There is no opinion at all; it is not a question of opinion. They are determined by a consensus of action: a consensus of doing the same thing, reacting in the same way" (*Mathematics* 183-84). The meaning of words is not controlled by a system of rules outside of our acts of speaking and living together.

10 In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein makes this point by reminding us of the analogy between speaking a language and playing a game. We can easily imagine, he writes,

[3] Wittgenstein, Ludwig, and G. E. M. Anscombe. *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997. §115. In the following *PI*.

[4] For a more technical discussion of this point see the second chapter of my *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear* as well as Pears' formulation that, according to Wittgenstein, meaning resides in linguistic techniques" (26).

people "playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball [. . .] and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw" (*PI* §83). Importantly, Wittgenstein adds: "And is there not also the case where we play and — make up the rules as we go along. And there is even one where we alter them — as we go along" (*PI* §83).

11 The key implication of this (often quoted) example is that accords and discourse in language are based on the players' willingness to engage each other. Thus, what makes the systematicity of language possible according to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein is our capacity and willingness to follow each other's words. We can do this to the degree that — to use Cavell's expression — we are "attuned" to each other's sense of what can be said in a given context, of how *this* word in this situation can be considered as a natural extension of what *we* say in that context or of how this is an appropriate or inappropriate understanding of what you say. Linguistic attunement is therefore an instance of being attuned in a shared form of life, according to Wittgenstein. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? — It is what human beings *say* that is true or false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinion but in form of life" (*PI* §241; emphases in the original). The fact that we are attuned in our understanding what can "naturally" or "humanly" be said or doubted reflects, as Wittgenstein writes in §325, "how we think and live."

12 "How we think and live" is however not simply given either — nor is there a stable set of behaviors and thought patterns that identify "how we think and live." Rather, like playing ball together, thinking and living together is an ongoing process; and (unlike playing ball) it is a risky activity. What is remarkable about our use of language is how easily we can and do follow naturally the invitations expressed in new stories, in new jokes, etc. This speaks to the fact of how much we are in tune with each other. What is worrisome, and should be according to Cavell at least, is that any such invitation to follow can be refused. Sometimes projections that seem natural to us are utterly outrageous to others and we realize that we are not in tune with each other. "We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss" (Cavell, *Claim* 178).

13 What does this mean for the Wittgensteinan idea of a language game, which has such a hold on the imagination of many of his readers? Do language games provide a clear set of rules that perfectly govern the use of words? Given that Wittgenstein resists the idea of

seeing rules as perspicuous representation of how we use words we need to tread carefully here. The function of language-games should not be pictured as being like the function of a computer-chip somewhere implanted in our brains, filled with algorithms for potential moves for the game it governs. Rather, language games are methods of description that Wittgenstein uses in dialogue with the philosopher. *They are methodological inventions aimed at solving not abstract issues of grammar but particular concrete problems about which we find ourselves to be confused*. Remember the ball-game. The revelers play some existing game without finishing, and then play parts of another. In describing a strip of behavior we may invoke "football" or "soccer" and we may say that this move is "like playing soccer," etc. We imagine connections, similarities and dissimilarities in order to clarify what is going on. Yet, there is a difference between saying that "this is what is going on" and claiming that "this is all that is going on" or that "this is the only way of describing what is going on." Whether you do agree with me that this way of describing things is appropriate cannot be settled by rules. I can only try to tell you how it strikes me thus. I can tell a story or relate to you my impressions. The invention of language-games is part of the methodological procedures by which I show you how this or that use of my words seems natural to me. I am leading you from one example to another. By showing you how this is natural to me I am appealing to you that you understand or consider these connections to be natural, as well. As Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*:

> The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I made sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me from others, from all others, from myself [. . .]. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason. (20)

14 This picture provokes the question of who are "we" here? It may be tempting to invoke the concept of "form of life." The players in questions are those who belong to the "same form of life" and who are socialized, perhaps, in the same ways of using language, in the same standards of appropriateness or of esthetic tastes etc. Yet, a closer look reveals that Wittgenstein invokes "form(s) of life" or "what we do" in his *Philosophical Investigations* mostly in contexts of contestations. Martians may see the man as back-sliding, but "we" cannot help but see him as climbing the steep hill. References to what "we" do are not so much explanations for our actions but rather exhortations or appeals to being in community. If you cannot help but see the world in terms of mereological sums; or human beings as sacks

of flesh governed by a universal consciousness; if you cannot see how "this" is being in pain, my words come to an end. I cannot explain but only claim that "this" *is* pain, or that bodies do matter. The form of live, which we share or contest, serves as a reference point that comes to existence only in the process of our appealing to it. As such, forms of life do not refer to existing demarcated spheres of behavior or experience. Appealing to a "form of life" is a claim to being intelligible and thus to being in community. Such appeals do not necessarily settle the question of any specific disagreement, but they transform a linguistic question into a negotiation of community.

15 Appeals to what "we" say are not so much reference to any *existing* communality but they constitute negotiations and performative creations of community. Again, it is helpful to stay close to the picture of the ball-game. It is through playing that we keep the ball going around. In other words, it is the interaction in words and life that establishes the reach of language, i.e., the circle of those to whom we talk and whose words we hear. Failed or contested interactions bring to the fore the questions of "what are we playing here" or "weren't we playing this game and not that one." Yet, it would be a mistake to see contestation and negotiation only at play when we have no resort but to assert the legitimacy of our practice in statements like "well, *this* is how we do things." Rather, we negotiate the reach of our community through the very acts of speaking, avoiding speech, silencing, and listening.

16 This reading of "forms of life" presents a picture of community in the *optative*. References to "what we do" in language are attempts to *create* community. Speaking and living together are open and fluid negotiations of belonging, secured neither by stable boundaries of existing communities nor by transcendental structures of language or of speech. Who we are as a community and who we are within this community is not given prior to our acts of speaking. Answers to these questions are only found as the result of constant struggles and attunements. In contrast to most readers of Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell is acutely aware of the dangers and potentials this plasticity in language implies.

Movies as Sites of Analysis and of Overcoming Skepticism

Masculine Knowing: the Skeptic's Plight of Mind

17 While this basic analysis of the skeptical desire for epistemic certainty is based in a reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in his work on film and opera Cavell goes beyond the Wittgensteinian answer that language is the main culprit. Not language (as a disembodied actor) exerts an irresistible and bewitching influence on the skeptic who is lured into desiring

the impossible and into denying the web of relationships on which rests intelligibility in language. Rather, the skeptical problem is driven by a specific plight of mind, by a specific way of being in the world, which makes it seem natural to move from claims to phenomenal knowledge to those to noumenal knowledge. Not structures of language but the epistemic desires of specific language users lie at the heart of the skeptical problem.

18 In Cavell's analysis of the skeptical desire, the idealized position of absolute sovereignty over and impotent isolation from the world reflects a particular masculine vision of knowledge. For example, in his interpretation of Othello, Cavell writes:

> The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property. Othello's problem, following my suggestion that his problem is over success, not failure, is that Desdemona's acceptance, or satisfaction, or reward, of his ambition strikes him as being possessed, as if he were the woman. (*Knowledge* 10)

Othello as an emblem of skeptical knowledge aims not only to achieve total access to Desdemona as the object of his desire; moreover he fears to be known in turn, since being known seems to require being objectified in the calculus of the skeptic's understanding of knowledge.

19 Particularly Cavell's work on Hollywood movies from the mid1930s to the 1940s can be read as a further examination of the contours and consequences of this idealized masculine knowing. By turning to artistic analysis, Cavell treats the skeptical desire as expressive of gender configurations permeating north-Atlantic culture. More specifically, Cavell considers through his work on these films the question of whether modern skepticism, and with it modern philosophy, could be seen as a profoundly "male affair" (*Pitch* 169).

20 One site of analysis are the movies that Cavell subsumes under the genre "melodrama of the unknown woman," a designation taken from Max Ophüls' movie of the same name.[5] In the films of this genre we encounter women who are forced to expose themselves to a male world, one that is characterized by a skeptical desire for epistemic control. Like Othello, the men of the melodramas are not ready to be objects of knowledge themselves. Knowledge is understood by the man as total access to and possession of the woman's privacy. In *Now Voyager*, the man wishes to know the woman's secret, in *Stella Dallas*, he tries to escape it, and in *Gaslight* to destroy it "where each objective is generically reflected in the others" (*Contesting* 14). And by holding on to the idea of knowledge as objectification, the man makes it impossible for the woman to expose herself to his knowledge. The kind of

[5] Other titles are: George Cukor's *Gaslight*, Irving Rapper's *Now Voyager*, and King Vidor's *Stella Dallas*.

knowledge to which she can expose herself is violent; the terms set by masculine knowledge in the movies disallow the woman to be known outsides of the logic of objectification and thus prevents her from being acknowledged on her own terms.

21 Cavell's reading of *The Letter of an Unknown Woman*, describes how this ideal of knowledge affects the unknown woman. Lisa Berndle, the character played by Joan Fontaine who gave the film its name, is left to create herself. But she has to do so without reciprocity and conversation with Stefan Brand, the addressee of the letter. Rather Lisa creates herself in isolation from Stefan, played by Louis Jourdan, and for him. She does this moreover privately — as her voice-over tells him (and us) posthumously: Quite consciously I began to prepare myself for you. I kept my clothes neater so that you wouldn't be ashamed of me. I took dancing lessons; I wanted to become more graceful, and learn good manners — for you. So that I would know more about you and your world, I went to the library and studied the lives of great musicians. (*Contesting* 107)

22 She wants to know more about him and his world but she is disbarred from doing so in relationship with him. Consequently, Lisa herself remains unknown because knowing her would move Stefan into a relationship of reciprocal knowledge and thus transformation. The problem in the films of the genre lies in the masculine desire to remain unchanged, unexposed, and private. In Stefan's denial of reciprocal knowing Lisa's "existence has been unacknowledged, a fact that quite literally, kills her. This is the reason she comes back to haunt the screen; her plea for acknowledgement posthumously directed both to Stefan and to us," as Carla Marcantonio comments (no pag.).

23 In short: the skeptic imagines knowledge to be constituted according to a logic of objectification where the knowing subject positions himself ideally in contrast to the world, desiring a form of knowledge that is possible only if he remains disconnected from his epistemic object. Similarly, the men in the melodrama understand desire according to a logic of objectification. In order to be desirable the woman has to be known without reciprocity. To be know or desired like a woman means to be objectified. To know and to desire like a man means to stand outside the processes of objectification.

The Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage as Sites of Transformation

24 What would it mean to overcome this imagination of absolute disconnect and objectification? How do women and men acknowledge and cultivate their attunement on which all their claims to knowledge rest? These are the systematic questions that Cavell explores in his reflections on the films he calls "comedies of remarriage" (e.g., Frank Capra's

It Happened One Night or Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday*) in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. These movies provide a happy vision of marriage as the bond of speaking and being together.[6] Here Cavell describes a world in which women and men solve the issue of being fated to each other in language and in community.

25 This positive vision however reflects more than a simple consummation of a desire for intimacy. Cavell's reading engages the fact that in the American political imagination, the ideal marriage is an emblem of the bonds that bind society together (see Cott). According to Cavell, this ideal marriage is best understood as *remarriage*, i.e., as the constantly threatened and regained bond of reciprocity in speaking and listening. "What does a happy marriage *sound* like," asks Cavell; and he points to the "sound of argument, of wrangling, of verbal battle" (*Pursuits* 86). Given that using a language is an appeal to community in the optative, as we have already seen, we can understand these marital conversations as an appeal to a new community, one which does not yet exist but that is there to be created by the couple. In this community the woman and the man can find their individual and separate voices. At the same time, husband and wife have to find words in which to express themselves and to speak for each other in mutuality. With the help of the comedies, Cavell develops therefore the Wittgensteinian idea that language is not a contractual relationship but one based on our willingness to speak together and thus to remain exposed and attuned to each others words. And, as any musician knows, the job of tuning in is not simply finished in the moments before the performance starts. Tuning, remaining in tune, is a constant ongoing and mutual process. The comedies provide Cavell with the imagery and the sound of the struggles by which we are, become, and remain attuned to each other's words.

26 However, these films also allow Cavell to work out another idea that is central to his philosophizing. This is the Emersonian theme that language presupposes and enables the creation of a new vision of humanity. Our words (the inflections of tone, the connections we draw, and the allusions we imply) are performances of what it means to be human. The never-ending exchanges of words in remarriage enable a never-ending back-and-forth between new visions of humanity. This intercourse in words begets new understandings of what it means to be a human being. The continuous transformation of self, language, and community is at stake. In the ideal world of the comedies this constant need for transformation is acknowledged. More importantly the remarriage of the leading couple in the comedies presents us with an image of a community of *mutual* transformation.

[6] The other movies Cavell discusses are: Leo Mc Carey's *The Awful Truth*, George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* and *Adam's Rib*, Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*, and Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve*.

27 The task of transformation is however curiously gendered in Cavell's work. He writes at one point, "that the subject of the genre of remarriage is well described as the creation of the woman, or of the new woman, or the new creation of the human" (*Pursuits* 140). The woman becomes the stand-in for a new humanity. Moreover, her new creation is the result of work done by the leading men in the comedies, as Cavell seems to be saying for example in discussing Peter and Ellie's relationship in *It Happened One Night*. According to Cavell, Ellie is transformed through Peter's insistence that she humble herself and that she accept the food he cooked for her (*Pursuits* 57). Yet, Cavell also states that Ellie creates *herself* as a new woman. The question of who transforms whom in these movies or who has agency in the shaping of the new human community leads to ambiguous results.

28 This ambiguous relationship between the leading woman's activity and passivity reveals itself most clearly in Cavell's description of Walter and Hildy in *His Girl Friday*:

> I mention several features of their intimacy which this film picks up quite unmodified from the laws of the genre of remarriage. There is the early, summary declaration that this woman has recently been created, and created by this man. What he created her from is a "doll-faced hick," which thus satisfies the law that they knew one another in childhood, anyway in a life before their shared adulthood. And what he created out of her was a newspaperman [sic!]. This creation accordingly hinges with the further feature in which accepted differences between the genders are made into problems, several related ones. The conventional distribution of physical vanity, first of all, is reversed. Our opening glimpse of Walter is of him primping, and soon he will be giving himself a flower to wear, as though dressing for battle. It takes a while for Hildy's comparative casualness about her looks to reveal itself [. . .]. The question which of them is the active and which the passive partner is treated at the close of their initial interview as a gag, as in *Bringing Up Baby*, about who is following whom, or about who should be. In *His Girl Friday* it takes the form of issues about who is to go first down the aisle through the city room and about who is to hold the door and a gate open for whom. (*Pursuits* 168)

29 Cavell's thoughts about the role of the camera and of the audience in these films can help to analyze further the question of activity and passivity in the creation of the woman. In his essay "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly," Cavell describes as an essential aim of the comedies that they exploit "film's power of metamorphosis or transfiguration." Cavell continues with the claim that in these films this power is "expressed as the woman's suffering creation, which cinematically means the transformation of flesh-and-blood women into projections of themselves on a screen. Hence the obligation in those films to find some narrative occasion for revealing [. . .] the woman's body, the body of *that* actress" (*Contesting* 122).

30 In this passage, Cavell follows an insight from his earlier work *The World Viewed*. Here he had argued that whereas the actor on a stage disappears behind the character he or

she plays, the camera makes the actor on screen into a star (*World* 33, 175). The camera emphasizes the physical presence as photographic presence of the actor, an emphasis which demands the display or suggestion of the naked body "of the woman" (*Pursuits* 140).

> Thus does film, in the genre under consideration, declare its participation in the creation of the woman, a declaration that its appetite for presenting a certain kind of woman a certain way on the screen — its power, or its fate, to determine what becomes of these women on film — is what permits the realization of these narratives structures as among the highest achievements in the art of film. (Pursuits 140)

31 In the next paragraph Cavell writes how in *The Philadelphia Story* the thematic question of whether this woman is made of flesh and blood or whether she is a (distant) goddess is formally inflected by the camera's studying of Katharine Hepburn's body — preferably in the presence of water, for example, when she produces a trained dive into the swimming pool. I refer to these passages because they seem to present us with the idea that the creation of the woman through the camera is a technical version of the creation of the woman through a male gaze.

32 Yet things are more complex. First, according to Cavell, the camera exposes allegedly "naturally" the "feminine aspect of the masculine physiognomy (and though I am for some reason more hesitant about his, the masculine aspect of the feminine)" (*Pursuits* 224). He links the intuition that the camera reveals the opposite sexual nature of its human subjects with the following two ideas. On the one hand, the camera reveals "an otherwise invisible self" (*Pursuits* 224). The camera and its focus on human bodily expression can present us with images of the potentials of the human self that are not usually seen, or not open to the "normal view." For example, the distinctions of societal order (in clothes, reputations, etc.) are not relevant for the eye of the camera. "It is this property of film that allows, say, Fellini to discover in the face of a contemporary Roman butcher the visage of an ancient Emperor" (*Pursuits* 158). On the other hand, the luminosity of the objects presented to the camera, points to an "inherent self-reflexiveness or self-referentiality of objects filmed" (*Pursuits* 224). The objects participate in their representation: the camera is not completely in control of the creative act. Moreover, the presence of those objects on the screen refers for Cavell to their absence. They point to the possibility that in the presentation of human beings on screen we are also confronted with what is absent or invisible in their gendered desire — something like the "other side" of each gender.[7]

[7] "The reflexiveness of objects harks back, in my mind, to the earlier claim in *The World Viewed* that objects on a screen appear as held in the frame of nature, implying the world as a whole. The sexual reflexiveness of

33 Secondly, the gaze of the camera should not be seen as fixed and fixing. Cavell produces a list of powerful gazes of woman on screen, transforming men on screen with their look. He ends this list with "Mae West delivering her line running, 'Come up and see me' — precisely unimaginable, I take it, as an offer to be gazed at dominatingly" (*Contesting* 124). Cavell invites us to imagine that these women are empowered to "instruct the camera in its ways of looking — to, say, the extent that men can be instructed" (*Contesting* 125). Thus the gaze of the camera is not conceived as the "appropriative, unreciprocated gaze of men," but rather in line with the creative and reciprocating gazes of the men in the comedies of remarriage themselves (*Contesting* 123). Moreover, some of the films present one partner in the leading pair as surrogate director. For example, "in *Lady Eve* it is the woman who directs the action (as it is in *Bringing Up Baby*); the man is her audience, gulled and entranced as a film audience is apt to be. In *It Happened One Night* it is the man who directs, and the woman is not so much his audience as his star" (*Pursuits* 107). Thus, it is not clear whether the gaze of the camera presents a point of view of a male or female director.
34 In sum, the content of the comedies as well as the camera work present us with a complex of agency: the female stars expose themselves to the objectifying gaze of the male viewers while returning this gaze and claiming reciprocity. In so doing they subvert the logic of objectification and introduce the viewing man and the audience into a web of reciprocity. This subtle play of gazing in the comedies supports the mesh of verbal exchanges, which creates and acknowledges a vision of community in mutual participation. The comedies therefore in form, verbal exchanges, and content create an alternative vision to the skeptical objectification of desire and knowledge.

Bearing the Beyond

Visualizing the Sublime

35 It is clear however from this presentation that in Cavell's reading the female stars bear a special burden and posses their own power for moving the skeptical viewers out of a desire structured on the model of objectification into one structured on the ideal of participation. They have to bear the risk of exposing themselves to a partner who may or may not see them outside the confines of skeptical desire and knowledge. They need a man who is capable of revealing his own limitations, like Walter who declares in the movie *His Girl Friday* "that his own power is only mortal, without certainty, without insurance" (Cavell, *Pursuits* 180). The

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human beings would accordingly suggest the individual as expressing humanity as such, what in *The Claim of Reason* I call the internal relation of each human being with all others" (*Pursuits* 225).</

leading men in the comedies are thus not only enabling transformation in their partners. They acknowledge for themselves the need for change and the acceptance of finitude.

36 This idea prompts for Cavell the question of what happens to the women who cannot find such a man. Do they possess their own powers to overcome the skeptical violence? Here we return again to the melodrama of the unknown woman. While the villains in these films are male, the women are cast in the double role of being both victims and saviors. The female stars represent therefore the Emersonian ideal of being open to change by embodying exposure to the future and to each other without metaphysical or grammatical guarantees. Where men deny the possibility of mutual conversation and where they refuse to join a community of transformation, "the woman must achieve her transformation otherwise" (Cavell, *Contesting*, 117). She must be considered to possess her own power to create herself in the face of the violence of masculine knowing. This power for self-creation is expressed in these movies through the trope of gaining a new identity, one which is visualized through changes of her body — or in and around her body, new ways of carrying herself, new dresses and appearances.

37 An example of this new creation of self, dressed in the visualization of bodily changes, is Stella Dallas's scandalous choice of donning excessive jewelry and furs when she, the working class woman and heroine of the movie *Stella Dallas*, appears at the resort hotel frequented by the upper class friends of her husband's Stephen. Cavell interprets this "Christmas tree spectacle" as Stella's way of appealing to the "distaste of those for whom she knows she is distasteful" (*Contesting* 202). Stella performs her exclusion from Stephen's world by presenting her audience with their own reading of her. According to Cavell, we have no reason to assume that her over-decorated appearance reflects Stella's own taste (*Contesting* 202). The care with which her preparation for this appearance is shown, suggests rather that she plans to be a spectacle. In so doing she reveals what it means to be a woman in an unwelcoming world of men:

> The woman's problem is not one of not belonging but one of belonging, only on the wrong terms; unlike the exile, the woman is not between two different cultures but is at odds with the one in which she was born and is roughly in the process of transfiguration into one that does not exist, one as it were still in confinement. (*Contesting* 213)

38 Her spectacle theatricalizes the fact that Stella is at odds with Stephen's culture. And it declares Stella's right not to accept the terms of his culture, not to accept Stephen's terms of association and conversation. The spectacle prepares her for the freedom to leave "not just the man of the marriage but the consequence of a marriage she allowed herself to believe would

transform her" (*Contesting* 217). In this freedom Stella can express and realize her own taste, and this is no longer a taste for the world of men. Has it ever been the world of men? By characterizing her family of origin as primitive, Cavell suggests that Stella early on had a sense of being out of place in this world she was supposed to call home. Cavell recalls for us

> the wooden, shadowy father delivering ugly orders; the monosyllabic, helpless mother; the noisy, nervous brother, the filthiness of whose hands is ambiguous as being caused by his work in the mill, or by his maleness or by his incestuousness; and Stella's primping before the cheap mirror, as if always knowing that, wherever else she finds to be, she does not belong, she from the beginning does not belong here, at what the world calls home. (*Contesting* 218)

39 At the end of the movie, and of her attempts to find a home in the world of men, Stella walks away, ratifying her own taste, "that is the taking on the thinking of her own existence" (*Contesting* 219). She proves her own existence without fully knowing who she is. Here she is stripped of ornaments and Barbara Stanwyck's Stella is without spectacular beauty or "obvious glamour" (*Contesting* 219). Despite this lack, we know, says Cavell, that she has a future, "because she is presented here as a star (the camera showing her that particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction), which entails the promise of return, of unpredictable reincarnation" (*Contesting* 219).

40 Whereas the stars in the comedies stand for humanity achievable in mutuality, the female stars in the melodrama stand for humanity achievable only through an aversion of the terms of a society that has no knowledge of them. In this aversion the women of the melodrama are not only asserting their right to speak their own mind. They are also empowered to judge this male world, which has nothing but silence to offer to them; a silence which is either the result of the negation of her voice in an abusive marriage or the silence of inexpressiveness in her isolated state of being unknown (cf. *Contesting* 127). The women of the melodrama demand the transformation of a man's world, and they transcend the position ascribed to them in this world.

41 Reading the fate of women in the Hollywood movies analyzed by Cavell therefore gives us insights in the violent consequences of the skeptical epistemic and erotic ideals of total access and total disjunction. Importantly these consequences are not metaphysical but instantly recognizable as part of the violence perpetrated against women's bodies in a world shaped by these ideals. Yet, Cavell's close attention to the luminosity of the body of the female stars on film also presents these women as a visualization of the sublime, understood as that which resists the confinements of the given order of things and yet is encoded in this

very order. These women's powerful bodies bear the beyond, which is able to change or judge the world created in a state male skeptical imagination.[8]

Judging the World

42 In his reflections on opera Cavell expands on the idea that women have the power to judge a male-centered world from a space beyond it. He does this by linking their power to judge with the act of singing. He writes that a central feature of "singing [is] expressing the inexpressible — *in loss* or *in discovery*" (*Pitch* 154; emphasis added). The women in opera express in their song the

> sense of being pressed or stretched between two worlds — one in which to be seen, the roughly familiar world of the philosophers, and one from which to be heard, one to which one releases or abandons one's spirit [. . .] and which recedes when the breath of the song ends. This expression of the inexpressible (for there is no standing language of that other world; it requires understanding without meaning) I described as a mad state, as if opera is naturally pitched at this brink. (*Pitch* 144)

43 Like the women stars in the melodrama, the singing women in opera expose themselves to the male world, because they carry within them the power to embody an Emersonian aversion from a place beyond the male space of seeing. In what he calls the *experience of loss* Cavell expresses the connection of singing to orality. Orality implies a pre-verbal place of feeling or pain. It is from this space that the woman expresses herself without a concept and consequently without assurance that she is understood or can make sense. The point is "to propose that we think of the voice in opera as a judgment of the world on the basis of, called forth by, pain beyond a concept." The therapeutic seduction of opera involves that we are called to listen to this pain and "to understand beyond explanation" (*Pitch* 149). This pain expresses the forced separation of the women's self from herself in a world where there are no words for her, "a separation that may be figured as being forced into a false marriage" (*Pitch* 151). In its inexpressiveness, this experience of loss — like music — points to a place of "understanding *before* what we might call meaning, as if it exists in permanent anticipation of — hence in perpetual dissatisfaction with, even disdain for — what can be said" (*Pitch* 160).

44 In what he names the *experience of discovery*, Cavell links singing to orgasm. In singing, the woman is beside herself. She experiences herself in connection to a "nextness to a grander world," i.e., a transcendent or sublime realm intervening into our world in the form

[8] For this notion of the sublime see also: Mehigan, Timothy J. *The Critical Response to Musil's* The Man without Qualities. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003. 103.

of an "irrupting of a new perspective of the self to itself" (*Pitch* 145). Cavell conceives of this irruption of self-knowledge as empowering jouissance available only to the woman herself. The diva abandons herself to this knowledge and in her abandonment she is willing to "depart from all settled habitation, all conformity of meaning" (*Pitch* 144). In her — according to Cavell — word-shattering singing she becomes the emblem of the "human as immigrant" (Pitch 144).

Conclusion

45 It is impossible not to hear heteronormative Freudian undertones in Cavell's equation of "woman" and her "inexpressible jouissance" with "absence" and "transcendence."[9] In his work on the movies or on opera, the "feminine side" of our character symbolizes "the other" side, i.e., the sublime other side of the male and his fearful and violent desire to control. However likewise important is that Cavell's reading of these movies allows us to consider how these structures of desires (named as feminine or masculine) are malleable and part of the world that we speak into being. Masculinity and femininity are not the result of innate rules of desire given in biology or in the structure of any symbolic system; rather as forms of desire masculinity or feminity are formed in us through the social intercourses that carries our world. Consequently, they are local and performative. In Cavell's analysis modern philosophy's desire for the impossible, as the opening gambit of modern skepticism, is intertwined with these local performances of desire, epistemic and erotic. Not metaphysics but new attention to politics of desire will help us overcome them.

[9] The similarities between Cavell and, for example, Julia Kristeva are suggestive and deserve fuller exploration. I explore these in more detail in my *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear*, where I give a fuller and more critical account of Cavell's symbolism of gender.

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