

Series editors' foreword

Joshua Foa Dienstag's engagement with Stanley Cavell's work on cinema is both homage and critique. Deliberately echoing the form of Rousseau's 1758 essay *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (*Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*), it revisits and updates the question of the relation of aesthetic culture to morality raised by the Rousseau–d'Alembert exchange in terms of a meditation on the relation of cinema and democracy.

Rousseau's essay addresses his friend Jean d'Alembert's article "Genève" (Geneva) in the *Encyclopédie* proposing the establishment of a theater in Rousseau's home city. After making clear his respect for d'Alembert, Rousseau proceeds to express skepticism concerning the moral and political effects of the content of theatrical productions, especially comedies such as those of Molière; to express concern about the likely effects of the establishment of a theater (and the presence of actors) on the existing culture of Geneva; and to propose that open-air festivals offer an alternative that is more attuned to sustaining the patriotic unity of Geneva's political culture. *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* is an acute and highly influential expression of the philosophical pessimism that Rousseau opposes to the philosophical optimism of the Enlightenment – and it is no coincidence that Dienstag's prior work, especially his award-winning 2006 book *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, offers both a cogent reconstruction of the tradition of philosophical pessimism and a forceful advocacy of this orientation. Notably, philosophers who exemplify the pessimist tradition, on Dienstag's account, such as Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud and Camus are without exception philosophers of culture, centrally concerned with the relations of culture to ethics, society and politics or, put more abstractly, the government of self and of others.

The constitutive features of the pessimistic tradition as Dienstag reconstructs it are fourfold: that time is a burden; that the course of

history is, in some sense, ironic; that freedom and happiness are incompatible; and that human existence is absurd. This pessimism is opposed to an outlook ("optimism") according to which the world is, in principle, fully knowable by us and receptive to our ethical interests; that is, a condition in which we and the world are, in some happy sense, made for each other and in which, rightly understood, the world makes epistemic and moral sense to us *as if* it were designed to satisfy our rational desires and to reconcile moral freedom and personal happiness.

It is the pivotal concern of the pessimistic tradition with culture (as central to freedom, happiness and the tension between them) that motivates Dienstag's engagement with Cavell and cinema. The work of Stanley Cavell has a strong claim to be the most significant philosophical engagement with culture in contemporary thought, while cinema is one of the most vital media of contemporary culture (arguably akin to that of theater for the Enlightenment period) and Cavell's philosophical engagement with cinema, perhaps especially in his work on comedies of remarriage, offers the best argument for the ethical and political value of cinema in contemporary democratic cultures. In this respect, Cavell's work on cinema represents the most important contemporary challenge to the pessimistic orientation that Dienstag reconstructs and advocates. Dienstag's essay is thus a testing of his own philosophical stance against its most worthy opponent. This is not to say that Cavell's work represents a full-blown "optimism" in the sense that pessimism opposes, but, rather more modestly, it is to say that, for Dienstag, Cavell's engagement with cinema has not fully freed itself from the grip of the philosophical optimism that has been the dominant feature of the philosophical tradition, especially with respect to the reconciliation of freedom and happiness.

At the heart of this agonistic encounter is Dienstag's skepticism that cinema can perform the work of ethical exemplification that Cavell finds in such films as *The Philadelphia Story*. This skepticism is developed in three stages. In the first, Dienstag offers an alternative reading of *The Philadelphia Story*, one that foregrounds more explicitly its relation to the political refounding of the USA in this city and, through

this foregrounding, draws out the relations between the publicity and secrecy, institution and eros, and participation and spectacle that link the political and the personal in this film. In the second, Dienstag contrasts *The Philadelphia Story* with Renoir's contemporary film *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du jeu*), a film that bears many parallels to *The Philadelphia Story* in terms of its treatment of the themes of union, of erotic desire and of the household as symbolic of the nation, but which presents a stark counterpoint to the optimism of the former that eros can be stably channeled into bonds of (civic) friendship, namely, that freedom and happiness can be fully reconciled. On the contrary, *The Rules of the Game* offers a working out of the costs to individuality and spontaneity of establishing a stable union. In the final stage, Dienstag addresses the nature of viewing cinematic film as a mode of experience, arguing against Cavell that it is akin to dreaming rather than lived consciousness and, crucially, cannot be shared. Democracy is a relation of seeing and being seen; cinema is a relation of seeing and not being seen. For this reason, film may be a source of pleasure but it cannot engender or sustain relations of freedom.

These remarks only sketch the barest outlines of Dienstag's challenge to Cavell's work on cinema and, as such, cannot communicate the depth or richness of his engagement with that work nor of the clarity with which his essay articulates the implications of philosophical pessimism for addressing contemporary culture in its relationship to political life. But it is hoped that they indicate the philosophical and political stakes of this encounter and of the dialogue that Dienstag's essay engenders. Recent years have seen a welcome burgeoning of the engagement of political theory with cinema and this volume provides a dialogue in which what is in play is the question of the precise significance of this engagement.