“That dangerous contention”: a cinematic response to pessimism

Davide Panagia

Games are places where intention does not count, human activities in which intention need not generally be taken into account; because in games *what happens* is described solely in terms set by the game itself, because the consequences one is responsible for are limited a priori by the rules of the game.

S. Cavell, “A Matter of Meaning It”¹

To begin, I feel I must be forthcoming by means of an apology: Prof. Dienstag has given us too much to think about, and too much to respond to, and I cannot be true to the markings I have made in his text and respond to all the things I wish and hope to respond to in the remarks that follow. Indeed, what Dienstag has offered is a lifetime of topics for conversation about the marriage of film and democracy, and I look forward to furthering all the possible strands and moments of conversation, though not in this response piece.

Here I wish, instead, to begin with a dangerous contention I hold to be true: film is in direct competition with God for the creation of worlds. No other art could claim as much, though all other media have tried. Every other art form relies on the presence of a viewer/spectator to enact worlds via the enlivening motility of the imagination. Poetry, novels, painting, sculpture – even theater and dance! – all these require an audience. Film does not. For film has absolved the spectator from

¹ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 236.

the burden of imagining movement through its own technical automaticity – a simple gear borrowed from a sewing machine and a perforated strip of celluloid; this was all that was needed in order to overcome the power of the human imagination. Film does not require humans to create moving images, it does so on its own by projecting them onto a screen. In this way – and like no other art form – it is in direct competition with God, who is said to have created life and movement.

No doubt such a contention is absurd, blasphemous to some. But I hope the reader will accept it as a provocation that Dienstag's "Letter to M. Cavell" invites; that is, the demonic coupling of film with democracy is the dangerous contention of which Dienstag accuses Cavell. But, we might respond, echoing that other great reader of Rousseau, "the contention contends."² And what does it contend? It contends that there is a non-human presence that competes with humanity in the organization of worlds. Call that non-human presence film, or God. In this shadow, Dienstag's countercontention is that the ameliorative spirit of perfectionism found in Cavell's comedies of remarriage, and especially in *The Philadelphia Story*, is a dangerous supplement that degrades viewers to a state of animalian existence incapable of presenting and admitting vistas to one another. In the movie theater, Dienstag affirms, "We relax into the comfort of a prehuman isolation only to enjoy the spectacle of human travails" (p. 71). And no happiness or freedom, never mind democracy, can come of this. *That* is the dangerous contention: there is no politics, democratic or otherwise, when we humans give ourselves up to an experience of aesthetic presentness that, as Diderot describes in his Salon writings, is so intense and absorptive that it denies the presence of others.³ For, as Dienstag affirms, "We go to films with preexisting friends precisely to compensate for enduring the loneliness of experience. For, however marvelous an experience, it is a lonely one, not one that can be truly shared" (p. 72).

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 154.

³ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980) pp. 7–70.

"Truly shared" is a curious – uncharacteristically optimistic – expression that I find to be at the heart of my disagreements with Dienstag's position. I should note – quite ironically – that my disagreements are rooted in a friendship with Dienstag born of (amongst other things) the sharing of films and a love of cinema, and of the conversations that films invite. This is despite the fact that, in the history of our friendship, Dienstag and I have never gone to a theater to see a movie together. This aside, I do not know what can be "truly shared" or, for that matter, proximately shared. But, elaborating on this is not my concern in this reply, as I am not an epistemologist. Rather, my concern regards the conceptual ties between sharing, education, and influence in Cavell's work on film, and how my understanding of this mediation differs (radically) from Dienstag's. In this regard, I read the title of Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* to be less descriptive than autobiographical. In that book, we discover an author recounting, sharing and partaking in the pursuit of happiness (of going to the movies).

Much of my disagreement with Dienstag, then, rests on my inability to recognize his account of Cavell's motivation in writing about film. I simply do not read Cavell's words in the same way as Dienstag does, and he and I do not share a sense of film's activity. In part this is because I do not read Cavell as making prescriptive arguments about film's relation to democracy, nor to the ameliorative potential of film for democracy. Instead, I sense great hesitancy in all of what Cavell writes about film – a hesitancy born of the "imponderable evidence"⁴ he champions. Cavell's mood is not regularian but adverbial:⁵ there is no subliming of an ought here, but a sense of frustration that, however hard he might try to point us to a source of conviction in a claim about film, such indexing inevitably fails. It is in light of what I take to be Cavell's antinomianism that I read his book *Pursuits of Happiness*, not as instruction

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (3rd edition, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 228e.

⁵ Richard E. Flathman, *Reflections of a Would-Be Anarchist: Ideals and Institutions of Liberalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p. 74.

for the place of film in democracy but as a set of reflections on the kinds of tuitions our intuitions might afford.⁶

From a formal perspective, the book models a course syllabus, or an attempt at a syllabus, plagued by an anxiety in addressing the pairing of philosophy and film in a university curriculum. Let us recall, briefly, the era in which Cavell's studies on film were written. Though published in 1981, *Pursuits of Happiness* was composed throughout the 1970s and followed *The World Viewed* as the only other book that took film seriously as a philosophical topic, written by an American author tenured in a philosophy department at a prominent American university. By any standard, *that* is an achievement given what we know of the orientation of American philosophy departments in the post-war period.⁷ More to the point, Cavell is writing about what he considers "works," and about his sense of what constitutes the nature of a work. Moreover, he does not take this ontological question lightly, as we can all agree; for an answer to the question of what constitutes a work provides a very important first step to answering the question of whether a film can contribute to a philosophy curriculum. That is, for Cavell, the ontological question of the nature of a work must first be answered before any account of the value of a specific work can be given. Hence, the anxiety, and the inevitable disappointment, in discovering that he (Cavell) cannot provide adequate epistemic evidence for the existence of a filmic work. There is, then, a curious instance of habeas corpus to his project: if Cavell cannot provide evidence for the existence of a work (what he refers to as "the question of film's legitimacy"),⁸ can there be any value attached to cinema and/or the philosophical study of cinema? The short answer is ambiguous: yes and no. Indeed, I would argue that a first lesson that we learn from reading Cavell on film is the antinomian

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mary Oliver, "Self Reliance," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), pp. 132–53.

⁷ John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), *passim*.

⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 270.

position (first elaborated by Immanuel Kant in the third *Critique*) that there can be no rules for expressing or indexing or proving the existence of value. Thus, the best that we can do, to use Cavell's famous term, is *acknowledge* it; and by acknowledging value, we are acknowledging the sensation of an experience. So, when acknowledging something like the work of cinema, Cavell can only access his experiences with the hope or ambition or anxiety "that others have a similar kind of experience, that they will recognize themselves in his words."⁹ The alternative, as Cavell puts it starkly, "is having nothing (political) to say."¹⁰

Therefore, the political question of *Pursuits of Happiness* seems to me less about the semblances or usefulness of film for democracy (because aesthetic objects aren't instrumental) than the question of democratic participation: what is entitled to partake (i.e., share) in a curriculum? And, more devastatingly, can one's experience of value partake (i.e., be shared) in that curricular project? Such questions imagine a conjoining of participation (*qua* sharing) and acknowledgment in the forging of what Cavell refers to as a university's "commitment to the idea of curriculum."¹¹ By "curriculum," I take Cavell to mean both the idea of a plan of study (hence my formal reading of *Pursuits of Happiness* as a syllabus) and the sense of a shared way (or path) of learning. Keeping Cavell's anxieties regarding the validity of subjective experiences of value in mind, then, the questions he asks are what are the elements that can be shared in a way of learning, and are one's intimacies in viewing legitimate participants in those sharings? The study of film is nothing other than the pursuit of experience as a source and resource for the learning of and about value; to wit, aesthetics. Can the curriculum in and of democracy bear such pursuits? Can it avoid them?

However, the problem of curriculum – of a path of learning – does not end here. For when Cavell was writing his works on and of film, he

⁹ Daniel Morgan, "Stanley Cavell: The Contingencies of Film and Its Theory," in Murray Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer, eds., *Thinking in the Dark: Cinema, Theory, Practice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 28.

¹¹ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 269.

did not have access to our visual media (i.e., he was not writing at a time when he could access vistas via a VHS or DVD player, or a tablet). Cavell pursued his curriculum not only with intuition, but with memories, the *least* reliable sources of evidentiary support out there and certainly not something that could count as a robust testimony for the pursuit of “film’s legitimacy.”¹² In a courtroom, this would be akin to responding to the charge of habeas corpus by saying, “I remember to have seen a body.” But Cavell’s aesthetic philosophy reminds us that, when issues regarding the nature of value arise, we are not in a courtroom and the epistemology of legitimacy has little sway. So what does have sway?

“A reading of a film,” Cavell states, “sets up a continuous appeal to the experience of the film, or rather to an active memory of the experience (or an active anticipation of acquiring the experience).”¹³ It is at the point at which memories count as the fragmented traces upon which to construct a claim about film’s legitimacy that Cavell encounters Dienstag’s mood of pessimism which affirms that “Nothing is permanent, and we suffer most from the lack of permanence in the people and things that we most care about. Indeed, the more we care, the more we suffer.”¹⁴ For, if we might entertain (with some difficulty) the possibility that Cavell is endorsing the ameliorative function of film for democracy, the fact that his readings of films are grounded in the impermanence of memories – and memories are, essentially, dying thoughts – suggests a strain of suffering throughout Cavell’s pursuits of happiness: his happiness is dying because his memories – those things we care deeply about – are fading. Films – and our experiences of films – point to nothing other than the lack of permanence in our lives. I wish to call that lack of permanence *discontinuity*.

¹² Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 270. At this point, I ponder, as an aside, whether “an anticipation of acquiring the experience” is not what Cavell means by “pursuits of happiness”? And to ponder this means, once again, to acknowledge that Dienstag and I do not partake in a shared reading, despite reading the same words and viewing the same films. There is here a veritable dissensus, not a disagreement.

¹³ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 23.

I thus read the mood that Dienstag names *pessimism* to be at the heart of Cavell's pursuits of happiness. The things most impermanent – the memories of views and experiences of value – are the quicksand upon which Cavell chooses to ground his pursuits of a life of learning, a life of curatorship dedicated to the impossible sharings that relate things like film and philosophy, or Kant and Capra. These are, to anyone's eyes, perverse couplings or risky marriages, to be sure. The claim(s) Cavell makes about film(s) are not representational where *x* and *y* films are said to offer better understandings or a more capacious or effective semblance of democratic life. Cavell cannot make those claims, given his own anxiety about claim-making, and his acceptance of the fact that aesthetic experience is neither verifiable nor prescriptive.¹⁵ That is to say, Cavell's claim(s) of and about film(s) do not assign an experience of value to objects in the way that I read Dienstag recommend they do.

Cavell's claim(s) of and about film(s) are, rather, presentational – not surprisingly, of the *look and see* variety – as when Wittgenstein says this: "I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*."¹⁶ Being "inclined to regard differently" is not a seeing differently, nor a thinking differently, nor an agreement or a consent on the validity of the statement of value. It is an acceptance of the projection of value in the form of a linguistic utterance which recalls a moment of experience. What Wittgenstein and Cavell are accessing, in short, are sentimental reflections on the nature of taste.

Of course, by taste here I mean neither "preference" nor "liking." I mean, rather, that ambiguous set of practices and capacities that enable pairings and couplings to come into occasion – let us call such pairings and couplings "assemblages" (Deleuze), or "queer connexions" (Wittgenstein), or "partitions" (Rancière). Recall how Cavell begins

¹⁵ Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, *passim*.

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 144.

Pursuits of Happiness by declaring that the object of study of his book is genre, and that his first – explicit – debt is to Northrop Frye’s “The Argument of Comedy.” Of course, the matter of genre as a practice of literary inquiry is not far from the issue of curriculum as an object of ontological inquiry, and it does not surprise me at all that the book-ends of *Pursuits of Happiness* are the topics of genre (“Introduction”) and curriculum (“Appendix”). These bespeak, in some sense, the same activity that parallels the activity of filmmaking: that is, these are activities that give priority to the human capacity for selection and arrangement, call it the human instinct to cut and paste. They are activities, in short, that understand the practices of and about taste to be activities fundamentally committed to the forging of relations and structures of participation (and hence sharing) that previously did not exist – like, for instance, the participation of *The Philadelphia Story* with a treatment of *La Règle du jeu* in a discussion of the democratic value of cinema. What dispositions do such forms of sharing admit? What is taste’s scene of instruction? Whatever answers might arise from these questions, one thing is for certain: the issue of sharing is a matter of taste.

Pursuits of Happiness is a book that enacts its own argument about taste by putting a picture before us and exacting a movement of comparison with *this* rather than *that* set of archival pictures (Shakespeare, marriage, Freud, Bazin, etc.). But, more than this, it is an exercise in remarking upon pictures and fictitious narratives, as if Cavell had taken this passage from Wittgenstein as his professional epigraph: “Don’t take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds.”¹⁷ The (erotic) pleasure of a mental occupancy, or what the history of taste otherwise calls “absorption,” is at the heart of Cavell’s reflections on film. His are reflections on how to take as remarkable the fact that memories of streaming images persist in our consciousness, and what we make of the “queer connexion(s)”¹⁸ that ensue.

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 142e, para. 524.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 19e, para. 38.

The issue of aesthetic absorption bespeaks a further element of Cavell's writings on film-learning that Dienstag's "Letter" sidesteps; namely, the matter of ekphrasis. I have already noted the technical environment within which *The World Viewed* and *Pursuits of Happiness* were written. This was a time when one could not readily access the films themselves, and if one did have such means at one's disposal, the kind of stop-action viewing available to film scholars today was not possible then. Thus, much of Cavell's hesitancy in claiming is related to the acknowledgment that a) affirmations of taste are not prescribable; b) that the film/philosophy pairing might be deemed in bad taste; and c) that faded memories are a poor source of evidentiary support for something as important as an ontology of film; but d) that the faded memories of viewings compete for mental occupancy with the faded memories of other lived experiences, making the memories of films as real as the memories of other peoples or events.¹⁹ Hence Cavell affirms the following in the "Foreword to the Enlarged Edition" of *The World Viewed*:

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

¹⁹ And here I am making the blasphemous (Humean) point that, to the extent that mental life relies on memories of experiences, no appeal to a robust realism can be made as regards the difference between memories or images or impressions of peoples and memories or images or impressions of things (like films or pictures or paintings). "Real" people and "real" events are, to our mental occupancy, indistinct from the films we view on the screen. To buttress such blasphemy, I point the reader to Daniel Kahneman's theory of the experiencing and remembering selves as outlined in his *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (reprint edition, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

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.²⁰

To write not *from* memory, but “out of the memory of films” – this is Cavell's ekphrastic ambition; as if memory is not a storage device but a spring to thought. Writing about film is thus not the pursuit of an accurate semblance *in* films, this because vistas cannot be cited and memories are impermanent. Herein lies Cavell's flirting with pessimism, despite his own pursuits of happiness.

How does any of this make Cavell's writings on film an ekphrastic exercise? Simply put, he is writing of things that *do not* exist in the world precisely because his (and our) views and experiences and memories of vistas *do not* exist in the world. The allure or prestige of aesthetic criticism is to make the audience/reader believe that the object in question actually exists even though there can be no corollary to it. This is the ekphrastic ambition of film-writing and thinking that is akin to Homer's description of Achilles' shield, or Keats's Grecian Urn. The ekphrastic in all these instances regards “the illusory representation of the unrepresentable, even when that representation is allowed to masquerade as a natural sign, as if it could be an adequate substitute for its object.”²¹ Thus, I would say, Cavell's recommendations of films read less like the commending of a tuition than as an attempt to create a system of signs that can adequately address the flux that arises from the experience of remarkableness. “A study of what may be remembered in any art”²² is the study of aesthetic criticism, and what is remembered is not the object itself, but the subjectivity of encountering a felt impression. There is no doubt that *The Philadelphia Story* exists: it has a material (celluloid) existence. But there is no such object-thing as Cavell's

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. ix.

²¹ Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. xv.

²² Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. ix.

(or mine, or your) vista of it; and, when we speak of *The Philadelphia Story*, or *La Règle du jeu*, or *Blade Runner* or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, we are never speaking of the film, whatever that may mean, but are always speaking of our vistas of them – and *that* means that we are speaking, or writing, ekphrastically, about a non-existent object, a virtual *res*. Hence the impossibility of a commendation (how can one commend something that doesn't exist?), yet the invitation to look and see for yourself.

This sense of the ekphrastic is Cavell's scene of instruction that I understand as a curatorial disposition that invites us to take up a view, to bear or support a view, like a strewn blanket might bear light if it were a makeshift screen holding "a projection, as light as light."²³ With this in mind, let us take a look at that dangerous contention once again, the scene of instruction (one of many, no doubt) that sets off Dienstag's penning of his letter:

But the idea of what happened in Philadelphia during the making of our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution is not the whole daydream. It projects further a conversation between film's pre-occupations and some three or four texts or moments in the working out of those covenants in their subsequent two centuries.²⁴

What a couplet! It's almost Shakespearean! The idea that what happened in Philadelphia is a daydream in exactly the same way that what happens on film is a daydream, and they are daydreams because they are events that cannot correspond to anything in the world, unless memories and recountings (call them histories, if you must) are things in the world. But they are not. History is not something that exists in the world, it is a *poesis* of recounting temporal happenings, and such ekphrases can manifest themselves numerically, or orally, or archivally, or textually. And all of these things may represent truths about the world in exactly the same way that film does, by projecting views and vistas and imaginings.

²³ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 24.

²⁴ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 154.

So what are film's preoccupations? They are varied and variable, no doubt, but, at least between the cover pages of Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*, there is a sense that a central preoccupation that film is not so much the stories it tells, but how to tell those stories by creating associations and relations (e.g., kinships or marriages) between things that do not actually belong together: this shot with that camera angle, this film with that other film, this set of concerns (e.g., cinema) with those others (e.g., democracy) – to wit, this genre or that curriculum. In short, the preoccupation of film is a preoccupation for democracy: namely, it is the preoccupation of partaking in and assigning lots to things. For, if there is one thing that film does very well – exceedingly well, indeed – it is to assign lines of sight and auralities. Film parses the world in order to make worlds. This is at once its technical and aesthetic achievement, and why it is in competition with God.

It seems, then, that a central preoccupation of Cavell's own scene of instruction is not so much to exact representations for prescription or adoption, but to beg the question as to what transubstantiating force of mediation enables distinct and unrelated objects to exist in proximity (spatial and temporal) to one another. The aesthetic version of this question is "how is value shared?" And this is a political question that for Cavell arises out of the fact of film's automaticity and the further fact that film is "cut" (automatically) twenty-four times per second (in the case of conventional celluloid) and then cut, once again, between shots and scenes. It is also a political question because, if nothing else (and as Dienstag's Masonic picture of American founding projects), democratic politics involves selecting cuts and apportioning parts so that disaggregated units are seen to hold together. Such a holding together is not simply impermanent, it is ekphrastic – an illusion akin to the idea of a natural sign.

My response to Dienstag's letter is nearly exhausted, though inevitably incomplete. Nevertheless, allow me, then, two further qualms. The first is this: what are we to make of Dienstag's implicit contention that a proper democratic learning involves an active citizenry of reading and writing subjects? We know of Dienstag's penchant for narrative and

prose: he is a great reader of novels and his work in political theory places great emphasis on narrative in political life. Notably, Dienstag never – and I mean *never* – actually claims the privilege of reading to viewing for education in his "Letter to M. Cavell." And yet, there is something of a *punctum* – a wounding pinprick – that glares at me when I encounter his view of spectatorship, and in particular his sociology of the isolationism of filmic spectatorship. No doubt he is right that going to the movies is a "lonely" experience where "We relax into the comfort of a prehuman isolation only to enjoy the spectacle of human travails" (p. 71). But, how much more lonely is this activity from that of reading? Is reading not equally something we tend to pursue in isolation, with our heads "buried" in our books, as we are accustomed to saying? Our ordinary language likens reading to a grave, for heaven's sake! How's that for isolation?

As Dienstag's work shows, there is nothing more solitary (and perhaps more antipolitical) than death. But though Dienstag has much to say about film's capacity to distract us from one another, he has little to say about reading's similar capacities; curiously, scriptural activities somehow remain immune from charges of demonology in political education. And yet, what benefit to democracy does reading or writing bring? Neither is (for us, today) a social activity. To paraphrase Dienstag's own words, "I have never yet made a friend *in* a book, and I expect I never will" (p. 72). For, however marvelous the experiences of reading and writing may be, they are not ones that can be "truly shared." What does it say for democracy that reading and writing are not shareable activities? What does it say about a democratic education that they are not? To share someone's perspective, you must first acknowledge its difference from your own; literature affords no space for this experience. Or, at the very least, and if I may continue to be coy, it offers the same "no-place" that film does. (I could, at this point, make a direct riposte by way of quoting one of I. A. Richards' most memorable lines: "A book is a machine to think with."²⁵)

²⁵ Ivor Armstrong Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.

I might be exhausting the reader's patience, but it is worth noting how the issue of sharing as a social activity in Dienstag's analysis of cinema partakes in similar concerns as the issues of curriculum, editing, and genre in Cavell's writing about film. The crux of the concern is this: the nature of influence and collaboration in and for democracy is undetermined, and to assume that influence and collaboration require a correspondence model of transmission that relies on a telegraphic account of sharing is, I believe, limiting. As others have shown, such an account of social influence is rooted in a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commitment to theories of unconscious imitation. The idea is as straightforward as it is familiar: consciousness implies attention and intention, unconsciousness implies coercion and manipulation by another authority, whether that authority is the power of a mental illness (hysteria), or a trickster (the hypnotist), or a spectacle (cinema).²⁶

My point here is this: the debates over the uses and abuses of cinema for politics rest on an understanding and appreciation of the power of the image, of its architecture, and the forms of influence the image can excite. Indeed, it is excitement itself, and it is the concomitant sense of the uncontrollable (as in the early twentieth-century film-going archetypes of the hysteric and the somnambulist) that is at stake. For the uncontrollable is akin to the unspecifiable, or the unpredictable; to that sense of anxiety that Cavell admits to when having to rely on the sensations of an experience, or the vagueness of a memory, to index value. The uncontrollable is also what is at stake in our appreciations of mediatic theories of influence in and for democracy. In democracies, we tend to want to defend the absolute value of freedom, but not defend the absolute value of the uncontrollable for fear that the uncontrollable can generate undemocratic impulses, like cinematic demagoguery. I take this point to be at the heart of Dienstag's concerns regarding the sociality of sharing, and cinema's failure in generating "those more truly democratic experiences" (pp. 72–73).

²⁶ Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Redwood, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), *passim*.

I fear that I have now embraced Dienstag's horrible subject of cinema: the one incapable of distinguishing between dream and reality, or, worse perhaps, of preferring the dream of a world of moving images, or (*sumum malum!*) of the sinner who believes the world is nothing other than a stream of moving images. This is the vista of the democratic somnambulist who is maligned because she is passive and incapable of seeing other perspectives. This is what she shares with animals. But is this spectatorship? What do we make of the element of play in movie theaters that makes a collective writhe and squirm with pleasure, pain, or horror while viewing?²⁷ Must the education of the city occur without play?

Here, then, is my second and final qualm over Dienstag's position: there is absolutely no room for play (*Spiel-Raum*) in his discussion of film and in his representation of a democratic education. "If we are to experience a democracy of moments," Dienstag affirms, "we can never learn to do so from an art that exists to subvert them" (p. 76). Such an assertion can only be true if we excise any sense of play from art, learning and democracy. It is perhaps the case that Dienstag might associate the element of play in art with the kind of ameliorative aspirations that he sees in comedies, thereby adding to the "myth of optimism that happiness and freedom walk hand in hand" (p. 73). But, if this is true, it is simply a category mistake. For there is no 1:1 correlation between play-comedy-happiness-freedom-democracy-optimism. This is not a fixed series.

It is telling that, in his treatment of *La Règle du jeu*, Dienstag spends much time on the issue of rule and ruling, and little time on game playing. And it is further telling that Dienstag's account of the doll scene in *La Règle du jeu* interprets the automaticity of the doll as an absence of willpower. In short, the relation is analogical, and the analogy speaks of an absence of freedom, hence the dangerous tendency

²⁷ In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2009), Adam Smith says this of his idea of fellow-feeling (or sympathy, or sharing): "The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, as they feel that they must do if in his situation" (I.i.1.3).

“of the mechanistic life toward violence and death” (p. 45). But dolls and games and automata are complicated things. From one perspective (e.g., Dienstag’s optimistic vista regarding the existence of something like human will and freedom), dolls and automata inevitably represent a limit to human will, and automaticity is akin to an absence of individual freedom. But this is only one side of the dice. For Renoir, as for Cavell, automata offer an occasion to explicitly explore the nature of human sentiments; Cavell does this in his example of the “striptease of misery”²⁸ in *The Claim of Reason*, and Renoir (as Dienstag rightly notes) does so in such scenes. But, more than Cartesian carriers of the problem of human freedom vis-à-vis mechanization, dolls and other automata also represent (for the early twentieth-century viewer like Renoir) the quintessential site of cinematic play as a force of freedom. For, what the automata show is exactly the opposite of an absence of freedom but, rather, a freedom from the habituation of ritual that narrows the scope of freedom’s play. Doll and automata for the early twentieth-century viewer were things that enabled a kind of play that liberated one’s sense of servitude to (class and spiritual) ritual.

Consider, in this regard, Walter Benjamin’s famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.” Rather than reading the compromised third version of that essay (found in the *Illuminations* collection), however, let’s follow Miriam Hansen’s advice and read the second version – the final version written by Benjamin before Theodor Adorno’s distortive hands took over.²⁹ I cannot do justice to Hansen’s treatment of play theory in cinema, and especially in Benjamin’s theory of technological reproducibility. But, there are two things I do want to note, which I believe (at the very least) complicate Dienstag’s image of the passive spectator. The first is what Benjamin has to say about play and cinema, and the second is the emphasis Benjamin places on innervation (a synonym for the unpredictable), that culminates in his esteem for Chaplin.

²⁸ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 403–16.

²⁹ On Adorno’s distortion of Benjamin, see Miriam Hansen’s discussion in *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, edited by Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 195–9.

Much rests, in Benjamin's essay, on his treatment of mimesis as the interplay of semblance and play. But it is cinema, which Benjamin at several points calls "games of light" (*Lichtspiele*), that holds the greatest promise for game-play, and for extending the scope of play so as to dissolve and dissociate the power of semblance, or what he refers to as the "decay of the aura." Here, Benjamin's task is to distance himself from the age of "auratic perception" that he associates with Hegel's beautiful semblance – indeed, with bourgeois capitalism. Throughout the second version of *The Work of Art* essay, Benjamin insists on exploring forms of emancipation from auratic perception that "technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual."³⁰ Further, in footnote 23 of this second version of *The Work of Art* (a footnote ultimately cut from the *Illuminations* edition), Benjamin says this: "what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope of play [*Spiel-Raum*]. This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play."³¹ Why might this be the case? Simply put, because "it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*]."³² In short, Benjamin finds the political importance of film in the conjunction of play and action because no other art, technology or medium provides occasions for the innervation of semblance via repetitive play in the way that cinema does.

Recall that Benjamin's interest in play is tied to his interest in child-like imitation and the learning that comes through the child's "creative innervation."³³ Benjamin believes children are unique (but not innocent) in their capacity to generate new images for the *an-archive* of humanity: "To each truly new configuration of nature," Benjamin writes

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 24.

³¹ Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, p. 49.

³² Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael William Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 117.

³³ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p. 36.

in *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*), “and, at bottom, technology is just such a configuration – there corresponds new ‘images.’ Every childhood discovers these new images in order to incorporate them into the image stock of humanity.”³⁴ That “database aesthetics”³⁵ is disconnected and discontinuous, innervated, a broken heap of pictorial traces, something that each generation, and each epoch, carries with it. Repetitive technical reproducibility guarantees the constant cutting and circulating of such a pictorial bricolage. Indeed, we could say that the element of play identified by Benjamin in cinema, which far from an ameliorative happiness (as it offers no guarantees for joy or redemption) interplays the tragic with the comic (i.e., fragmentation and play), is encapsulated in the two great archetypes of modernity that he projects: the bricoleur and the flaneur. What we quickly discover via *The Work of Art* essay is that, for Benjamin, the flaneur is the bricoleur in motion – or cinema.

For this reason, Chaplin – the quintessential bricoleur in motion – takes on “historical significance” for Benjamin, for “he was the first to inhabit new fields of action opened up by film.”³⁶ Whether this is an accurate account of Chaplin or not is, of course, beside the point. The point is that what cinema offers politics is a transfiguration of motor-perceptual energies, a heretofore unavailable technical transformation of the human sensorium itself.

In a posthumously published 1935 fragment entitled “The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression,” Benjamin writes this:

The formula in which the dialectical structure of film – film considered in its technological dimension – finds expression runs as follows. Discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence. A theory of film would need to take account of both these facts. First of all, with regard to continuity, it cannot be overlooked that the assembly

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 390.

³⁵ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p. 202.

³⁶ Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, p. 38.

line, which plays such a fundamental role in the process of production, is in a sense represented by the filmstrip in the process of consumption. Both came into being at roughly the same time. The social significance of the one cannot be fully understood without that of the other. At all events, our understanding of this is in its infancy. That is not quite the case with the other element, discontinuity. Concerning its significance we have at least one very important pointer. It is the fact that Chaplin's films have met with the greatest success of all up to now. The reason is quite evident. Chaplin's way of moving [*gestus*] is not really that of an actor. He could not have made an impact on the stage. His unique significance lies in the fact that, in his work, the human being is integrated into the film by way of his gestures – that is, his bodily and mental posture. The innovation of Chaplin's gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement. Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat – always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions. Now, what is it about this behavior that is distinctively comic?³⁷

The movement-innervation-gesture-discontinuity sequence as embodied in Chaplin's innervated *gestus* is the site of cinema's politics of play, a politics that, though not exclusively democratic, isolates the discontinuity of human movement in the face of the recursive, auratic pressures of ritual semblance. Interestingly, Benjamin holds out no hope for an actual (real) distinction between human and automaton. In the fragmented world of his modernity, it is impossible to do so, and unwelcome as well. The cult of the human – and the aura of human freedom – is dissolved by the innovation of Chaplin's gestures, in his bodily and mental postures that parallel (indeed, imitate) the innervated sequences of cinematic movement. What Chaplin shows us, by embodying the motorial law of the cinematic image sequence, is an

³⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, p. 93.

embodied automatism, or a human *something* “unlike anything else we know.”³⁸

The godlike feature of cinema, and its aesthetic and political value, is its capacity to give us something unlike anything else we know. And *that*, to be sure, is a dangerous contention.

³⁸ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 26.