

INTRODUCTION

How John the Baptist Kept His Head, or My Life in Film Philosophy

Thinking in the Dark (Pomerance and Palmer 2015), an anthology edited by Murray Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer, is a collection of lucid essays, each about a thinker whose theory of film the writer finds particularly enlightening. It is striking, though, that virtually every one of these thinkers is or was an outsider to academic film studies. The field of film studies, when it searches for theoretical insights, continues to look past its own members, including more than a few powerful thinkers whose own achievements as theorists are rarely acknowledged. Indeed, a number of the writers who contributed essays to *Thinking in the Dark*, and the book's editors as well, are worthy of inclusion as theorists in their own right. I'm not thinking only of myself, but I am thinking of myself. After all, during the Film Philosophy workshop at the 2016 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, my friend David Rodowick called me "the John the Baptist of film philosophy." I trust that he didn't have in mind the sad ending to the Biblical story, but simply the fact that I began thinking philosophically about film—about the ways films think philosophically—before there was a field, or subfield, that could be called "film philosophy." I've perhaps earned the right, while I still have my head, to recount, however sketchily, my half-century of writing film criticism that aspires to be philosophy.

It was in the late 1960s that I began writing what was to become *Three Essays in Aesthetics*, the dissertation I was finally to submit to the Harvard Philosophy Department in 1973. It consisted of three interrelated essays: "A Theory of Artistic Expression," "Toward a Theory of Narrative Film," and "An Analytical Description of the Film *Notorious*." That year, I began teaching in the New York University Cinema Studies Department, cutting my ties with academic philosophy

and casting my lot with a field that was just starting—when will it finish?—to establish a legitimate place within American universities. In the decades since, I have sometimes felt that I was, like John the Baptist, “crying in the wilderness.” But that’s as far as the parallel goes. “Prepare the way of the Lord!” is what John the Baptist cried in a world that (as the New Testament tells the story) had not yet seen the Light that Jesus was to bring into the world. John the Baptist was not the Light; he was only “sent to bear witness of that Light.” I was not “sent” to say what I said in my dissertation. Nor did it prophesy that a marriage of film studies and philosophy would one day come into the world. Whatever “film philosophy” is, I was already doing it. Of course, the same was true for Stanley Cavell, my mentor and dissertation advisor. If there’s a “Light” my dissertation “bears witness of,” it’s the intuition, which guided Cavell in writing *The World Viewed* (1971), that the marriage of film studies and philosophy, exemplified by my own writings as well as his, is not only possible but necessary—necessary no less for philosophy than for the study of film.

In the late 1960s, when Cavell was writing *The World Viewed*, I arrived on my own at a number of ideas—about stardom and screen performance; about the viewer’s outsideness to the world on film; about the camera and the movie screen—that were akin to ideas his book articulated with a far more sophisticated understanding of their relation to the Western philosophical tradition.

In writing *The World Viewed*, Cavell’s goal was to achieve a philosophical perspective on the period of his life in which going to the movies had been a normal part of his week without it occurring to him to reflect philosophically on film. In writing my dissertation, my goal was different. There had been a shift in my experience of film from my childhood, when I, too, enjoyed what *The World Viewed* calls a “natural relation” to movies, to my high school and college years, when I was drawn to films widely accepted as art and looked down on popular American movies, old and new. The conjunction of two events precipitated a second shift. One was the attention Cavell gave to *Vertigo* in what in *The World Viewed* he called a “failed” graduate aesthetics seminar—it didn’t fail me—that he allowed me to take although I was still an undergraduate. The other was the publication of an essay by Andrew Sarris on the auteur theory that he later expanded into his seminal book *The American Cinema* (Sarris 1968). In my dissertation, I sought a philosophical perspective on my experience of films by “auteur” directors for whom film was, I ardently believed, first and foremost a medium of self-expression. Given that films are composed of machine-made images, I asked myself how self-expression was even possible in the film medium. Sarris’s claim was that an auteur film expressed its director’s *personality*. I knew that this could not be right, since directors are invisible and silent, and outside

of the projected world, as the viewer is. Then what part or aspect of a director's "self" does an auteur film express and call upon us to acknowledge?

The first part of my dissertation reflected on a paradox inherent in expression. To express oneself is to change, I argued—to become other than who or what one had been. When an artist performs an act of self-expression by creating a work of art, what "self" is expressed? What "self" performs the act? Self-expression, I argued, reflects the fact that the human "self" is not unified; human identity is not fixed. In creating a work of art, the artist takes a step in the direction of realizing the "self," becoming more fully who he or she is.

The dissertation's second part took point-of-view cutting to be key to classical cinema's way of representing human being-in-the-world. Cutting from a character to his or her view and back to a "reaction shot" links our condition as viewers with that of the character, who is a viewer, too. It also separates the character from us, in that we cannot thrust ourselves into the projected world the way the character can—and must. Even when we view the character, in an "objective" shot, performing actions within the world he or she lives in with others, the character might at any moment withdraw, or be withdrawn, into the aloneness, the outsideness, that is also the viewer's condition, and the director's—a condition that cannot ultimately be overcome or transcended apart from a traumatic breakthrough equivalent, allegorically, to crossing the barrier-that-is-no-real-barrier of the movie screen, a barrier impossible to cross. The part or aspect of the "self" an author like Hitchcock expressed and called on us to acknowledge, I argued, was his aloneness, his condition as solitary, outside the human circle. What his films expressed was thus a condition that set him apart from all others. And yet, outsideness is also our condition as viewers; we, too, are outside the film's world. In the third part of my dissertation, I focused on *Notorious*, dwelling on the condition of outsideness that I took to be defining for Hitchcock's role as author. This part of the dissertation, as revised for publication in *The Georgia Review* (Rothman 1975), adding numerous frame enlargements, provided the model for the readings in *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze* (Rothman 1982).

In my years at NYU, 1973 to 1976, the Cinema Studies Department was dominated by an ideology that privileged avant-garde cinema over "ordinary" movies, which students were encouraged to hold in contempt as "illusionistic." Like anyone who read *The World Viewed* with the kind and degree of attention it calls for, I knew that the Cinema Studies Department ideology was philosophically naïve, and why it was naïve to think of film images, or the worlds they project, as illusory. Had the Department as a whole been prepared to acknowledge Cavell's philosophical seriousness, my years at NYU—not to mention the history of film studies—might have been different. Be that as it may, at that time the approach

that prevailed within the Cinema Studies Department was being outflanked on the left by the theoretical frameworks that became prominent in France in the altered post-May 1968 cultural landscape. Semiology was all the rage, but offered little to anyone for whom writing about film was art, not science. The same was true for Saussurean linguistics, which for me had been blown out of the water by the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*—and by Cavell. Christian Metz’s “*Grande Sygmétique*,” an exercise in semiotics that claimed to establish the units of cinematic discourse, seemed to me an empty exercise. So-called apparatus theory, which denied the viewer an active role, struck me as pernicious. Worse, to me, was the reading of *Young Mr. Lincoln* by the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma* published in translation by the British Film Institute journal *Screen* (October 1972). The essay claimed authority both from Althusserian Marxism, which was enjoying a brief heyday in American film studies, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which has proved to have a much longer shelf life.

Lacanian psychoanalysis also played a central role in “The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema,” an essay by Daniel Dayan in *Film Quarterly* that presented Jean-Pierre Oudart’s theory of suture to English-speaking readers. Going beyond Oudart, Dayan claimed that the fact that movies were pernicious ideological constructs—the thrust of the *Young Mr. Lincoln* piece as well—was an inevitable effect of the “system of the suture” (aka point-of-view cutting) which masked the real source of the film image’s meaning-construction. This was a moment at which, in film studies, it was *de rigueur* to invoke the Velasquez painting “Las Méninas” to buttress the theory that continuity editing in cinema was a system—analogueous to linear perspective in painting—that made it impossible for classical movies to be anything but instruments of bourgeois ideology. (Laura Mulvey’s widely anthologized 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” employed a variant of this approach by claiming that in classical movies the camera was an instrument of “the male gaze”—as if all men always do only one thing, or perhaps two, with their gaze!—thus inevitably making such films instruments of patriarchal ideology.)

In “Against the System of the Suture” (1975), which was itself widely anthologized, I offered a painstaking critique of Dayan’s argument, which especially ruffled my feathers because it flew in the face of the detailed analysis of point-of-view cutting in my dissertation. Looking back, it pleases me that I condemned so passionately the use of theory not as a companion to criticism, but as a justification for avoiding criticism as I aspired to practice it. Not that my response had any noticeable effect on the consensus forming within the field that to secure its legitimacy film studies had to aspire to the condition of a science. In retrospect, though, I regret that I avoided making any reference to my dissertation, which had predated Oudart’s essay as well as Dayan’s. Perhaps I was not

completely immune at that time, stranded as I was in the philosophical wilderness of the NYU Cinema Studies Department, to the seductive but destructive notion that breaking our attachment to movies was the first step we had to take if we were to think seriously about film. Or perhaps I was perversely withholding my thoughts from a field that, at some level, I *wanted* to be outside of.

I lived in Cambridge between 1961, when I entered Harvard College, and 1973, when I started teaching at NYU. In 1976, that sentence was commuted when I was invited to return to Harvard to help create a film program in which I would not be a voice “crying in the wilderness,” a program with no walls separating filmmaking from film studies, or film studies from philosophy. Harvard’s Carpenter Center was home to myself; to Nick Browne; to Marian Keane; to Charles Warren; to Alan Cholodenko; to Vlada Petric and the Harvard Film Archive; to Robert Gardner and the Film Study Center he founded; to Gilberto Perez, for the year he was a Mellon Fellow at Harvard; to Alfred Guzzetti, whose film *Family Portrait Sitzings* (1975) was the subject of one of my first published essays; to visiting filmmakers such as Dusan Makavejev and Ross McElwee (who was to make Harvard his permanent home); and to such brilliant students as Richard Pena and Mira Nair, who took to heart the program’s vision. And Stanley Cavell was across the street in my old stomping ground, Emerson Hall. In this environment, where thought-provoking conversation was an everyday occurrence, I published numerous essays that later found their way into my second book, *The “I” of the Camera* (1988). In these writings, my commitment was, as it still is, to open myself to film’s own ways of expressing thoughts; to let each film reveal itself—and myself—to me; to allow the film to help teach me how to view it, how to think about it, how to find what I had at heart to say about it.

My goal in writing my first book, *The Murderous Gaze* (1982), was to achieve an understanding of Alfred Hitchcock’s authorship and at the same time to investigate, philosophically, the *conditions* of authorship in film. A premise and conclusion of the book is that Hitchcock’s films express serious thoughts about their medium, about themselves, about such matters as the nature and relationships of love, murder, sexuality, marriage, and theater. Thus, the book rejected and contested the view, which was then dominant within film studies, that on the basis of some theory or other we can rest assured that films cannot possibly have thoughts—that we already know, without attending to what they have to say, that they have nothing to say, that they are in the repressive grip of ideology, a grip only theory can break. And the book rejected and contested the view, also dominant then within the field, that the concept of authorship had been discredited on theoretical grounds. No writing on Hitchcock goes further than *The Murderous Gaze* in taking seriously the idea that he was an “auteur”—a master of what he called the “art of pure cinema” for whom film

was a medium of artistic self-expression. But it is an auteurist study that is also, as I've said, a philosophical investigation of the *conditions* of authorship in the medium of film. *The Murderous Gaze* does not say everything there is to say about Hitchcock's films. Far from it. But what it does say is said in a singular way and in a distinctive voice, a voice I still recognize as my own. It is the voice of the writer I have always aspired to be.

In *The Murderous Gaze*, I aspired to demonstrate something fundamental about Hitchcock's films and their place within the history of film, about film itself, and about the "art of pure cinema." To that end, I performed extended "readings," as I called them, of five characteristic Hitchcock films, following them moment by moment, shot by shot, line by line, as they unfold from beginning to end, putting into words—complemented by over six hundred frame enlargements—the thoughts inscribed in their successions of frames. The method I followed was simply to attend to the films themselves, and to the experience of viewing them, with the degree and kind of attention required to follow one's own thinking. It is a central claim of the book that Hitchcock's films have a philosophical dimension. As I put it: "Within the world of a Hitchcock film, the nature and relationships of love, murder, sexuality, marriage, and theater are at issue; these are among Hitchcock's constant themes. His treatment of these themes, however, and his understanding of the reasons film keeps returning to them, cannot be separated from his constant concern with the nature of the camera, the act of viewing a film, and filmmaking as a calling. In demonstrating something about the 'art of pure cinema,' as he liked to call it, Hitchcock's films are asserting something about themselves, something about their medium, as well as something about our existence as human beings within the world" (Rothman 1982, xi).

The Murderous Gaze was published a year after Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cavell 1981). Within film studies, both books were widely perceived, not wrongly, as incompatible with the agenda of a field that was increasingly marginalizing all alternatives to its then dominant practices. Flying under the field's radar, *The Murderous Gaze* was nonetheless widely read, and has had an impact not readily measurable in terms of public recognition within the field of film studies. Innumerable strangers have introduced themselves at conferences to tell me, privately, how strongly they wish for the field to embrace, openly, the value of writing about films in one's own voice, in words accountable to one's own experience, as *The Murderous Gaze* does.

Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, the MIT Film Section, the world's premiere training ground for cinema-vérité filmmakers, sustained the counter-cultural, anti-MIT spirit envisioned by Edward Pincus and Richard Leacock, its founders. That spirit was snuffed out when it was subsumed in 1985 by MIT's new Media Lab, which thrived on military contracts. The demise of the MIT

Film Section was virtually simultaneous with Harvard's decision, once grant support had run its course, not to fund the permanent positions its film studies program needed. And so we went our separate ways. We all kept faith with the program's vision, even as we never stopped regretting that our collective voice had been silenced—a voice that might have made a difference within the debates that continued to forge the identity, now all but unalterable, of film studies as an academic field. And so I journeyed on, to borrow a phrase from the signature song of Scottish music hall performer Harry Lawder.

I will skip over the years between 1985, when I left Harvard, and 1990, when I accepted my present position at the University of Miami, where I have been happily ensconced ever since. Those were adventurous, mind-expanding years when my wife and I traveled the world, leading the International Honors Program on Film, Television and Social Change, even as we tried to put film projects together, resulting in our writing and producing *Unni* (1989) a 35mm feature film directed in South India by the visionary Indian director G. Aravindan, and signing a contract to coproduce a film with the Shanghai Film Studio, a project the Tiananmen Square massacre aborted. Although during those years I didn't expect I would ever again (or would ever again want to) be a film studies professor, I continued to fulfill my responsibilities as editor of the Cambridge Studies in Film series. And I was moved to put together, for the series, a collection of my published and unpublished essays called *The "I" of the Camera*, to which I added a preface and pieces I wrote specifically for the book on *The Birth of a Nation*, *True Heart Susie*, *City Lights*, and *The River*. Perhaps because I had cut my ties with academic film studies, as I had earlier cut my ties with philosophy, I felt—and feel—that those essays, unencumbered by the wish to make an impression on the field, were the purest examples I had yet produced of the kind of writing I aspire to. I was not “crying in the wilderness.” I was not “crying” at all. I was simply saying what I had at heart to say to any reader who might be moved to take an interest. And that book's preface was my most lucid account of the way I write, and why it is of value to me to write that way.

This preface to *The "I" of the Camera* registered my conviction that the essays it contained challenge readers to think about film in ways responsive to the ways movies themselves think, and responsive as well to their own experience. It expressed the idea that films “speak to us in an intimate language of indirectness and silence,” and thus that if we are to speak seriously about a film “we must speak about that silence, its motivations and depths; we must speak about that to which the silence gives voice; we must give voice to that silence; we must let that silence speak for itself” (Rothman 1988, xii). My point was that, as I put it with a nod to Wittgenstein, “It is not our words, but rather the silence they achieve when they reach the limits of what words can say—a

silence within which echoes of the film's own silence can be heard—that gives voice to that which the film consigns to silence.” I added, “The border that separates language from film is also where the two touch. It is when it reaches this border that film achieves its poetry. For writing about film to reach this boundary, the poetry of film must artfully be evoked by the writing itself, by its own voices and silences” (Rothman 1988, xii).

The time had come to be a film studies professor again—only differently, this time, in the only city in the continental United States that looks a bit like the South India my wife and I had fallen in love with. I have never regretted that decision. I came close, though, when the Society for Cinema Studies (SCS; “Media” had not yet been added to its name) rejected the panel on Cavell that I proposed for its 1991 conference. I suspected that my proposal had not been judged on its merits, but had been rejected because Cavell's name had raised a red flag. I was well aware that his writings were not beholden, philosophically, to the field or its prevailing theories and, indeed, that they called radically into question views that had come to be treated as dogmas. My suspicion that panels on Cavell were blackballed, in effect, was confirmed by a member of the conference committee who swore me to secrecy. I complained so vehemently that the SCS compromised, still rejecting the Cavell panel but accepting my paper (“Cavell's Philosophy and What Film Studies Calls ‘Theory’” [1994]), which it added to a panel with the innocuous title “Film Theory II.” At the last moment, I was also added to a panel of speakers asked to make brief remarks at a plenary session devoted to the conference theme of “multiculturalism.” From that platform, I decried the hypocrisy of an organization that celebrated multiculturalism but pressured its members to speak in a single voice. “This is not the place to trace in detail the specific sequence of events that led the field of film studies up the garden path to its present situation,” I said on that occasion, “but a decisive moment was the publication, in 1971, of Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*. What made the publication of Cavell's book such a formative moment for film studies was not its reception by the field, but its all but complete nonreception.” I concluded: “To this day, the field of film studies continues to deny or avoid this book's philosophical way of thinking. Historically, the field of film studies constituted its present identity at once by turning toward ‘theory’ and turning away from philosophy.”

Evidently, my intervention touched some nerves, as I was invited the following year to be on the SCS Dissertation Committee. Of the fifteen dissertations I was given to read, fourteen described their goal as developing a Lacanian approach to film studies (the one holdout being a dissertation about films made from x-rays, a topic not amenable to a Lacanian approach, since only baby Superman would be

able to see his own mirror image with x-ray vision). No two of these dissertations explained the mirror phase in the same way. Just as the Freudian concept of the fetish had become fetishized by the field, Lacan's theory of the mirror phase had come to serve the same function within film studies that, according to the theory, the mirror image serves for the baby: it enabled the field to imagine itself as a unified subject, a reflection crafted according to its own desires.

This perfect validation of my critique of the field tickled my sense of the absurd, defused my anger, and motivated a resolution: I would resume writing, without defensiveness, the way I valued. This led to my third book, *Documentary Film Classics*, published in the Cambridge series I was still editing, in which I "read" five great documentaries in the manner of the readings in *The Murderous Gaze*.

The ending of my reading of Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1956) is a culmination of its exploration of the self-referential dimension of the film. In the eloquent shot in which the camera tracks the length of the [gas chamber] ceiling scratched and clawed by the fingernails of victims who knew this 'shower' was only a facade, who knew that their dream of dying their own death was being denied, the camera, I wrote,

. . . discovers a sign of Resnais's "self"—perhaps the only one in the film, but it only takes one. And in these telltale marks scratched and clawed in the stone as if by an artist's wounded fingers, the camera, in the present, also discovers a tangible sign—perhaps the only one it discovers, but it only takes one—of the "true dimension" of the "world of the past." In these marks in the medium of stone—and in the marks of these marks in the medium of film—the world of the past is tangible, is present to Resnais's camera. In these marks—and in the marks of these marks—the past is present, is present as past, which is the only way the past can be present in the real world. And in these marks in the medium of stone—and in the marks of these marks in the medium of film—the reality of the world of the past is restored. The present becomes the real world again, is no longer a mere image. But, as the narrator puts it, "You have to know." You have to know what *Night and Fog* enables us to know, makes it impossible for us not to know, impossible to keep pretending to ourselves that we do not know. (Rothman 1997, 68)

In writing the *Night and Fog* chapter, I did not pretend not to know what the film enables us to know. And I discovered something about this film, and something about my own authorship, that my "reading" made it impossible for me not to know:

It is a recurring idea in my writing that a number of the greatest and most influential films that have ever been made have meditated on the mysterious barrier-that-is-no-real-barrier of the movie screen, and that their meditations have led them to envision this “barrier” as magically transcended or transgressed, as *Night and Fog* does in its privileged vision of the death-camp survivor no longer separated from us by the fence that made the camp a self-contained universe. (Evidently, this is an idea that speaks precisely to me, is as definitive for my sense of myself and my project as is the image of “hands scraping stone” for Resnais.) (1997, 63)

What this passage left unsaid is that I could have taken the image of the marks made in the stone ceiling of the gas chamber by “hands scraping stone,” which Resnais took to be a sign, cut to the measure of his medium, of his own act of artistic creation, to be a sign, as well, of my own act of writing. In writing the book’s introduction, which I began after I had completed the “readings” it contains, I discovered something about all the films I had chosen, and something about my own authorship, that writing this book had made it impossible for me not to know:

All these films, as they emerge in these readings, share a common overall form or trajectory, a trajectory that (also not coincidentally) turns out to be shared by my writing as well (by each of the following readings, and by the book as a whole). All of these films assume the form of a literal and/or mythical journey in which the camera penetrates deeper and deeper into an ostensibly alien region. Upon penetrating to the heart of this region, at once a geographical and spiritual “place,” each film simply ends, in every case without envisioning a way back, as if to imply that there is no world outside this region, no reality outside the world on film. (1997, xiii)

These passages together say that *Documentary Film Classics* is a meditation on the mysterious barrier-that-is-no-real-barrier of the movie screen, and that, in transporting us to a “place” where it leaves us with no direction home, it assumes a form that mirrors the form of the films it “reads.” The same can also be said about *The Murderous Gaze*, which ends with its very dark *Psycho* chapter, followed by the even darker “Postscript.” Like these passages in *Documentary Film Classics*—and not these alone—the postscript to *The Murderous Gaze* reflects on the book’s writing. The difference is that *The Murderous Gaze*, in a Hitchcockian spirit, presents an account of its own writing that it acknowledges as a fantasy without making any claim as to that fantasy’s relationship to reality; in a Hitchcock film, that something is a fantasy doesn’t mean it isn’t also reality.

Documentary Film Classics, by contrast, claims to reveal truths about the reality of its writing. Then again, in a documentary, that something is reality doesn't mean it isn't also a fantasy.

Documentary Film Classics does not end with the *Night and Fog* chapter, however. What follows is a chapter on Richard Leacock's *A Happy Mother's Day* and a long chapter—the longest in the book—on D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*. The “place” to which *Documentary Film Classics* ultimately transports the reader is the rock music festival Pennebaker “documents” in *Monterey Pop*. Such a festival conjured a self-contained universe—America's answer to a concentration camp. In the “place” to which the book ultimately transports us, musicians and audience alike are possessed by the gloriously life-affirming spirit of the raga being improvised by Ravi Shankar and his accompanists (Alla Rakh, his regular tabla player, and tambura player Kamala Chakravarty, Shankar's partner at the time). The ending of *Documentary Film Classics* not only declares that the book had kept faith with *The Murderous Gaze*, but also acknowledges how far my writing had journeyed, the distance it had traversed from one book to the other.

The hopeful affirmation of the later book's ending does not make nonsense of the darkness of the earlier chapters or the earlier book. In ways *Documentary Film Classics* addresses, it is a logical conclusion—not necessarily the only possible one, to be sure—that the book arrives at with conviction. A main thrust of these two chapters is that, by the 1960s, the Emersonian spirit that had been ascendant in Hollywood, as it was in America, during the New Deal era had become all but completely repressed in what remained of the classical American cinema. It resurfaced, not in Hollywood movies, but in countercultural figures like Bob Dylan and in the cinema-vérité or direct cinema documentaries of filmmakers like Leacock and especially Pennebaker. Pennebaker's film about Dylan reflects on its own creation by declaring how intimately his own art is aligned with Dylan's.

Looking back on *Documentary Film Classics*, the hopeful affirmation its conclusion expresses marked its writing as another new departure for me. So is the pervasiveness throughout the book of overtly philosophical passages, adumbrated in its introduction by such paragraphs as this:

The documentaries addressed in this book, by virtue of their commitment to reality, challenge the theoretical frameworks that dominate contemporary film studies, which thus may be said to have an interest in discrediting these films, an inherent bias against them. Then what critical approaches, what terms of criticism, do these works call for if their seriousness is to be taken seriously, if their revelations are to be acknowledged? How are we to acknowledge what separates what we call “documentaries” from

what we call “fiction films” without denying what they have in common?
(What they have in common, first and foremost, is the medium of film.)
(Rothman 1997, xiv)

These were not rhetorical questions; they were challenges to myself to say, as clearly as I could, what my aspirations in writing this book were, and why I believed the book had value. This I did: “My writing aspires to exemplify the value—all but forgotten in contemporary film studies—of criticism that is rooted in experience and expressed in ordinary language, in words we hold in common, words capable of enabling us to achieve a perspective from which a clear understanding can be reached” (Rothman 1997, xiv). To be sure, my “all but forgotten in contemporary film studies” was a rebuke to the field. But it was not a rebuke to the reader, for whom I was offering as clear and straightforward an explanation as I could come up with. Hence, this is what follows: “Without knowing oneself, one cannot know what self-knowledge is. And without knowing—that is, acknowledging—our own experience of film, we cannot know the roles films play in our lives, we cannot know the reality of the world on film, we cannot know what films are.”

This passage, too, marked a new departure in my writing. It announced a commitment to understanding and explaining, again as clearly as possible, the philosophical principles I believe in, and my understanding of their value.

Film studies had reached a point—my friend and comrade-in-arms Marian Keane and I both felt—at which it could not move forward without revisiting its own history. It was clear to us that at every juncture in the field’s development, Cavell’s work had blazed a path not taken by the field, a path leading to a territory that remained to be explored. Together, Marian and I wrote *Reading Cavell’s The World Viewed* (Rothman and Keane 2000). By reading Cavell’s book the way I read films in my own books, we hoped to open the field’s eyes to a philosophical alternative to the theories that had caused film studies and philosophy, happily married in Cavell’s writings, to divorce. Wasn’t it time for their remarriage?

In a 1989 interview with James Conant, Cavell observed that the ascension of French theory was to be welcomed, because academic criticism in America “had been terribly undertheorized, much too dismissive and afraid of philosophy” (Fleming and Payne 1989, 20–34). Nonetheless, the fact that America “had to receive philosophy into the study of literature at the hands of the French” struck him as an irony and a pity, however understandable the historical forces at play, because “the price of this reception, in the context in which literary studies have shunned philosophy as practiced in America, is that what is called philosophy by departments of literature is not by American criteria simply to

be called philosophy” (Fleming and Payne 1989, 32). Between Anglo-American analytical philosophy and Continental philosophy, which edges closer to literature than to science or mathematics, there was a history of mutual ignorance, incomprehension, and distrust. By recognizing this rift within philosophy as a subject for philosophy, Cavell’s aim was to achieve a perspective from which it becomes perspicuous how intimately they have been aligned, as if they were two halves of the same mind, not opposed positions between which to choose. For Cavell, the fact that Emerson (through his great reader Nietzsche and, through Nietzsche, Heidegger; but also, I would add, through Bergson and, via Bergson, Deleuze) could be seen to underwrite the new French thought, conjoined with the fact that both traditions resist acknowledging their common ancestor and thus their kinship, intensified the irony that Americans turned to Europe to receive a philosophy that was American to begin with. And that philosophy, as received back in America, no longer recognized its American roots. “The tradition of philosophy it neglects is exactly our own,” Cavell put it, registering that it neglected both the analytical tradition represented by American philosophy departments and Emerson’s practice of philosophy (which American philosophy departments also neglected).

A recurring theme in the book Marian Keane and I wrote together is that Cavell’s *The World Viewed* takes its own writing to be inseparable from what the writing is about. In reflecting on the implications of the self-reflexive dimension of Cavell’s writing, we invoked his observation, in the same 1989 interview, that “[p]hilosophy at all moments answerable to itself. If there is any place at which the human spirit allows itself to be under its own question, indeed, that allows that questioning to happen is philosophy” (Fleming and Payne 1989, 66). The central thrust of our reading of *The World Viewed* as a whole is that its writing is at every moment “answerable to itself,” that it is a “place at which the human spirit allows itself to be under its own question,” that Cavell’s book about film is philosophy.

Reading Cavell’s The World Viewed promised a companion volume: a retrospective of Cavell’s writings on film, apart from his books, in the years between the publication of *World Viewed* and our book about it. *Cavell on Film* (2005), which I edited and for which I wrote the introduction, was that volume—and more, since it also contained many pieces written between 2000 and 2005. The idea of such a collection wasn’t Cavell’s; he had never chosen to segregate his writings on film in this way. Nor did I wish to suggest that Cavell’s writings on film stood apart in their concerns, or in their standing as philosophy, from his other writings. In my introduction to the volume, I quoted Cavell’s remark, in a 1999 Sorbonne colloquium organized by the philosopher Sandra Laugier, that the study of film cannot be a “worthwhile human enterprise” if it “isolates

itself”—as the academic field had largely done—“from the kind of criticism Walter Benjamin had in mind when he argued, as Cavell paraphrases him, that ‘what establishes a work as art is its ability to inspire and sustain criticism of a certain sort, criticism that seeks to articulate the work’s idea; what cannot be so criticized is not art’” (Rothman 2005, xxvi). In my introduction, I also quoted another of Cavell’s remarks at the same colloquium (a remark I have since found myself invoking more than once), that thinking about film had an effect on his “ambitions for philosophical prose” and had left “permanent marks” on the way he wrote—in particular, the “necessity to become evocative in capturing the moods of faces and motions and settings, in their double existence as transient and as permanent” (Cavell and Rothman, xxiii). This remark resonates with a passage from Cavell’s 1983 essay “The Thought of Movies” that I have also had more than one occasion to quote:

Every art, every worthwhile human enterprise, has its poetry, ways of doing things that perfect the possibilities of the enterprise itself, make it the one it is. I understand it to be a natural vision of film that every motion and station, in particular every human posture and gesture, however glancing, has its poetry, or you may say its lucidity. Any of the arts will be drawn to this knowledge, this perception of the poetry of the ordinary, but film, I would like to say, democratizes the knowledge, hence at once blesses and curses us with it. It says that the perception of poetry is as open to all, regardless of birth or talent, as the ability is to hold a camera on a subject, so that a failure so to perceive, to persist in missing the subject, which may amount to missing the evanescence of the subject, is ascribable only to ourselves, as if to fail to trace the implications of things requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves. (cited in Rothman 2005, xxvi)

I ended my introduction with this: “Marrying philosophy and film studies, the writings gathered in the present collection do not miss the poetry of either subject, and thinking about film emerges as a worthwhile human enterprise, indeed. In these writings, the study of film achieves its own poetry, its own ‘ways of doing things that perfect the possibilities of the enterprise itself, make it the one it is’” (Cavell and Rothman, xxvii). In thus defining Cavell’s achievement, I was also defining my own aspiration as a writer. I do not wish to “coarsen and stupefy myself.” Do you?

The foreword I wrote for the expanded second edition of *The “I” of the Camera* (2004) expressed my hope that the book would no longer meet with the same kind and degree of resistance I had anticipated in the book’s original preface. After all, the reign of “theory” over film studies had ended, I said in the

new foreword, hoping that I wasn't whistling in the dark. The foreword, echoing the original preface, registered my conviction that the essays it contained challenged readers to think about film in ways responsive to their own experience, and responsive as well to the ways films themselves think. How films think is a question every essay addresses.

In his 1980 essay "*North by Northwest*," Cavell writes, "What I found in turning to think consecutively about film a dozen or so years ago was a medium which seemed simultaneously to be free of the imperative to philosophy and at the same time inevitably to reflect upon itself—as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition" (Cavell and Rothman, xxii). Film seemed to Cavell to be "free of the imperative to philosophy" insofar as it had been able to avoid for so long the fate of modernism—the situation in which, as he understood it, an art has no choice but to be, like philosophy, "answerable to itself," to be "under its own question." A traditional art, such as painting, for example, only brought itself "under its own question" when painters such as Manet found that they could no longer make paintings they believed in, believed in *as* paintings, without breaking radically with the very tradition they wished to keep alive. It was no longer natural, as it were, for the art to be true to its nature. What enabled film to remain comfortable for so long with its own tradition, Cavell's essay suggests, is that being "under its own question" *was* film's tradition. That film is a "moving image of skepticism," as he put it in "*More of The World Viewed* (1974), opens one path to reflecting on why this is so. Another such path is opened by the idea, expressed in "What Becomes of Things on Film?" (see Rothman 2005), that things and people filmed by the movie camera participate actively in the creation of their own film images.

In any case, if it is in the nature of the art of film to be "under its own question," it is natural for a film's "idea" to be, at one level, an idea about its own art, about the conditions of its medium that make it possible for film to be an art. For writing to articulate a film's idea, it must be "under its own question," too. That is why it is necessary for film studies to be married to philosophy if it is not to exclude the kind of criticism without which it cannot be a "worthwhile human enterprise." Film criticism is philosophy when it achieves its own poetry by acknowledging the poetry of film.

In 2003, the first part of the "philosophical memoir" Cavell had begun appeared in *Critical Inquiry* under the title "Excerpts from Memory" (2003). This was to be the subtitle of *Little Did I Know* (2010), the book he completed and published several years later. In telling the story of his life, Cavell's aspiration was to compose "a philosopher's or writer's autobiography, which, like Wordsworth's *Prelude* (quality aside), tells the writer's story of the life out of which he came to be a (his kind of) writer." Wordsworth showed, the passage goes

on, that his story of how he came to be his kind of poet “had to be told in poetry—or rather showed that the telling of that story was the making of poetry. To do something analogous to that work, I would have to show that telling the accidental, anonymous, in a sense posthumous, days of my life is the making of philosophy” (Cavell 2010, 5). Because our memories of movies are “strand over strand” with memories of our lives, as he put it in the opening sentence of *The World Viewed*, Cavell found it necessary, in undertaking to write the story of the life out of which he became the philosopher he was, to evoke every moment with such concrete particularity that the resulting memoir reads like a screenplay. How else could he have learned, and taught, that the story of a life *could* be written in a way that made philosophy?

For Wittgenstein, philosophy’s goal is to bring philosophy to an end. For Cavell, too, philosophy is inescapably concerned with endings. In writing *The World Viewed*, he brought to an end the period of his life in which going to the movies was a regular part of his week. In *Little Did I Know*, he told the story of the period of his life that ended when he completed *The Claim of Reason* (Cavell 1979a), in which he declared his existence as the only kind of writer, the only kind of philosopher who could have written such a book (or could have wanted to). In writing *Little Did I Know*, too, Cavell brought to an end a period of his life—the period that began where the story the book tells ends, the period in which he fully yielded to his longing for philosophy. Writing the book that tells this story is inseparable from the story it tells. In this writing, Cavell was as committed as ever to “walking in the direction of the unattained but attainable self,” to borrow another of Emerson’s felicitous formulations. But Cavell’s way of moving forward was now by looking back. In telling this story, he brought its meaning home. His “philosophical memoir” is not only “under its own question;” it finds the answer it is seeking. For Cavell, philosophy had achieved its end.

I kept journeying on.



Although it was far from my main focus after publishing *The Murderous Gaze*, I did write several new essays on Hitchcock. Two were included in *The “I” of the Camera* when it was published in 1988. Two more were among the essays added to the second edition. All these essays expanded on ideas articulated in *The Murderous Gaze*. This was also the case with “Blood is Thicker than Water: The Family in Hitchcock” (2008), which is included in the present volume. Then, quite unexpectedly, I found myself again thinking almost obsessively about Hitchcock, pushing my thoughts in a new direction. When I learned that *The*

Murderous Gaze was going out of print, theorist and editor extraordinaire Murray Pomerance invited me to submit an expanded edition for the Horizons of Cinema series he edits for the State University of New York Press.

In this period, my thinking about Hitchcock and about Cavell were converging in a new way, and converging as well with a new attention to Emerson, and to the approach to morality that in his later writings Cavell named “Emersonian perfectionism.” My attention to Emerson was motivated by Cavell’s readings of Emerson texts and my own encounters with his writings that went back to the NEH Summer Institute on Emerson that I attended in 2003. That Emersonian perfectionism provides a key to thinking about the director’s work was a central theme in my new writings about Hitchcock; and in “Silence and Stasis” (2012a), an overtly philosophical study of the conditions of film criticism; and in “Why Not Realize Your World? Philosopher/Film Scholar William Rothman Interviewed by Jeffrey Crouse” (Crouse 2012).

For the new edition of *The Murderous Gaze* (2012), I wrote a chapter that follows *Marnie* from beginning to end in the manner of the five original readings. As I put it in the foreword to the new edition:

The resulting reading is, in a sense, co-authored by my young self and my present self. I don’t want to call my present self “old.” The experience of collaborating on this chapter with my former self has made me feel like Bob Dylan when he sang, “Ah, I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” I was pleasantly surprised to discover how ready my young and younger selves were to collaborate with each other. Evidently, they had a lot in common. They also had their friendly disagreements. (2012, xiv)

The new chapter on *Marnie* turned out to be even longer than the *Psycho* chapter. One reason was that almost a half-century after its release *Marnie* still stood in need of defending. No one these days doubts the stature of *Vertigo* or *Psycho*. But although *Marnie* has its supporters, it remains widely denigrated. A serious defense of *Marnie*, I felt, required establishing what is singular, unprecedented, about it. One way *Marnie* was unprecedented, I argued, resides in the altered role it accords the camera. As I put it in the new foreword: “At every moment the camera is doing *something* to elucidate the characters’ thoughts, feelings and moods even as it reminds us of the singular way the world on film is at once present and absent, real and unreal” (2012, xiv). In *Marnie*, the camera’s relationship to the characters “is at every moment so intimate that all its revelations of their thoughts and feelings and moods are also revelations about the camera, about the ‘art of pure cinema’” (xv). Because in *Marnie* the camera

is declaring itself in everything it does, and because it is doing something meaningful at every moment, I felt the need to attend closely to every sequence, not only the passages—surprisingly few—in which the camera performs the virtuoso gestures that abound in other Hitchcock films.

A second way that *Marnie* is unprecedented is the film's profusion of dialogue. In his book-length interview with François Truffaut, Hitchcock spoke mockingly of "talking heads" as uncinematic. No one knew better than Hitchcock, however, how to turn great conversation into great cinema. When heads talk like Mark and Marnie in *Marnie* (that is, like Sean Connery and Tippi Hedren, speaking lines written by Jay Presson Allen, as directed by Alfred Hitchcock, placed in settings designed by Robert Boyle, photographed by Robert Burks, edited by George Tomasini, and accompanied by music composed by Bernard Herrmann), and when the camera attends to their conversation with the precision necessary to follow their thoughts and capture their moods, the result is a triumph of the "art of pure cinema."

Hitchcock makes it look so easy! But it was a daunting challenge to convey in prose—even complemented by hundreds of frame enlargements—the poetry *Marnie* achieves at every moment, not least in its dialogue sequences. Take away its poetry, and the film would have little to say, little to teach, about the "art of pure cinema" or about anything else.

For my reading of *Marnie* to reach what in *The "I" of the Camera* I called "the border that separates language from film," the writing itself, its own voices and silences, had to artfully evoke the film's poetry. As I put it in that book's preface (and reiterated in my essay "Silence and Stasis" [2012a]), "Such writing perceives film—a medium limited to surfaces, to the outer, the visible—as also a medium of mysterious depths, of the inner, the invisible. The moods the writing expresses, and casts, are themselves colored by the moods of faces and motions and settings it evokes. When those moods resonate with the film's moods, writing about film attains its own poetry." Take away whatever poetry it has achieved, and my chapter would have little to say, little to teach.

In the Introduction to the first edition of *The Murderous Gaze*, I observed that I could imagine the readings engendering the sense that Hitchcock's work ended where it began, that from *The Lodger* to *Marnie* and beyond, his philosophical position never changed, as if, to paraphrase the immortal words of Norman Bates, who knows whereof he speaks, Hitchcock was in his own private trap within which, for all he scratched and clawed, he never budged an inch. When I wrote *The Murderous Gaze*, I recognized that a tension between two incompatible worldviews ran through his work. *The Murderous Gaze* argued that the inevitability of being suspended between these positions was Hitchcock's position. And yet, in the original five readings, dark moods intensify until they

climax in the last pages of the *Psycho* chapter and the melancholy postscript I began writing the day I heard that Hitchcock had died. By the time I wrote the chapter on *Marnie*, I had become aware that I had favored the dark side of Hitchcock's split artistic identity, the aspect encapsulated in the Oscar Wilde line he loved to quote: "Yet each man kills the thing he loves." In my reading of *Marnie*, my intention was to balance the scales.

When I wrote *The Murderous Gaze*, I had no name for the affirmative side of Hitchcock's artistic identity, or a historical or philosophical context in which to place it. Enter "Emersonian perfectionism." For Cavell, Emersonian perfectionism is not a theory of moral philosophy comparable to Kant's view that there is a universal moral law by which we can rationally determine whether an action is right or wrong, or Mill's view that the good action is that which will cause the greatest good, or the least harm, for the greatest number. Instead, moral perfectionism in general is an outlook or register of thought, a way of thinking about morality expressed thematically in certain works of philosophy, literature, and film, that takes it to be our primary task as human beings to realize our humanity within a world with other people in it. The questions that couples in remarriage comedies address in their witty give-and-take are *moral* questions, as Cavell argues in his magisterial late book *Cities of Words* (2004). But they are "formulated less well by questions concerning what they ought to do, what it would be best or right for them to do, than by the question how they shall live their lives, what kind of persons they aspire to be" (2004, 54).

The 39 Steps followed the lead of *It Happened One Night* by ending with the union of a man and woman that holds a hope of being a relationship worth having. In turn, the films Hitchcock made in the few years remaining before his departure for Hollywood followed the lead of *The 39 Steps* by aligning themselves with comedies of remarriage—but only up to a point. Hitchcock could not bring himself simply to embrace the American genre's Emersonian outlook because he was equally attracted to the idea that we are fated to kill the thing we love. In *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?: Emersonian Perfectionism and the Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (2014), my central thesis is that Hitchcock's ambivalence toward Emersonian perfectionism, compounded by his ambivalence toward overcoming or transcending that ambivalence, was the driving force of his work. The book discerns in the vicissitudes of his ambivalence a progression from his British thrillers to his earliest American films (made when the Emersonian moral outlook was beginning to suffer repression in Hollywood); to his wartime films; to his postwar films; to his masterpieces of the 1950s, culminating in *The Wrong Man*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest*; to *Psycho*; to *The Birds*; and ultimately to *Marnie*, in which—I claim, recapitulating the argument of the reading of *Marnie* I wrote for the new edition of *The Murderous Gaze*—Hitchcock overcame or

transcended his ambivalence and embraced the Emersonian perfectionism he had always also resisted.

To embrace Emersonian perfectionism, as *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?* claims Hitchcock finally did, means, in part, to abandon oneself to the view that, as Emerson puts it in “Circles,” “Every action admits of being outdone,” that “life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning.” It is a defining feature of the Emerson essay that it draws a circle around the essays that came before it, a circle around which another circle can be drawn (by another essay that succeeds it). *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?* argues that this is a defining feature of the Hitchcock film as well. Looking back from the Emersonian perspective that I believe *Marnie* achieves, it is possible to perceive the Hitchcock thrillers that preceded it as leading up to it. *Marnie* draws Hitchcock’s largest circle.

“People wish to be settled, but only insofar as they are unsettled is there any hope for them,” Emerson writes in “Circles.” Writing about *Marnie* for the new edition of *The Murderous Gaze* brought home to me how unsettled my thoughts about Hitchcock had become in the years since I wrote the original five readings. In those years, I was in almost daily conversation with Cavell. And yet, in retrospect, I could see that as much as I had been drawn to philosophy as practiced by Cavell, and by Emerson before him, I had also been as drawn as Hitchcock was to the idea that we’re in private traps from which we’re powerless to escape, and that we’re fated to kill the thing we love. In writing *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?*, which retraced the trajectory of Hitchcock’s career in a manner meant to balance the scales, I found, happily, that, as I put it in the introduction, “the Moving Finger, having writ, tilted the scales in favor of the Emersonian perfectionism I find myself no longer resisting” (30). I had become an Emersonian perfectionist. *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?* draws a circle around the circle I had drawn when I wrote *The Murderous Gaze*.

Must We Kill the Thing We Love? is about Hitchcock, not Emerson. The chapters that comprise the body of the book invoke Emerson’s name only occasionally, and usually in the context of reflections on the Hitchcock thriller’s relationship to the Hollywood genres Cavell has shown to be exemplary of Emersonian perfectionism, or in reflecting on the reflections, which run throughout Hitchcock’s oeuvre, motivated by the question, “What, if anything, justifies killing another human being?” Hitchcock thrillers, in their darkness, may well seem—in a sense they *are*—further removed from Emerson’s way of thinking—not that the “Sage of Concord” was a stranger to dark thoughts—than comedies of remarriage. And yet, my guiding intuition was that *as authors* Hitchcock and Emerson had profound affinities. In the course of writing *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?*, I came to