

A Plea for Intention: Stanley Cavell and Ordinary Aesthetic Philosophy

[J.L.] Austin, in a seminar discussion at Harvard in 1955, once compared the role of intending with the role of headlights [...]. An implication he may have had in mind is that driving somewhere (getting something done intentionally) does not on the whole happen by hanging a pair of headlights from your shoulders, sitting in an armchair, picking up an unattached steering wheel, and imagining a destination. (Though this is not unlike situations in which W.C. Fields has found himself) [...]. Even if some theorists speak as though intention were everything there is to meaning, is that a sensible reason for opposite theorists to assert that intention is nothing, counts for nothing, in meaning? Is W.C. Fields our only alternative to Humpty Dumpty? (Cavell [1986] 1988: 117)

In 1967, Roland Barthes published a brief polemic entitled 'The Death of the Author'. Taking the baton from the New Critics of the mid-20th Century, Barthes sought to provide philosophical justification for a paradigm shift in aesthetics away from author-based criticism.¹ From a historical perspective, this incendiary tract marks a significant moment in the history of aesthetic philosophy. Situated alongside the work of Jacques Derrida, who at this time was setting about



'deconstructing' his white whale, which he referred to as the 'metaphysics of presence' ([1967] 1997), and Michel Foucault, who was carrying on about how 'the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse' ([1969] 1979: 28), Barthes' effort in 'The Death of the Author' to deconstruct aesthetic philosophy and strip authors of their roles as the creators of artworks was the decisive blow in what the literary critic E.D. Hirsch characterised as the 'heavy and largely

victorious assault [throughout the 20th Century] on the sensible belief that a text means what its author meant' (1967: 1).

Having critiqued this philosophical and aesthetic legacy elsewhere (Barrowman 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b), in what follows, I will return to this revolutionary moment in the history of aesthetic philosophy in order to explore a path not taken. At the same time that Barthes was trying to take the concept of authorship off the critical table once and for all, Stanley Cavell was trying to redirect scholarly attention

to it. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, Cavell's anachronistic 1967 essay 'A Matter of Meaning It' was largely ignored by scholars of the day. More surprising is the fact that, still to this day, at a time when Cavell has become a canonical reference point in film studies, literary criticism, and aesthetic philosophy more broadly, the profound insights contained in this provocative essay have remained unexamined.² In an effort to redress this neglect, my goal in what follows will be to situate 'A Matter of Meaning It' at the heart of Cavell's aesthetic philosophy. To do so, I will explicate Cavell's ideas and arguments in and beyond 'A Matter of Meaning It' vis-à-vis authorship and critical practice, which significantly coalesce in an extended thought experiment inspired by Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), toward the goals of demonstrating the probative value of author-based criticism on the one hand and pointing the way toward an 'ordinary aesthetic philosophy' on the other (cf. Cavell 1996b, 2004).

To begin, it is worth mentioning that 'A Matter of Meaning It' was not written in a vacuum. Quite the opposite. In 1965, as part of the Proceedings of the 1965 Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy, Cavell joined Monroe C. Beardsley and Joseph Margolis to discuss, principally, music. In 1967, these Proceedings were published under the title *Art, Mind, and Religion* (Capitan and Merrill 1967). Cavell's contribution to the Proceedings was an essay entitled 'Music Discomposed' ([1967a] 1976). This essay served as the initial grist for the philosophical mill. Beardsley and Margolis each responded to what Cavell had to say, and their responses provided Cavell with the material and the directions for what became 'A Matter of Meaning It'. In the first two sections of his response essay, Cavell takes time first to clarify his ideas and arguments from 'Music Discomposed' and then to catalogue some misapprehensions, problematic assumptions, etc., on the parts of Beardsley and Margolis. In the third section, however, by far the longest section of the essay, Cavell uses Beardsley's remarks as an occasion to take a substantial detour on the subject of authorial intention, a detour which importantly brings him into the realm not merely of aesthetic criticism generally but of film criticism specifically.

In his response to Cavell's musings on music, Beardsley took the opportunity to elaborate a conception of 'musical

worth' absent any notion of authorship; as he explained, his conception of 'musical worth' bespeaks 'patterns of inner relationship that give [a particular piece of music] shape' (1967: 109). Cavell objects to this conception on the grounds that 'one can find' such vague things as 'patterns of inner relationship' in virtually anything, from 'hand claps' to 'feet taps' to 'the sound of spoons tinkling'. These things, Cavell contends, 'may be *related* to music in various ways', that is, they may be musical, but they are *not*, strictly speaking, *music*, for 'what is missing' from Beardsley's conception of 'musical worth' (and his implicit conception of aesthetic worth more broadly) is 'the *point*' of the piece of music in question (and, implicitly, of any given artwork). Hence Cavell's charge that, in Beardsley's critical practice, artworks are erroneously regarded 'as more or less like a physical object, whereas the first fact of works of art is that they are meant' ([1967b] 1976: 227-228). Cavell supports this charge by adducing Beardsley and W.K. Wimsatt Jr.'s contention in their landmark essay 'The Intentional Fallacy' that judging an artwork 'is like judging a pudding or a machine [...]'. [A given artwork] *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what [was] intended or meant' (Beardsley and Wimsatt Jr. 1946: 469).³ This as opposed to Cavell's contention that an artwork is, 'whatever else it is [...] an *utterance*' ([1967b] 1976: 228). Thus, to Cavell's mind, *contra* Beardsley and Wimsatt Jr., first, the existence of artworks (that is, their being what and as they are) is by no means simple, and, second, artworks (insofar as they are intentionally made by individuals to communicate ideas) do not merely invite or allow for investigations of intention, they require such investigations.⁴

On this point, Cavell is aware that to speak in this register – that is, to conceive of art as a medium in which individuals, call them authors, communicate ideas, on the one hand, and to conceive of aesthetic criticism as the investigation of authors' intentions toward the goal of understanding and evaluating (*their*) artworks, on the other – is to reject the quasi-Kantian conception of artworks as being uniquely 'without purpose' and hence available to us for us to do with as we please, a conception which has buttressed countless nonsensical arguments against author-based criticism.⁵ This, however, does not perturb Cavell; he simply asks (primarily Beardsley

but secondarily anyone for whom criticism is important) if there is 'any reason other than philosophical possession which should prevent us from saying, what seems most natural to say, that [aesthetic criticism involves] discover[ing] the artist's intention in a work' ([1967b] 1976: 225). In what remains of his essay, Cavell does not find any valid reasons which should prevent us from saying this. Moreover, three decades after the publication of 'A Matter of Meaning It', by the time that he was writing about classical Hollywood melodramas in his book *Contesting Tears*, Cavell still had not found any valid reasons. As he explains with reference to his practice of referring to the 'signatures' of authors in the course of analysing films:

As long as a reference to a director by name suggests differences between the films associated with that name and ones associated with other such names, the reference is, so far as I can see, intellectually grounded. It may be intellectually thin in a given instance. But that is more or less pitiable, not a matter for metaphysical alarm. (1996a: 8-9)⁶

In other words, as far as Cavell was concerned, there are no valid reasons for being sceptical of author-based criticism. Yet, if this 'most natural', or ordinary, conception of aesthetic criticism – namely, as, whatever else it is, the investigation of authorial intention – is so commonsensical, one may wonder, as I certainly have, why it is not more common in scholarly circles. This leads precisely to the ideas of 'philosophical possession' and 'metaphysical alarm'. Significantly, the manner in which Cavell responds to philosophical possession in 'A Matter of Meaning It' and metaphysical alarm in *Contesting Tears* is indebted to the manner in which J.L. Austin responded to 'philosophical worries' in *Sense and Sensibilia* (Austin 1962). Austin, of course, was not only the foremost practitioner of what became known first as 'Oxford philosophy' and later as 'ordinary language philosophy', he was also an influential teacher of Cavell's during Cavell's time as a student at Harvard in the 1950s. Methodologically, Cavell was and remained throughout his career an ordinary language philosopher through and through (cf. Barrowman 2019a, 2020), and, in 'A Matter of Meaning It', Cavell significantly follows in the methodological footsteps of his teacher.

In *Sense and Sensibilia*, Austin set about interrogating the prevailing position on sense-perception – in particular,

the position that ‘we never see or otherwise perceive (or “sense”), or anyhow we never *directly* perceive or sense, material objects (or material things), but only sense-data (or our own ideas, impressions, *sensa*, sense-perceptions, percepts, etc.)’ (1962: 2) – in order to prove that this ‘typically *scholastic* view’ (3) presents not a riddle to be solved, not a question to be answered, not even an argument to be refuted, but rather, a conception in need of revision (4). As Austin explained:

There is no simple way of [encouraging conceptual revision]. [...] It is a matter of unpicking, one by one, a mass of seductive (mainly verbal) fallacies, of exposing a wide variety of concealed motives – an operation which leaves us, in a sense, just where we began. In a sense – but actually we may hope to learn something positive in the way of a technique for dissolving philosophical worries [...]. [For] there is nothing so plain boring as the constant repetition of assertions that are not true, and sometimes not even faintly sensible; if we can reduce this a bit, it will be all to the good. (1962: 4-5)

Analogously, in ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, Cavell sets about interrogating the prevailing (‘typically *scholastic*’) position on authorial intention in aesthetic criticism – in particular, the position that, in aesthetic criticism, we never will encounter and should never try to discover, or anyhow we never will *directly* encounter and should never try to *directly* discover, authorial intentions in artworks, but instead only construct subjective interpretations of artworks (based on our own ideas, impressions, desires, convictions, biases, etc.) – in order to unpick a mass of seductive fallacies relating to notions of intention and meaning. This operation leaves him, in a sense, just where he began, namely, with the common sense, or ordinary, conceptions of authorial intention and aesthetic criticism. But only in a sense. For, through Cavell’s efforts in ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, we may learn something positive in the way of dissolving philosophical worries (or exorcising philosophical possession, or silencing metaphysical alarm, etc.) in relation to notions of intention and meaning, and thereby encourage conceptual revision vis-à-vis authorship and criticism.

For an illustrative example of Cavell’s investigative method in ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, an example which illustrates the

influence on Cavell’s philosophical practice not only of Austin but also of Ludwig Wittgenstein, in particular Wittgenstein’s fondness for developing arguments through conversations with imagined interlocutors, consider Cavell’s rehearsal of an exchange between himself and an imagined interlocutor on the subject of Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ (1867):

I will be told that it is not Mr. Arnold speaking to us, but a mask of Arnold speaking to...anyway not to us: we don’t so much hear his words as overhear them. That explains something. But it does not explain our responsibility in overhearing, in *listening*: nor his in speaking, knowing he’s overheard, and meaning to be. What it neglects is that we are to *accept* the words, or refuse them; wish for them, or betray them [...]. What is called for is our acknowledgment that we are implicated, or our rejection of the implication. In dreams begin responsibilities? In listening begins evasion. (Cavell [1967b] 1976: 229)

This is a decidedly productive exchange. First, Cavell unpicks a fallacy, which his imagined interlocutor proffers in the following form: In the course of analysing a given artwork, such as ‘Dover Beach’, we never (indeed, we *cannot*) encounter the author; rather, what we encounter is some sort of authorial mask, or stand-in, or facsimile, or projection, etc. To Cavell’s mind, ‘this explains something’. What does it explain? For one thing, it explains, epistemologically, *where* opponents of author-based criticism go wrong, namely, in the belief that it is impossible to encounter or discover the intentions of authors. At best, this is a faulty generalisation. With respect to film, for instance, particularly in this day and age, when filmmakers regularly record audio commentaries for DVD and Blu-ray releases of their films in the course of which they often explain their creative processes at length and in detail – to say nothing of the preponderance of interviews and roundtables, podcasts, screening Q&As, etc. – the opportunities to encounter and discover the intentions of authors are so abundant that the sceptical conclusion that it is impossible to do so is an almost comical nonstarter.⁷ For another thing, it explains, ethically, *why* opponents of author-based criticism go wrong, namely, in an attempt to evade, for whatever reason(s), the responsibility of acknowledging authors (cf. Cavell 1979: 329-496; see also Cavell [1969a, 1969b] 1976). So patently ludicrous is the

sceptical conclusion that it is impossible to discover authorial intentions that to want to jump to this conclusion indicates, à la Austin, the presence of a concealed motive, namely, the desire to deny ‘the human being’s absolute responsibility for the intentions and consequences of his actions’ (Cavell [1971] 1979: 188), which manifests in the aesthetic realm in ‘the absolute responsibility of the artist for the actions and assertions in his work’ (188) on the one hand and ‘our responsibility [in aesthetic criticism] for *claiming* something to be so’ (Cavell 1979: 216) on the other.

Nevertheless, the takeaway for Cavell vis-à-vis scepticism in any realm, aesthetic or otherwise, is not that it is ‘incoherent’, or that it has ‘incoherent presuppositions’, for this is so obvious that it is hardly worth mentioning; rather, the takeaway is that scepticism ‘does not *begin* incoherently’, that ‘it is not clear [prior to investigation] that any given [or which particular] step is avoidable’ ([1967b] 1976: 257). From this perspective, Cavell’s philosophical orientation is more Wittgensteinian than it is Austinian. If Austin’s philosophical project can be thought of as, for lack of a better term, a ‘defense of the ordinary’, that is, as an attempt to prove that there are no valid reasons to search for concepts beyond our ordinary array of concepts in the already ‘rich and subtle [...] field [of] ordinary language’ (Austin [1957] 1961: 130), Wittgenstein’s philosophical project can be thought of as, for lack of a better term, an ‘investigation of the extraordinary’, that is, as an attempt to understand the motivations of people who find it necessary for whatever reason(s) on whatever occasion(s) to search for concepts beyond our ordinary array of concepts, to try, as Wittgenstein described it, to ‘sublime’ the logic of ordinary language (Wittgenstein [1949] 2009: 46e-48e). Both Wittgenstein and Austin agree that, in Wittgenstein’s formulation, our ordinary ‘forms of expression’ can ‘send us in pursuit of chimeras’ and can ‘prevent us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing extraordinary is involved’ ([1949] 2009: 48e). They differ insofar as Austin’s concern was to exclude those chimeras from philosophy, whereas Wittgenstein considered a crucial aspect of philosophy to be investigating the terrain covered in pursuits of chimeras (cf. Cavell [1993] 1995: 58-61, 2004: 17).

This Wittgensteinian spirit was very much alive in Cavell's work; he, too, was keen to investigate the terrain covered in such pursuits, including in the field of aesthetics. For, as Cavell maintained, effectively synthesising Wittgenstein and Austin, any 'formidable' defence of any given 'ordinary' proposition must be more compelling than the sceptical argument against it, but in order to prove that said ordinary proposition is more compelling than its sceptical counterpart, it is necessary to give scepticism a proper hearing ([1969a] 1976: 257). Hence the second thought experiment conducted in 'A Matter of Meaning It' in relation to Fellini's *La Strada*. Throughout his essay, in relation to several different issues relevant to aesthetic criticism, Cavell discourses with imagined interlocutors on the myriad ontological, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic implications / ramifications of various grammatical formulations vis-à-vis authorship. This is evidence of Cavell's inheritance of Wittgensteinian philosophical investigation. Just as Wittgenstein did before him, Cavell uses imagined interlocutors to specify occasions on which one may be prevented from seeing that nothing extraordinary is involved in the ordinary phenomenon in question, to give voice to the reasons why one may be inclined to go off in pursuit of a chimera – in short, to steelman rather than strawman scepticism.

In the context of this second thought experiment, Cavell and his imagined interlocutor discourse on authorial intention and film criticism. To begin his thought experiment, Cavell states that, as he understands *La Strada*, 'it is a version of the story of Philomel: the Giulietta Masina figure is virtually speechless, she is rudely forced, she tells her change by playing the trumpet, one tune over and over which at the end fills the deserted beach and whose purity at last attacks her barbarous king' ([1967b] 1976: 230). This is an example of, in Cavellian terminology, an 'act of criticism' ([1971] 1979: 219), an instance of his taking the aesthetic responsibility for claiming something to be so. But what if Cavell wanted to know if it *actually is* so? That is, what if Cavell wanted to know if Fellini *intended* his film to be a version of Philomel? On this point, Cavell imagines different scenarios. In one, he simply asks Fellini directly if he intended *La Strada* to be a version of Philomel and Fellini affirms it. In another, he asks Fellini but Fellini denies it. In this latter scenario, Cavell admits that his

'conviction' in his sense that *La Strada* is a version of Philomel is 'so strong' that, in asking Fellini about his intentions, he 'would not so much be looking for confirmation' as he would be 'inquiring whether [Fellini] had recognized this fact about his work', so that, even if Fellini denied it, he would not 'take [Fellini's] word against [his own] conviction' ([1967b] 1976: 230).

This, to Cavell's mind, is the point where scepticism gains a foothold; it is also, therefore, the point where an imagined interlocutor arrives on the scene. Having admitted that he would stand by his own interpretive conviction even against the author's word, Cavell avers that 'one may ask: "Doesn't this simply prove what those who deny the relevance of intention have always said? What is decisive is what is there, not what the artist intended"', but he clarifies that, actually, what this proves is that 'a particular formulation of the problem of intention has been accepted' ([1967b] 1976: 230). His imagined interlocutor is not satisfied by that response, however, so the interlocutor continues pressing: "But you admit that Fellini may not have known, or may not find relevant, the connection with Philomel", which, his interlocutor alleges, is to admit precisely that "what [Fellini] knew and what he intended are irrelevant to our response. It is what he has *done* that matters". To this, Cavell replies that 'it is exactly to find out what someone has done, what he is responsible for, that one investigates his intentions' ([1967b] 1976: 230-231).

As should be evident, Cavell's argumentative procedure here is not to refute or to counter his imagined interlocutor's sceptical arguments. Instead, Cavell is trying, after Austin, to encourage conceptual revision, that is, he is trying to get his imagined interlocutor, after Wittgenstein, to 'see an aspect' of the issue to which he is currently blind (cf. Wittgenstein [1949] 2009: 224e-225e). First, by stressing the importance of the investigation of intentions in determining what someone has done, Cavell is encouraging his interlocutor to check the premise that 'what someone has done' and 'what someone intended' are so conveniently and neatly separable, that there can never under any circumstances be any relevant connection whatsoever between the two, let alone that the one, namely, intention, is never and can never be relevant in any context. Second, by claiming that the issue of 'what someone

has done' versus 'what someone intended' indicates that 'a particular formulation of the problem of intention has been accepted', Cavell is encouraging his interlocutor to check the premise that 'what someone intended' is a sensible locution only if by 'intention' is meant *conscious and explicit* intention, quite as if short of Fellini walking up and gathering his cast and crew, telling them explicitly, 'The film that we are going to make is my version of Philomel', and then setting out with the express purpose of realising his version of Philomel, to say that 'Fellini meant to realise with *La Strada* a version of Philomel' can have no sense whatsoever.

The relevance and utility of Cavell's musings on this point extend far beyond just the case of Fellini and *La Strada*. For instance, in my own critical practice, in the course of preparing to analyse the crime drama *Collateral* (Michael Mann, 2004) nearly a decade ago (Barrowman 2011), I opted to watch the film while listening to the audio commentary track recorded by Michael Mann for the DVD release. In so doing, I came to realise that my understanding of a key moment in the film's major action set-piece did not align with Mann's stated intention behind the scene. Though at first this appeared to be quite the impasse, one which all but invited a sceptical conclusion, it became clear to me soon enough that the source of the problem was my faulty conception of intention, namely, referring back to Cavell's imagined interlocutor, the (mis) conception of intention as conscious and explicit intention. In other words, in the course of my confrontation with Mann, I was able to avoid succumbing to scepticism by simply revising my conception of authorial intention.

In brief, *Collateral* follows Vincent (Tom Cruise), a contract killer, as he forces Max (Jamie Foxx), a Los Angeles cab driver, to drive him around the city all night while he kills five Federal witnesses set to testify against a drug lord named Felix (Javier Bardem). Additionally, as the story unfolds, we come to learn that part of Vincent's M.O. is not merely to get cabbies to drive him around cities to his targets' locations, he ultimately kills and frames the cabbies for the murders that he commits. While this action plot is the driving force of the narrative, one of the major subplots, and ultimately the psychological and emotional core of the film, is the breaking down of Vincent's carefully constructed psyche. Having

successfully turned himself into a Terminator, Vincent has constructed a psychological shell that effectively protects against the intrusion of emotions. Over the course of his night with Max, however, his shell slowly begins to crack. Not one for whom friends are plentiful, Vincent finds that he actually likes and respects Max. After several meaningful interactions and events, a bond seems to develop. This invites the question: Will Vincent be able to conduct his business as usual and kill Max at the end of the night?

A possible answer to that question emerges during the film's major action set-piece. As Vincent goes after his next target – a Korean gangster named Peter Lim (Inmo Yuon), who hangs out with a full protective detail at a Korean club called Fever – all the narrative threads are weaved together by Mann in this set-piece. First, Felix's crew is monitoring Max (Vincent had deceived them into thinking that Max was him in an effort to protect his identity) with instructions to kill him if anything goes wrong; second, the FBI, who were monitoring Felix's club and who saw Max there and are now operating under the same misapprehension of thinking that Max is Vincent, are trying to get to Peter Lim to protect him before Vincent kills him; and third, LAPD detective Fanning (Mark Ruffalo), the only person besides Vincent and Max who is aware of who is who and of what is going on, is trying to find Max and get him out of everybody's crosshairs.

As it usually does in an action set-piece, and as it always does in a Michael Mann action set-piece, chaos quickly ensues. Lim's Korean bodyguards do not speak English, so when the FBI approaches, weapons drawn, they draw their weapons under the assumption that Lim is under siege. In the struggle between the FBI and the Korean protection detail, a gun goes off and fires into the crowded dance club, inciting a massive stampede and setting off a gunfight between all parties involved. Vincent is working his way through the club to Lim; however, when he notices that Felix's gunmen are about to shoot Max, Vincent stops pursuing Lim and intervenes to save Max's life. Realising that Vincent just saved his life, Max looks over, and the two exchange a look between them.

Between my first viewing of *Collateral* in theatres in 2004 and my viewing of it with Mann's audio commentary in 2011, for all of those years, I interpreted the look between Vincent



and Max, in particular the look on Vincent's face as he looks at Max after saving his life, as an indication that Vincent does not want to see Max dead. More specifically, I interpreted the look on Vincent's face as irritation masking embarrassment over his feeling compelled to save his new friend's life. However, in discussing this scene during his audio commentary, Mann described this look in different terms:

Vincent in reality would be really focused on what's happening, almost like a fugue state, and then it's gonna get interrupted by a threat to Max and as Vincent deals with it I wanted [him] to have – and he absolutely has – a kind of look on his face almost as if he's irritated because Max has been so inconsiderate to allow himself to have his life jeopardized and Vincent's had to intervene to save him.

On one score, my interpretation aligns with Mann's intention: He wanted Vincent to have a look of irritation on his face. On another score, my interpretation does not align with Mann's intention: He thought of Vincent as being irritated because Max was screwing with his work – which *is* something that Vincent had gotten irritated with Max for earlier in the film – whereas I thought that Vincent was irritated because he had realised that by saving Max's life he had tipped his hand regarding his emotional attachment to him – which *is* something that Vincent and Max discuss in the scene following this action set-piece. To be sure, some scholars would say at such a crossroads, 'Who cares what the author intended? The only faithfulness required in aesthetic criticism is to your own personal experience.' And if I were to admit to them, as Cavell admitted to his imagined interlocutor vis-à-vis Fellini and *La Strada*, that my conviction in my understanding of that look is all but unshakeable, then they would say in response, as Cavell's imagined interlocutor said to him, 'Doesn't this simply prove what those who deny the relevance of intention have always said? What is decisive is what is there, not what the artist intended.'

Though this appears to be quite the impasse, it is actually rather easy to dissolve this philosophical worry. All that is required is, first, a conception of *layers* or *levels* of intention, and, second, a *holistic* approach to aesthetic criticism. With reference to *Collateral*, it is not so much that I want to deny that what Mann explains as going on in that exchange of looks is actually there. I am happy to concede that it is there. Rather, it is more that I would not want Mann to deny that what I think is going on at a deeper level in that exchange of looks is actually there. I would hope that he would concede that it is there. In short, I think that what Mann was focused on during the shooting, and what Mann was explaining in his commentary, was the surface level, the basic constituent of the scene, whereas I was going below the surface and mining deeper character and thematic constituents of the film as a whole.

In 'A Matter of Meaning It', Cavell comes to a similar conclusion in relation to the dilemma of (*ostensibly*) being at cross-purposes with an author. Imagining a scenario in which Fellini denies that he had Philomel on his mind during the making of *La Strada*, Cavell considers possible continuations

in the event that he were to press Fellini to consider the relevance of the former to the latter:

Everything depends upon how the relevance is, or is not, acknowledged. Suppose [Fellini] says, 'Of course! That's just the feeling I had about my character when I was making the picture. Odd the story never occurred to me'. Or: 'How ironic. I had tried to translate that story into a modern setting several times with no success. Here, without realizing it, I actually did it'. In such cases I am inclined to say that the relevance is intended [...] [as opposed to] *unconscious*. [The latter] may well describe certain cases, but its usefulness will have specifically to be made out. What would prompt it here is the idea that intentions must be *conscious* – the same idea which would prompt one to deny that Fellini can have intended the reference if it hadn't occurred to him at the time, if he hadn't been aware of it. But [...] to say that works of art are intentional objects is not to say that each bit of them, as it were, is separately intended. (Cavell [1967b] 1976: 232-233, 236)

This is perhaps the most crucial contribution made by Cavell vis-à-vis the practical relevance of authorial intention in aesthetic criticism. To return to *Collateral*, suppose that I were to tell Mann my understanding of the exchange of looks between Vincent and Max in the Fever set-piece. The 'worst-case scenario' would obviously be him flat-out rejecting my interpretation and denying that Vincent had any emotional attachment whatsoever to Max. I cannot imagine him saying that for the simple reason that everything in the film to this moment and everything after it seems to point in the opposite direction. As I mentioned, immediately after the Fever set-piece, Max confronts Vincent in the cab with his knowledge that, for whatever reason(s), Vincent is postponing the inevitable and refusing to kill him, either because he does not want to kill him or possibly even because he cannot bring himself to kill him. Even more tellingly, in an earlier scene in which Vincent similarly acted as Max's protector and helped him deal with his aggressive and obnoxious boss, afterwards, before exiting the car to execute his next hit, Vincent paused and gave Max a similarly enigmatic look.

So, instead, suppose that Mann accepts my interpretation but admits that it did not occur to him at the time, that at



the time of filming he was solely concerned with the professionalism aspect of Vincent's character and was not thinking about the deeper emotional implications regarding the film as a whole. Rather than jump to a self-serving conception of 'unconscious intention' with reference to which intention can effectively be theorised out of existence and meaning can be asserted as wholly within the province of the critic cum psychoanalyst who alone, in a perverse parody of the Lacanian 'subject supposed to know', has access to capital-K 'Knowledge' (cf. Lacan [1964] 1981: 230-243), Cavell simply encourages scholars to revise their conceptions of intention.

In calling attention to the fact that 'to say that works of art are intentional objects is not to say that each bit of them, as it were, is separately intended', Cavell highlights an aspect of artistic intention that has often gone unremarked. To his credit, in the context of literary criticism, E.D. Hirsch sought to refute the psychoanalytic picture of unconscious intention along the same lines as Cavell. To the issue of 'authorial ignorance', Hirsch noted that 'there is a difference between consciousness and self-consciousness'; the fact that a given author 'may not be conscious of all that he means is no more remarkable than that he may not be conscious of all that he does', which is to say that, nothing extraordinary is involved in acknowledging that there simply is not enough room in

our conscious minds to hold everything that we know, and believe, and want, and intend, etc., at the front of our conscious minds every second of every day. Indeed, considering the complex vicissitudes of artistic creation, it should not be surprising in the least that no author can 'possibly in a given moment be paying attention to all [of a given artwork's] complexities' (Hirsch 1967: 22). This is not to say, however, that anything that is not at the front of an author's conscious mind is unconscious, or inaccessible to consciousness, or what have you, nor is it to say that anything that was not at the front of an author's conscious mind cannot properly be said to have been something that the author intended.

To go back to *Collateral*, on the basis of the preceding explication of intention, I would argue that, while Vincent's emotional attachment to Max may not have been at the front of Mann's conscious mind, it was nevertheless always present as an organising premise, hence the film's unity in plot, character, and theme. In sum, a simple revision of the concept of intention is all that is required to dissolve this particular philosophical worry and thereby nullify scepticism. Even though, when faced with such seemingly intractable philosophical problems, it is sometimes difficult, as Wittgenstein averred, to 'keep our heads above water, as it were, to see that we must stick to matters of everyday thought' ([1949] 2009: 51e), the

ability to stay on track rather than go off in pursuit of chimeras allows for the possibility of recognising ‘distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook’ (56e). In this case, to speak of intention seems, per Cavell, to just mean the picture of intention as conscious and explicit intention. But there are nuances to the concept of intention provided by our ordinary forms of language which make it clear, provided that we are able and willing to recognise and acknowledge these nuances, that there is nothing extraordinary involved here.

‘Fair enough’, a sceptical scholar may be willing to concede, ‘but what happens when it is not a matter of “layers” or “levels” of intention? That is, what happens when there absolutely *is* a contradiction and it is an either / or question of either your conviction or the author’s intention?’ For this scenario, I will offer another example from my own critical practice. Recently, I took the opportunity to conduct an ordinary language investigation of the communicative protocols discernible in the Aaron Sorkin-scripted and Danny Boyle-directed tour de force *Steve Jobs* (2015) (Barrowman 2020). As I did with *Collateral*, I once again opted during the research process to watch the film while listening to the audio commentary tracks recorded by Boyle and Sorkin. By the time that I got around to these audio commentaries, I was on perhaps my eighth or ninth viewing of the film, which is to say that, as Cavell was with *La Strada*, I was fairly confident in my understanding of the film. But then there came a moment where, just as it had happened with *Collateral*, my understanding of a scene did not match the intention behind the scene.

In brief, *Steve Jobs* is a biopic which proceeds according to a clearly delineated and tightly plotted three-act structure with the three acts corresponding to three product launches. In act one, which takes place in 1984, Steve Jobs (Michael Fassbender) prepares to launch Apple’s Macintosh computer. In act two, which takes place in 1988, Jobs, no longer working at Apple, prepares to launch a new computer sold by his new company NeXT. In act three, which takes place in 1998, Jobs, having returned to Apple and taken over as CEO, prepares to launch the iMac. The dramatic conflicts throughout the film – between Jobs and his friend and Apple co-founder Steve ‘Woz’ Wozniak (Seth Rogen), his friend and Apple CEO

John Sculley (Jeff Daniels), his daughter Lisa (Makenzie Moss [act one], Ripley Sobo [act two], Perla Haney-Jardine [act three]), his ex-girlfriend and Lisa’s mother Chrisann Brennan (Katherine Waterston), and the Head of Marketing and Jobs’ closest confidante Joanna Hoffman (Kate Winslet) – all take place backstage ahead of the three product launches.

Needless to say, with a screenplay written by Aaron Sorkin, the pace is frenetic as the ensemble cast machine guns through Sorkin’s characteristically rapid-fire dialogue. In the film’s two-hour runtime, Jobs seldom has two consecutive seconds to himself during which time he is not engaging someone in verbal warfare. It is therefore more than just anomalous, it is clearly significant, when there are moments of quiet. One such significantly anomalous moment occurs in act one. Having just gone several rounds with Chrisann over their daughter Lisa and now on the way to go a few rounds with Woz over the Apple II team, Jobs experiences a few moments of silence as he rides the elevator down to where he will meet Woz.

Alone in the elevator, Jobs stands still, exhales, closes his eyes, and appears to go into a sort of meditative headspace. During this brief interlude, there are cuts between Jobs standing still with his eyes closed and the audience awaiting the Mac launch doing the wave to amuse themselves. It is as if, in the midst of all the verbal warfare on the one hand and the excitement of the product launch on the other, Jobs does his best to take a moment of solace to recharge. In fact, as he goes from Chrisann to Woz, the ding of the elevator as Jobs reaches the ground floor seems to serve as the bell that signals to a fighter in between rounds that the rest period is over and the next round of action is set to begin. I say ‘appears’, ‘as if’, and ‘seems’ because this is how I had formerly interpreted the scene. In the course of listening to the audio commentaries featuring Boyle and Sorkin, I came to realise that my understanding of this moment and the reasons for its composition was actually a woeful misunderstanding.

In his audio commentary, Sorkin discusses this moment – ‘another unscripted moment’, he explains, giving credit to director Boyle for this stroke of artistic inspiration – as follows:

It’s a very nice, quiet moment. It was Danny [Boyle]’s idea to put [Jobs] in an elevator [...]. Danny always [said] that



the script felt to him like the sound of Steve Jobs’ mind [...]. There are just a couple or three moments in the movie when Steve is alone and in that quiet is when I feel like it’s the loudest in his mind.

In Wittgensteinian parlance, this ‘aspect’ of the scene, namely, the paradox of moments of external silence resulting in moments of overwhelming internal loudness, had not been visible to me prior to Sorkin directing my attention to it. For my part, I had been operating on the simple premise that a moment of quiet in a film just simply *means*, as if *by itself*, regardless of the narrative context or the authorial intention, that the quiet is peaceful and relaxing. In so doing, I was violating a principle once expressed by V.F. Perkins, namely, that ‘a theory of judgment cannot remove the necessity for judgment’ ([1972] 1993: 193). That is to say, aesthetic judgments cannot be made as if they correspond to an aesthetic ‘playbook’ or some pre-existing set of aesthetic ‘rules’; rather, aesthetic judgments must be made on case-by-case bases (cf. Morgan 2011, 2020). As Cavell himself outlined:

I say, in effect, that any and every gesture of the camera may or may not mean something, and every cut and every rhythm of cuts, and every framing and every inflection within a frame – something determined by the nature of film and by the specific context in which the gesture occurs in a particular film [...]. [These] are the bearers of the filmmaker’s intentions [...] [and] this intentionality [...] dictates the perspective from which a critical understanding of a film must proceed. It is a perspective from which a certain level of description is called forth, one in service of the question ‘Why is this as it is?’ – the critical question – which may be directed toward works of art as toward any of the acts and works of human beings and of

their societies. Suppose that it would be true to describe what is shown on the screen as a shot of a stairway. This description may or may not have a point (beyond cataloguing the shot). If one calls what is shown a 'point of view shot,' one may go on to say that such a shot may be established by, for example, cutting to it from the face of a character and cutting from it back to that face [...]. If, however, you go on to say why *this* way of establishing a point of view is used, and why *here*, and why with respect to *this* character, and why by way of *this* content, then you are proposing a critical understanding of this passage [the interest of which] will depend upon its faithfulness to the intention of this work. ([1971] 1979: 186-187)

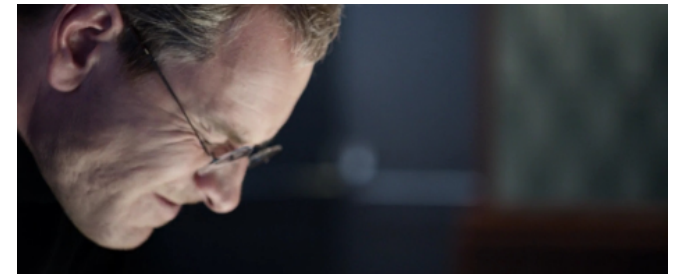
As it relates to *Steve Jobs*, I had correctly *described* the scene in question – namely, as a solitary moment of silence experienced by Jobs – but I had failed to correctly *understand* the scene in question – namely, as a solitary moment of silence the quickness of which Jobs was grateful for, as opposed to my misunderstanding of it as a moment of silence which Jobs was hoping would last for considerably longer. And my failure to understand the scene, both in and of itself and in relation to the film as a whole, is evident in the fact that, per Cavell, my 'critical understanding' was not faithful to 'the intention of the work.'

Once again, some scholars would say here, 'Who cares what the author intended?' Beardsley would certainly be one of the voices in that chorus. For his part, Beardsley valorised the concept of 'experience' precisely because he (erroneously) believed that it would ensure artwork-directed attention, as opposed to author-directed attention, which he (erroneously) believed would take scholars away from the artwork in question and would thus ruin (if it would not preclude entirely) the aesthetic experience. As this example from my own critical practice makes clear, however, *contra* Beardsley, this is by no means *always* or *necessarily* the case. In fact, there are instances, surely multipliable beyond my personal experience with *Steve Jobs*, where the investigation of authorial intention, far from taking one away from the artwork in question, is precisely that which allows for 'further penetration into' the artwork in question (Cavell [1967b] 1976: 236). In my case, it was only after I had come to understand the scene in and of

itself – which would not have been possible had I not learned of the director's intention behind the scene (that is, had I remained solipsistically wrapped up in my own experience) – that I was able to understand and appreciate the film on a much deeper level.

To wit, one of the most powerful moments in the film is a decidedly similar moment of silence and stillness. In act three, after a contentious backstage encounter in a conference room ahead of the iMac launch with former employee Andy Hertzfeld (Michael Stuhlbarg) about a personal matter involving his daughter Lisa, Jobs again finds himself alone in quiet but not in peace. As soon as Hertzfeld leaves, rather than sighing in relief, Jobs grimaces and violently shakes the table on which he was leaning while going over his launch notes. At that instant, an image flashes on the screen of Lisa as a small child in a scene from act one. Clearly, Jobs' emotions are overflowing, quite literally spilling out onto the table. He tries to keep his emotional turmoil at bay, dryly reciting information from his launch notes, but images of Lisa continually flash on the screen as they are going off like flashbangs in his mind. No matter how hard he bites down on the bullet of his work to ward off the emotional pain that he is going through, the emotional turmoil does not abate.

This is plainly evident in the scene itself, thanks to the performance of Michael Fassbender and the editing of Elliot Graham, yet, if not interpreted in conjunction with the *correctly understood* elevator scene from act one, the purpose of this scene from act three – and, by extension, one of the most important thematic motifs in the film on the whole – will be indiscernible. A recurring motif throughout the film is Jobs' inability to prioritise his work over his daughter in his mind even as it appears to outside observers, his daughter included, that he prioritises his work over everyone and everything. In the elevator scene in act one, the loudness in Jobs' mind, absent the welcome distractions of dealing with the Mac launch, is emanating from his having just had his first moment of genuine connection with his daughter. When the elevator dings and he goes off to talk with Woz, it is not so much signalling the interruption of a reprieve (from having to deal with people) as it is signalling the arrival of a reprieve (from having to deal with himself). In the conference room



scene in act three, Jobs is once again trying to quiet his emotional demons, and he once again seeks a reprieve in his work. But at this point in the film, having spanned two decades of his life – during which time Jobs has accumulated two additional decades of emotional baggage – Jobs cannot even so much as muffle the loudness in his mind.

In the elevator scene, Jobs closes his eyes and stands still. In this moment, his face is blank and serene while his body language is controlled and motionless. In the conference room scene, he again closes his eyes, only this time he is visibly straining as he closes his eyes, as if he thought that if he could just squeeze his eyes shut tight enough then thoughts of his daughter would not be able to penetrate his brain; his

jaw clenches, an external manifestation of the internal effort that he is expending to avoid dealing with the thoughts and feelings that are rushing in; and he takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes, a sign of the emotional fatigue that he is feeling by this point in the film.

Not only is this crucial character information, the ability to see in the construction of the elevator scene in act one – the solitary silence, the physical stillness, the intercutting of images to indicate what is happening inside of Jobs' mind – the reference point for the construction of the conference room scene in act three allows for, first and foremost, a deeper understanding of the film and the emphasis throughout the narrative on Jobs' desperate desire to avoid having to acknowledge and express his innermost thoughts and feelings, but also, and by extension, a greater appreciation for the inspired meticulousness of the narrative construction and aesthetic composition. And if facilitating such understanding and appreciation is not the ultimate goal of any activity which claims the title of 'criticism', then what is?

Hopefully, in conjunction with the preceding explication of Cavell's ideas and arguments vis-à-vis authorship and its vicissitudes, these two examples from my own critical practice, in the first of which the threat of scepticism inspired me to challenge and ultimately revise my conception of authorial intention and in the second of which the threat of scepticism inspired me to challenge and ultimately revise my conception of a film, are indicative of the probative value of author-based criticism toward the goal of understanding and appreciating art. To be sure, far more can and should be said with respect to aesthetic philosophy and critical practice in general and the aesthetic philosophy and critical practice of Stanley Cavell in particular. And I hope that more is said. This has merely been a prolegomenon. My goal is not to put an end to any conversations. On the contrary, my goal is to encourage scholars to (re)start a series of conversations on authorship, intention, and meaning in relation to the practice – the *ordinary* practice – of criticism.

To this end, my modest hope is to contribute to such conversations a sense of trust in and patience with ordinary language as exemplified in Cavell's writings, and in particular in his conception of an 'ordinary aesthetics', which I submit

points the way to an ordinary aesthetic philosophy (cf. Cavell 1996b; see also Cavell 2004). In order to defend and fortify the ordinary practice of criticism, Cavell encouraged scholars to learn how to 'philosophize by means of ordinary words (which often means identifying words that have been enclosed by philosophy – such as understanding, reason, accident, necessity, idea, impression – and retrieving their ordinarieness)' (1996b: 371). To Cavell's list of ordinary words 'enclosed by philosophy', I would add the words 'author', 'intention', 'meaning', 'criticism', and even 'art' itself. Toward the goal of establishing what I am calling an ordinary aesthetic philosophy, one of the principal tasks would be to retrieve the ordinarieness of words such as these, or, in Wittgenstein's formulation, to 'bring [such] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' ([1949] 2009: 53e). This task would involve 'plac[ing] philosophy's conviction in itself', as well as criticism's conviction in itself, 'in the hands, or handling, of ordinary words' (Cavell 1996b: 377). To my mind, there is no better place, nor are there better words.⁸

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¹ It is worth mentioning that situating poststructuralism as a continuation of New Criticism is more than merely a rhetorical gesture on my part. In 'The Death of the Author', Barthes explicitly situates his project as a radicalisation of New Criticism and the efforts of people like Monroe C. Beardsley to invalidate the concept of authorship ([1967] 1977: 143), while, in 'What is an Author?', Michel Foucault implicitly tips his hat

to New Criticism and incorporates its language when he writes that 'it has been understood [thanks to the project of New Criticism] that the task of criticism is not to re-establish the ties between an author and his work or to reconstitute an author's thought and experience through his works [...] [but rather] should concern itself with the structures of a work, its architectonic forms, which are studied for their intrinsic and internal relationships' ([1969] 1979: 16).

² For the only substantial discussion that I am aware of by a film scholar of 'A Matter of Meaning It', see Catherine Wheatley (2019).

³ Significantly, Beardsley maintained this position throughout his career. As late as *The Possibility of Criticism*, he was trying to argue that meaning is not, and cannot be, determined by the intentions of authors. In an effort to prove this, he adduced random computer-generated texts, which, he alleged, have meaning even though 'nothing was meant by anyone' (1970: 19). For the canonical refutation of the notion of 'intentionless meaning', see Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels (1982). As it relates to Cavell, his interest was in finding a space somewhere between these two poles – that is, with reference to the epigraph to this essay, between W.C. Fields and Humpty Dumpty – where he could acknowledge authorial intention, perhaps even give it pride of place, without thereby excluding as irrelevant considerations of medium, genre, history, culture, etc.

⁴ Interestingly, in the context of one of the only attempts by a film scholar to provide a foundation for a Beardsleyan film criticism, William Cadbury sought a compromise between the Cavellian conception of an artwork as the intentional communication of ideas by an author and the Beardsleyan conception of an artwork as an object that 'simply is'. For his part, Cadbury sought to loosen the authorial grip on meaning, as it were, by conceiving of artworks as 'aesthetic statements' with the caveat that, 'unlike ordinary statements, they are not *asserted* but merely *presented* for contemplation' (1982: 161; cf. Beardsley 1958: 419-437). Leaving aside the fact that 'presenting' is no less intentional than 'asserting', I would imagine that even Cadbury would have a hard time denying that the 'aesthetic statements' of filmmakers as diverse as Sergei Eisenstein (e.g. *Strike* [1925]), Dorothy Arzner (e.g. *Dance, Girl, Dance* [1940]), Jean-Luc Godard (e.g. *deux or trois choses que je said d'elle* [1967]), and Spike Lee (e.g. *BlackKkKlansman* [2018]) qualify as aesthetic assertions. To avoid such torturous circumlocutions, it must simply be acknowledged that, while authorial intention may not be all that matters in aesthetic criticism (to argue that it is all that matters would be the W.C. Fields line), it is what matters *first and foremost* (to argue that it does not matter *at all* would be the Humpty Dumpty line) (cf. Cavell [1986] 1988; see also Barrowman 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

⁵ For critiques of the problematic tendency of scholars to formulate aesthetic arguments with reference to Kant's philosophy of beauty, see Noël Carroll ([1991] 2001, 1998: 81-109), Michelle Marder Kamhi (2003: 414-416, 2014: 15-21), and Barrowman (2018b).

6 For the record, I, like Cavell, regard directors as the authors of films. On this subject, there are two issues worth considering in addition to intention, namely, attribution and collaboration. With respect to the issue of attribution, to the extent that my focus in this essay is narrowly on the concept of intention, the further question of 'Whose intention?' is not directly relevant. However, it is worth acknowledging that, given the collaborative nature of filmmaking, the 'credit' for certain ideas or choices is not always due, and therefore should not automatically be attributed to, the director. For instance, it is hard to imagine Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019) being so profound without the 'underdog' character arc of Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio). In particular, Dalton's breakdown in his trailer after a rough day on-set followed by his 'comeback' is one of the standout sequences in the entire film. While it would be easy to credit Tarantino for constructing such a tight character arc which so perfectly feeds into his larger thematic meditation on redemption in Hollywood, this was not in the script. The idea to have Dalton mess up his lines was DiCaprio's, not Tarantino's (see *Quentin Tarantino 2-Hour Exclusive Interview*, 2019: 00:01:34-00:09:00). Stories like this are easily multipliable throughout the history of film, to the point where some might ask: Is 'author' even a valid term in the context of such a collaborative art form? Given the specificity of each medium, playwrights, painters, novelists, and filmmakers, as authors, are as different as their respective media. However, I would still argue that 'author' is worth preserving even in as collaborative a medium as film and that the director is the figure most deserving of the 'author' label. For something as massive as a film to succeed, there must be someone with whom the buck stops, someone who ultimately says 'Yes' or 'No' to every logistical and creative idea based on a unifying vision. For example, Nicole Kidman has explained, with respect to the sense in which actors can be said to collaborate in the making of a film, that 'the director has a vision [and] ultimately it's the director's choice. Film is the director's medium ... [and] we serve the director. It's that simple' (see *Actresses Roundtable: Lady Gaga, Glenn Close, Regina King, Rachel Weisz, Nicole Kidman* | *Close Up*, 2019: 00:18:21-00:18:55). The sense in which actors, screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, etc., collaborate in the making of a film, then, is in the sense that they bring as much to the table as possible based on the vision of the director, and any and all ideas are either accepted or rejected by the director based on whether or not they help him / her to realise his / her vision. This is the sense in which directors *direct*: They do not literally imagine / do *everything* that ends up on the screen, but they do *direct* everyone in their individual jobs toward the goal of realising their particular vision of the film. This is the sense in which Cavell writes that 'good directors know how to mean everything they do' while 'great directors [...] discover how to do everything they mean' (Cavell [1971] 1979: 188).

7 On this point, one of the anonymous readers of this essay lamented – rightly, in my estimation – that 'there is still too little critical / theoretical work on the relevance (or otherwise) of commercial (DVD / Blu-ray) commentaries for the realm of critical practice'. To this point, my habit

in my own critical practice of always starting at the source, so to speak, with the filmmakers responsible for the films that I write about, harkens back to the earliest days of auteurism in film studies and specifically to the work of the early *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *MOVIE* critics. That is, my habit bespeaks a certain 'attitude' to art and criticism, as Ian Cameron once put it ([1962] 1972: 12), namely, an attitude of not just interest in art but interest in, and respect for, artists and the artistic process. The extent to which this attitude informs my critical practice will be evident in what follows, as will, I hope, the potential critical benefits of consulting filmmakers themselves in the course of analysing their work.

8 For their patience and generosity, as well as their diligence and shrewdness, I would like to thank Kathrina Glitre, James MacDowell, and the two anonymous readers for the time, energy, and care that they devoted to my ideas.