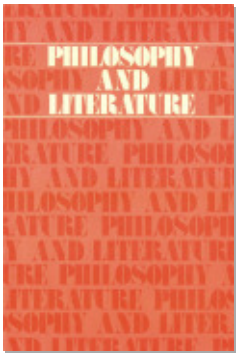
What Becomes of Things on Film?

Stanley Cavell



Philosophy and Literature, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 1978, pp. 249-257
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1978.0027*

STANLEY CAVELL

WHAT BECOMES OF THINGS ON FILM?

AND DOES THIS title express a genuine question? That is, does one accept the suggestion that there is a particular relation (or a particular system of relations, awaiting systematic study) that holds between things and their filmed projections, which is to say between the originals now absent from us (by screening) and the new originals now present to us (in photogenesis)—a relation to be thought of as something's becoming something (say as a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, or as a prisoner becomes a count, or as an emotion becomes conscious, or as after a long night it becomes light)? The title is, at any rate, the working formulation I have given myself for the guiding question of this discussion. Of the many issues and many levels of issue raised by the papers I have been invited to comment upon, I have picked two moments at which work of my own about film has been referred to, wishing to contribute to a conversation in the territory of film study.

The first moment is one in which I am quoted (or Heidegger and I jointly quoted) as saying that "The cinematic image accentuates the conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy of things." I am sorry to have given such an impression. The background of what I said[1]—in the course of giving some examples of how thinking about films and thinking about philosophy have drawn upon one another in my work—was this: early in *Being and Time*, Heidegger characterizes the specific way in which the phenomenon occurs, in his terms, of the "worldhood of the world announcing itself"; it is a phenomenon in which a particular mode of sight or awareness is brought into play. What brings this mode of sight into play is a disruption of what Heidegger calls the "work-world," a disruption of the matters of course running among our tools, and the occupations they extend, and the environment which supports these occupations. It is upon the disruption of such matters of course (of a tool, say by its breaking; or of someone's occupation, say because of an injury; or of some absence of material) that the mode of sight then brought forth discovers objects in what Heidegger

notes as their conspicuousness, their obtrusiveness, and their obstinacy. Now the foreground of what I said was this: it struck me that this perception or apprehension of the things of our world is part of the grain of silent film comedy; and, more particularly, that Buster Keaton is the silent comic figure whose extraordinary works and whose extraordinary gaze, perhaps the fundamental feature of his character, illuminate and are illuminated by the consequent concept of the worldhood of the world announcing itself.

While I take even this bare broaching of this idea to formulate one possibility of cinematic images of the things of our world, it is no more to be expected that *all* cinematic images carry this force, than it is to be expected that all are in the service of Keaton's species of comedy; any more than the idea of such images exhausts what there is to say about Keaton, or about Heidegger, or about any further relations between them. What the idea ought to do is to help us to see and say at once what it is Keaton permits us to laugh about and what concretely the nature is of the mode of sight from which Heidegger begins his analysis of Being-in-the-world. This laughter is not defined, for example, by a Bergsonian suggestion that the human being has become machine-like, or vice versa. Keaton is as flexible, as resourceful, as Ulysses, and his giant machines do exactly what they might be expected to do under their circumstances. We have here to do with something about the human capacity for sight, or for sensuous awareness generally, something we might express as our condemnation to project, to inhabit, a world that goes essentially beyond the delivery of our senses. This seems to be the single point of agreement throughout the history of epistemology, at least throughout the modern history of the subject, say since Descartes. The most common conclusion among epistemologists has been some kind of skepticism—a realization that we cannot, strictly speaking, be said to know, to be certain, of the existence of the world of material things at all. I understand Buster Keaton, say in *The General,* to exemplify an acceptance of the enormity of this realization of human limitation, denying neither the abyss that at any time may open before our plans, nor the possibility, despite that open possibility, of living honorably, with good if resigned spirits, and with eternal hope. His capacity for love does not avoid this knowledge, but lives in full view of it. Is he dashing? He is something rarer; he is undashable. He incorporates both the necessity of wariness in an uncertain world, and also the necessary limits of human awareness; gaze as we may, there is always something behind our backs, room for doubt.

Quickly compare Chaplin's knowledge and his world of things, say in *The Gold Rush,* made the same year as *The General* (1925). And take just the two most famous set routines from that film, the Thanks-

giving dinner of roast shoe, and the dream-dance of the rolls on forks. In both cases one object is taken as, treated as, something it is not in fact. The ability so to regard objects is studied in Part II of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,* through the concept of "seeing as," the concept Wittgenstein takes as the topic of his study of interpretation. To this human capacity for seeing or for treating something *as* something, Wittgenstein attributes our capacity for intimacy in understanding, for what we might call the innerness of the meaning we attach to words and gestures. That the Chaplin routines are in a sense opposites of one another allows them to suggest a complete world of such understanding—in the one case a shoe is treated as a food (a case of dire necessity), in the other a food is treated as a shoe (a case of dire luxury); in both, his imagination gives habitation to his ecstasy and to his grief. The madness of his meaning keeps him sane. (One could say that the worldhood of the world never reveals itself to the little man; he is both too far inside the world for that, and too far outside.)

Say that Keaton and Chaplin make a comedy of the fact that such a creature as a human being is fated to pursue happiness, and that they undertake to demonstrate that such a creature is after all, and to a certain extent, under very exacting conditions, capable of happiness. Then Keaton shows these conditions to be essentially those of virtuousness, or of conscientiousness—e.g., of courage, of temperance, of loyalty, and of an aptness of the body that Spinoza calls wisdom; an ability to maintain your poise no matter what happens to your plans (the outside of you). Chaplin shows these conditions to be those of free imagination, especially the imagination of happiness itself—an ability to gather your spirits no matter what has happened to them (the inside of you).

The logic of skepticism requires two things chiefly: that knowledge be discovered to fail in the best cases—in knowing, for example, that I am seated before my fire, or that two plus three is five; and that this failure be discovered in ways open to any normal human being, not something knowable only by experts. It requires only the willingness to know. The logic of the comedy that absorbs skepticism (in opposite ways in Keaton and in Chaplin) requires that we discover outer and inner aptnesses with objects to succeed in the worst cases, and by means of a precision and beauty of conduct in principle open to any normal human being. It requires only the willingness to care.

A second moment at which work of mine is mentioned occurs in Elliot Rubinstein's valuable discussion of Buñuel, when he questions Robbe-Grillet's remark that "the cinema knows only one grammatical mode: the present tense of the indicative."[2] Others, including myself,

have in effect questioned what "present" means applied to filmed objects. Rubinstein interestingly extends the worry to the idea of the "indicative mode" more generally, characterizing *Belle de Jour* as exploring "the camera's possibilities in the realm of the subjunctive." What Rubinstein is registering here is not simply the general truth, shown since the beginning of cinema, that the camera can lend itself to the projection of fantasy as readily as of reality; but, more specifically, the discovery that screened events remain intelligible to us if, even without conventional (or grammatical?) warning—specifically, without changes in the sound track, or the acting, or the modes of filming—they alternate between the depiction of the real and of the fantasied, call it the alternation between the indicative and the subjunctive.

Rubinstein claims distinctly more than this minimal intellectual or technical amount; he claims that Buñuel's discovery in *Belle de Jour* constitutes an artistic triumph. Going on my memory of the film from one distant viewing, and guided by Rubinstein's shaping of it, I am inclined to agree with him. But I put the point minimally first to emphasize that the intellectual or technical discovery, and the artistic achievement, do not assure one another. This is the sort of very primitive point of aesthetics that has to be made again and again in speaking of the modern in art, where artistic achievement does so often seem to be a function of some intellectual or technical discovery. An instance at hand is provided by Robbe-Grillet's *Trans-Europe Express.* It was taken by one of the panelists of this session as exemplifying roughly the procedure under discussion in *Belle de Jour,* that of unmarked juxtapositions of the actual and the . . . what? Call it the imaginary. (One already senses such a distinction giving way. And what it should give way to is a set of ideas I expressed in *The World Viewed* by saying: "It is a poor idea of fantasy which takes it to be a world apart from reality, a world clearly showing its unreality. Fantasy is precisely what reality can be confused with" [p. 85].) But *Trans-Europe Express* is, I find, a more or less uninteresting piece of work. And it is, for me, a matter of aesthetic logic that no procedure discovered in a particular work can be proven by that work to have greater artistic point than the work itself achieves, or some relevant part of it. (Of course the work may inspire a better or different artist to look more deeply into that procedure's possibilities. And of course we must not suppose ourselves to know yet whether, nor how, the procedures in question really are the "same.") Then shall we say that *Belle de Jour*'s superiority is *not* a function of any such procedure, but is due rather to the presence of such phenomena as Catherine Deneuve, and the camerawork of Sacha Vierney, and the genius of Buñuel? But I think one feels immediately that such an alternative is false to one's experience of

the film, that the procedure in question is indeed integral to the artistic achievement of the film, and that the phenomena of actress, camera, and director are to be accounted for by determining how the procedure lends itself to them, and contrariwise. I would like to say: in Buñuel's film the procedure has found its natural subject; which, if we accept this film as a masterpiece of the medium of film, means: in *Belle de Jour* film has found one of its master subjects. What is this subject?

Buñuel says, or someone says for him: the masochistic nature of a woman's impulses.[3] Rubinstein says, or suggests: the balance between sadism and bourgeois domesticity. How could we convince ourselves that these are answers, good answers, to the question I formulated?

I note that there is another masterpiece of film made within a year of *Belle de Jour* that employs the procedure of unmarked juxtapositions of reality with some opposition to reality, and which maintains their balance, the irresolution of them, through to the end: I mean Bergman's *Persona.* And that film, too, has as what we might call its subject something about the imagination of a woman, or of a beautiful woman, or perhaps of two women; which no doubt in part means: a man's imagination of the imagination of women, or perhaps a man's compulsion to imagine the imagination of a woman. More particularly, both films concern the meaning, or limits, or conditions, of female identity, hence no doubt of human identity. (I do not wish to disguise that I take the accurate statement of a work's subject to be an obligation of criticism.)

What is it about film that lends itself to such a subject? (The validity and pressure of such a question is what I take to demand so solemn a topic as "the ontology of film.")

Two further films—masterpieces of their own kind—might be allowed to have a bearing on the further specification of the subject we are seeking to formulate: Hitchcock's *Vertigo,*[4] from a decade earlier; and Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life,* from a decade before that.

The climax of the Capra is as subjunctive as a stretch of film can be, the realization of the wish that one had never been born; and it is filmed and acted in no special way and with no conventional marks to indicate its break with the larger body of the film. It is true that we as viewers are not in doubt about the shift of the plane of reality, but the character with whom we identify is tortured by exactly this doubt; it is an expression of this character's self-doubt, doubt about the worth of his existence. And since this worth is explicitly characterized as a matter of the difference his existence has made in the world, the doubt can be said to be about his identity—something amply registered at the climax of the climax as he turns in anguish from friends to mother to wife, accosting them with the demands: Don't you know me?, Tell me who I am.

In *Vertigo* we do not exactly move from a real place to a projected place, but we are made to share the hero's quasi-hallucinatory, quasi-necrophilic quest in the realm of the subjunctive for the woman he imagines dead. The confusion over the question whether there is one woman or two, or whether one woman is alive or dead, feels like a confusion within his own identity. His existence takes place elsewhere than in the world we see.

The point, at once critical and theoretical, of considering the procedure of juxtaposed realities is to enable us to do what any reading of a film must do—account for the frames of the film being what they are, in the order they are in, e.g., to say what motivates the camera to look and to move as and where it looks and moves. The Capra and the Hitchcock films make nakedly clear the power of film to materialize and to satisfy (hence to dematerialize and to thwart) human wishes that escape the satisfaction of the world as it stands; as perhaps it will ever, or can ever, in fact stand. (Whose wishes, a character's, or the viewer's? We would, I think, like to say both. But the justification of this answer will require an understanding of the nature of a viewer's "identification" with screened characters.) I think it cannot be an accident that the actor in both films is James Stewart, that both Capra and Hitchcock see in Stewart's temperament (which, of course is to say, see in what becomes of that temperament on film, its photogenesis) the capacity to stake identity upon the power of wishing, upon the capacity and purity of one's imagination and desire—not on one's work, or position, or accomplishments, or looks, or intelligence. Call the quality Stewart projects a willingness for suffering—the quality Capra also records in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,* and that John Ford used in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.* It is the quality that would admit him to the company of the women whose search for their identities seems to have traced the contours of the subject of film to which I have been wanting to give expression. Then call the subject the identifying or the inhabitation of a feminine region of the self, whether the person whose self it is be male or female.

(A comparison seems immediately called for with Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu.* I do not feel that I know the temperament or the environment of this male well enough to assay his photogenetic possibilities—e.g., his femininity. But I note that his wish, anyway his final wish, is not for translation into an opposed habitation, but for a particular figure to inhabit, or reinhabit, his own. This wish seems to me to have its source not in the woman in him, but in the child in him. Its materialization is of a woman moving about his familiar room, and it occurs as he is curled on the floor; our response to it is not that of a cry in the throat but of a break in the heart.)

That to be human is to have, or to risk having, this capacity to wish; that to be human is to wish, and in particular to wish for a completer identity than one has so far attained; and that such a wish may project a complete world *opposed* to the world one so far shares with others: this is a way of taking up the cause of Shakespearean Romance. If so, it is not surprising that a filmic procedure which taps this cause is one that juxtaposes modes and moods of reality as a whole, taunts them with one another. So romance in turn shares with skepticism the realization, in the terms of Descartes's First Meditation, that "there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep." The consequence of this realization, Descartes goes on to say, is that "I am quite astonished, and my bewilderment is such that it is almost able to convince me that I am sleeping." In both skepticism and romance, knowledge, call it consciousness as a whole, must go out in order that a better consciousness can come to light. (The idea of modes and moods of reality altering together as totalities, or the idea that the concepts of consciousness and of the world as such are made for one another, in one another's image, is epitomized in Wittgenstein's remark near the end of the *Tractatus:* the world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy. To this remark we might add that the worlds may be juxtaposed within the same breast.)

With one final film admitted to this discussion I will be ready to draw a moral. Rubinstein quotes Susan Sontag on Godard's films as follows: "In Godard's films things display a wholly alienated character. Characteristically, they are used with indifference, neither skillfully nor clumsily; they are simply there. 'Objects exist,' Godard has written, 'and if one pays more attention to them than to people, it is precisely because they exist more than these people. Dead objects are still alive. Living people are often already dead'." I know this quotation from Godard only from his voice, or half-voice, as narrator of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her.* We know that we are to be wary of granting the whole truth to any remark of this narrator, for at least the reason that he recurrently questions his own remarks. *Two or Three Things,* made the same year as *Belle de Jour,* is also a film about a bourgeoise who spends afternoons as a prostitute, and also explicitly links questions about her identity with speculations about the nature and existence of the external world. This film contains a juxtaposition of filmed objects to whose extraordinariness the filmmaker Alfred Guzzetti has called special attention.[5] With shots of the woman, and certain others, in a café-bar, the camera alternates, with progressively closer shots, a cup of coffee just stirred, and at last peers over the cup's rim until the bubbling liquid swirling as a whole fills the cinemascope rectangle;

the sound track rises to a poeticizing meditation that fits our willingness to endow this image with the power to invoke the swirling of the universe, and hence the question of its origin and ending. Whereupon we cut to an image of the rough barman filling a shot glass, then drawing a beer from a machine of pull faucets which now fills the rectangle. One possible reading of the juxtaposition of the cup-universe and the barman is as a rebuke to our willingness for a poetic meditation on universal origins when we do not even know where the beer and the coffee we drink on earth come from—that we drink them in real places made by real people for just this purpose; and that they are handed to us by real people whose livelihoods depend upon their being bought. We might speculate, among other things, upon whether the gleaming beer dispenser, worked by the barman as he observes the scene of meditation, is a comment on the idea of a movie camera.

The moral I draw is this: the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened—like the question what becomes of particular people, and specific locales, and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film—has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us. To express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering, are acts that help to constitute what we might call film criticism. Then to explain how these appearances, significances, and matterings—these specific events of photogenesis—are made possible by the general photogenesis of film altogether, by the fact, as I more or less put it in *The World Viewed*, that objects on film are always already displaced, *trouvé* (i.e., that we as viewers are always already displaced before them), would be an undertaking of what we might call film theory.[6]

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

1. In "Leopards in Connecticut," *The Georgia Review* 30 (1976): 233–62.

2. The remark is quoted from the essay "Time and Description" in *For A New Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

3. Cf. the Introductory Note to the English presentation of *Belle de Jour*, prepared by Robert Adkinson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

4. Robin Wood cites *Vertigo* as a touchstone for assessing certain matters of the viewer's distance or involvement with the events of *Persona* in "The World Without, The World Within," reprinted in *Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Stuart M. Kaminsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). Reprinted in this same collection, Susan Sontag's essay

on *Persona* momentarily contrasts, hence compares, that film with *Belle de Jour.*

5. In a long study of this film prepared for a meeting of the American Film Seminar in 1975.

6. These remarks, more or less, were read at the Modern Language Association Annual Convention held in Chicago, in December 1977. The title of the symposium was "*Chosisme* and the Cinema: the Perception of Physical Reality in Cinema and Literature." The text as it appears here has profited from modifications worked by Norton Batkin and William Rothman.