

## Found Footage at the Receding of the World

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Of the various developments following the recent and ongoing reassessments of Stanley Cavell's writing on film, one of the most important has been scholars' proposal of a greater rapprochement between Cavell's thought and experimental or non-narrative cinema. Increasingly, such scholars are recognizing that, despite Cavell's seeming disavowal of experimental film, the implications his writing bears for it are substantial.<sup>1</sup> So far, however, there has been no explicit accounting of Cavell's relationship to one of the characteristic techniques of experimental cinema, namely the substantial or exclusive reliance on found or repurposed footage. There are a number of reasons for regarding this omission as a missed opportunity. Cavell's emphasis on film's capacity to displace persons and things, and thus for it to facilitate a certain self-reflexivity among things screened, raises questions about what becomes of footage

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Dave Burnham, 'Turning to Nature: Cavell and Experimental Cinema', *Discourse*, vol. 42, no. 1-2 (2020), pp. 173-208, and Rebecca Sheehan, *American Avant-Garde Cinema's Philosophy of the In-Between* (Oxford: Oxford, 2020). For reappraisals of Cavell by scholars of the American avant-garde, see P. Adams Sitney, 'Apologies to Stanley Cavell', *Conversations* no. 7 (2019), pp. 8-13, and Scott MacDonald, 'My Troubled Relationship with Stanley Cavell', in *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema*, ed. David LaRocca (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 107-20.

when it is displaced from its original context.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, experimental cinema's reappropriating of images from Hollywood films has often functioned, albeit sometimes at the level of parody, to probe themes central to the opening chapters of Cavell's *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971). Here the principal example would be Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958), with its explorations of what Cavell formulates as Hollywood's reliance on types and typicality, though the variety of cases examined by William Wees in his work on found footage and movie stars would also be relevant to Cavell's concerns with stardom.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Cavell's frequent noting of narrative films' reliance on archival or stock footage, expressed most evocatively in his remarks in *The World Viewed* on Truffaut's use of newsreel footage in *Jules and Jim* (1962), points toward lines of thought in his work that still await further examination.<sup>4</sup>

There are reasons why – despite these points of potential connection – Cavell's thinking has not been brought to bear on experimental works relying substantially on found footage, or what I will call *fragments*; that is, films foregrounding their nature as collections from archival sources. These reasons, or the limitations one faces in bringing Cavell to bear on found footage film, are not simply a matter of his personal tastes.<sup>5</sup> Rather, as I will argue here, structural issues

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<sup>2</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. xiv-xvi, 233-34n21.

<sup>3</sup> William Wees, 'The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2002), pp. 3-18.

<sup>4</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 140-41. Compare with Jay Leyda, *Film Beget Films* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 133, 143-44.

<sup>5</sup> The question of taste is nevertheless raised by Cavell's lukewarm response to Standish Lawder's experiments with reappropriating footage from Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) in their shared 1971 appearance on Robert Gardner's TV program *Screening Room*. His response to other work by Lawder was far more positive.

in Cavell's early writing on film prevent his thorough engagement with found footage film.<sup>6</sup> These issues include what I will call Cavell's proneness toward a 'global-holistic' approach to film, which informs his anxiety about approaching a film as a fragment. This approach of Cavell's changes over time – partly for reasons having to do with the receding of modernism as an explicit concern in his film writing. This shift has little to do with the familiar critical trajectory whereby scholars move from conceptions of unified, modernist 'works' to those of differentiated, postmodernist 'texts.'<sup>7</sup> Rather, Cavell's trajectory, as well as the Cavellian account of found footage that it affords, was, I contend, facilitated by an atavistic turn in his late film writing to his teacher J.L. Austin, especially his 1962 book *How to Do Things with Words*. In the wake of this turn, Cavell would articulate a variety of ways of collecting fragments in order to address the world, especially a world receding from view. These articulations appear in his 1998 essay 'The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting' – the culmination of his later considerations about what a collection of fragments might express.<sup>8</sup> Here, he also ties collecting to phenomena associated with his late concept of 'passionate utterance', the importance of which I will gloss below. In the final section of this essay, I bring these arguments to bear on the accomplished Oaxaca-based Mexican experimental filmmaker and video artist Bruno Varela's film *Monolito* (2019), projecting Cavell in understanding this collection of fragments from

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<sup>6</sup> Compare with Burnham's claims about constraining features of Cavell's practice of film criticism, whose status as 'structural' Burnham questions.

<sup>7</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (Durham, North Carolina: 1989), pp. xvii, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Cavell, 'The World as Things', in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2005), pp. 236-80.

Varela's personal archive, audiovisual material downloaded from YouTube, and digitally-distorted VHS footage.<sup>9</sup>

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Commentators have already noted that Cavell's use of the term 'world' in *The World Viewed* refers, in a Heideggerian vein, to a meaningful totality.<sup>10</sup> This conception of meaning as lying in totality is an aspect of what I alternatively call Cavell's 'global-holistic' approach – figuring not just in his conception of a world, but also in his conception of a film. The latter partly results from his having shared Michael Fried's conception of modernism, in which a medium can no longer rely on guaranteed forms of meaning-making in order to secure a world's 'presentness;' rather, these have to be reinvented with each new work. This conception of modernism likewise disbars reliance on pre-established evaluative criteria in criticism, further informing Cavell's conception of film criticism as requiring nothing short of consideration of the film as a whole.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in *The World Viewed*, this Friedian conception of criticism operates together with a certain picture of whole films that Cavell draws from his understanding of film

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<sup>9</sup> On Varela and found footage, see Itzia Fernández, David Wood and Daniel Valdez, 'Apuntes para una filmografía', *Nuevo Texto Crítico* vol. 28, no. 51 (2015), pp. 89-108.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Shuster, *New Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017). Daniel Morgan, 'Modernist Investigations: A Reading of *The World Viewed*', *Discourse*, vol. 42, no. 1-2 (2020), pp. 209-40.

<sup>11</sup> Although Cavell claimed that films had mostly escaped modernist conditions until the period just before the writing of *The World Viewed*, his early thinking also displays uncertainty about the possibility of separating his conception of criticism as such from his conception of modernism. See *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2002), p. 183.

history's topics of criticism. For example, early in the book Cavell asks, 'Why [...] didn't the medium begin and remain in the condition of home movies, one shot just physically tacked onto another, cut and edited simply according to subject?'<sup>12</sup> In answer to this, he notes that 'significance' was historically located in certain narrative forms. The question of home movies, or fragments, as possible bearers of significance is left suggestively hanging.

A tension between Cavell's 'global-holistic' approach and serious engagement with found footage is likewise evident in Cavell's most extended study of a found footage project: the examination in his essay 'On Makavejev on Bergman' of Dušan Makavejev's 1978 presentation at Harvard of twenty-five sequences of moments of silence drawn from nine Bergman films.<sup>13</sup> Though Cavell's essay is an earnest treatment of filmic reappropriation, he is tellingly reticent to call Makavejev's project a 'film' (despite Makavejev's own description of the project), preferring to call it a 'work of criticism.'<sup>14</sup> It is as though Cavell's lingering 'global-holistic' approach, applied to films, could only render Makavejev's project subordinate to the nine Bergman features and their corresponding 'wholeness.' Thus, the 'heteronomy' of Makavejev's project, characteristic of found footage films, takes Cavell's focus elsewhere, to the supposedly 'autonomous' works composing its parts.<sup>15</sup>

I referred to Cavell's lingering approach in his Makavejev essay because by this point we can already see a loosening of the framework that held his 'global-holistic' approach in place,

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<sup>12</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Cavell, 'On Makavejev on Bergman', in *Themes Out of School*, pp. 106-40.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14.

especially as concerns his relationship to modernism. Jennifer Fay and Daniel Morgan have recently argued that, after the publication of *The World Viewed* in 1971, Cavell's focus on modernism 'quickly disappeared.'<sup>16</sup> While I disagree with Fay and Morgan about the quickness of this transition, it is clear that Cavell gradually found a sustained engagement with modernism to be unnecessary for his later studies of Hollywood genres. It is also striking how concerns about modernism are already downplayed in Cavell's 1974 essay 'More of *The World Viewed*' – and, correspondingly, how part of his 'global-holistic' approach is already in recession.<sup>17</sup> Here 'world', and its suggestions of a meaningful totality, largely gives way to the more neutral 'reality.' But if we want to understand how Cavell's trajectory might have involved a gradual embrace of the fragmentary in film, the disappearance of modernism remarked on by Fay and Morgan provides only one, negative condition. Yet another, positive condition – I want to argue – was Cavell's late turn to J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*.

Though in graduate school Cavell attended the 1955 lectures by Austin that would eventually constitute *How to Do Things with Words*, it was only in later writing, especially in extended response to Derrida's reading of Austin in 'Signature Event Context', that Cavell devoted himself to addressing that specific book at length.<sup>18</sup> In this late period, Cavell took up Austin's well-known notion of performative utterances, coming to supplement it with his own concept of 'passionate utterances.'<sup>19</sup> At this stage he also gives a greater role to notions from

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<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Fay and Daniel Morgan, 'Introduction', *Discourse*, vol. 42, no. 1-2 (2020), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 162-230

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1988), pp. 1-23.

<sup>19</sup> Cavell, 'Performative and Passionate Utterance', in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, pp. 155-91.

Austin's book in assessing his own earlier approach to film. For example, in a 2005 interview with Andrew Klevan, Cavell remarks on Austin's (as well as Wittgenstein's) influence on his earlier film writing, including its 'allowing [him] to resist the idea that the relation of a photograph to what it is of is well thought of as representation.'<sup>20</sup> In fact, *How to Do Things with Words* is never explicitly mentioned in *The World Viewed*, and Austin only by allusion.<sup>21</sup> But Cavell's remark to Klevan invites a fresh rereading of *The World Viewed*, one in which the foregrounding of representation in film would be understood to be as much in error for Cavell as the foregrounding of constative utterances in speech was for Austin. Such a rereading would also emphasize the variety of things we do with film, as with words.

Cavell's late Austinian reassessment of *The World Viewed* is one part of his broader turn to Austin in the late film writing. In drawing attention to this turn, two lines of thought regarding Cavell's relation to found footage present themselves. First, in this later writing on film, Cavell's understanding of a meaningful context for footage (allowing it to be the topic of criticism), need no longer be anchored in the earlier 'global-holistic' approach, or his conception of modernism. Now, Austin's notion of the 'total speech situation' can provide this framework.<sup>22</sup> 'Total speech situations' are the historically and culturally situated contexts that Austin recurs to in understanding speech acts, and which are characterized by their plurality and possible openness. Upon bringing the variety of such speech situations into view, the early Cavell's picture of a meaningful context in film (his picture of 'films as wholes') comes to seem like it was foreign

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Klevan, 'What Becomes of Thinking on Film?', in *Film as Philosophy*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (London: Palgrave, 2005), p. 168.

<sup>21</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 114, 133.

<sup>22</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard, 1975), pp. 52, 148.

imposition. With a variety of ‘speech’ situations in view, there is no longer a serious question about whether, say, Makavejev’s use of Bergman’s footage constitutes a ‘film’, or whether that only resolves into its being subordinate to other, ‘autonomous’ works. The earlier impediment to an encounter with found footage film recedes.

Secondly, as Cavell’s turn to *How to Do Things with Words* centralizes questions of passionate utterance, his thinking holds promise for assessing the emotional or affective qualities of found footage film. Cavell’s last substantial engagement with Austin’s book was his 2000 essay ‘Performative and Passionate Utterance’. There, Cavell criticizes Austin for being ‘skittish’ about emotional expression, something evident in Austin’s focus on the ‘illocutionary’ force of utterances like telling and promising, at the expense of ‘perlocutionary’ effects – characteristic of self-revealing ‘passionate utterances’ – like embarrassing someone or stopping them in their tracks. For Cavell, what Austin neglects in slighting emotion is that, in contrast with the standard and conventional procedures that ensure one’s ability to tell or to promise, passionate utterances require or ‘reward’ self-understanding, curiosity, and imagination.<sup>23</sup> Passionate utterances also uniquely tolerate forms of fragmentariness and incompleteness. Whereas leaving one’s words as partial, unfinished, and tentative would impede one’s ability to make a promise, it would be no impediment to, and might even facilitate, various forms of passionate self-revelation. (We reveal ourselves in fragmented speech.) Indeed, scholars of found footage have recurred to notions of speech acts in accounting for what filmmakers ‘say’ with footage, just as they have examined

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<sup>23</sup> Cavell, ‘Performative and Passionate Utterance’, p. 173.



how filmmakers repurpose footage to emotional effect.<sup>24</sup> These aspects of found footage are not isolated, and neither should be our accounts of them. Thus, Cavell's writing on passionate utterance provides the kind of speech-act framework required to elucidate the passionate character of found footage – a proposal I illustrate below.

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Cavell's late Austinean considerations and his resulting reassessment of film along the lines of speech acts allow him, in turn, to approach the question of fragments and wholes differently. This is evident in the work that culminates Cavell's gradual embrace of the fragmentary – the appropriately titled essay 'The World as Things'. Here, Cavell directly addresses films dealing with archival footage and its powers, in particular Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) and, by allusion, his *Immemory* CD-ROM (1997).<sup>25</sup> Cavell's shifted approach to film is conspicuous, as, now, Marker's filmic 'total speech situations', as we might call them, are no longer framed as complete or whole works (in some strong, constraining sense), but rather, more loosely, as collections, including collections of literal refuse and debris. What's more, Cavell frames these collections as vehicles for expressing passion. Note his remarks on the expressive powers of Freud's collection of statuettes, or his remarks – in later writing that builds

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<sup>24</sup> William Wees, *Recycled Images* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), pp. 42-43; Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect* (London: Routledge, 2014). See especially Baron's concept of the 'archive affect'.

<sup>25</sup> Cavell, 'The World as Things', p. 273-78.

on the collecting essay – on the Venezuelan performance artist Antonieta Sosa’s ‘sublat[ing...] the debris or leaving of life into a work of art.’<sup>26</sup>

Cavell’s essays on collecting and on passionate utterances were written within two years of each other, both for projects at the Centre Pompidou, and both were collected by Cavell in the same volume. In claiming these as complementary, and as together offering a distinctive account of found footage filmmaking, I have in mind the notion Cavell provides in the collecting essay on Walter Benjamin’s behalf of a ‘skepticism of traces’, or the belief that collecting is tantamount to self-evasion.<sup>27</sup> Noting Benjamin’s views on the fetishism for collections in the creation of the nineteenth-century European bourgeois home, Cavell comments here on how collecting ‘traces’ of bygone or ephemeral events can typically serve to ward off self-knowledge, an outcome figured in Benjamin’s ‘portrait’ of the collector as lacking ‘interiority’.<sup>28</sup> But Cavell is less concerned with bringing out the dangers of collecting than its expressive powers. For him, these include the varieties of self-revelation that allow collecting to participate in the powers of passionate utterance. Indeed, the examples Cavell chooses in writing about collecting show collectors as engaged in activities of self-understanding or self-revelation: Cavell comments on Freud’s collection as marking the space of his therapeutic procedures, while Sosa’s ‘debris’ amount to the reconstruction of her apartment for museum visitors. In other words, it is only within the grip of a narrow conception of collecting’s function – one that cannot survive Cavell’s late turn to Austin, and his emphasis on a variety of self-revealing expressive functions, from

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 260. Cavell, ‘Crossing Paths’, in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (SUNY Press, 2005), p. 369.

<sup>27</sup> Cavell, ‘The World as Things’, p. 247.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

which we have no good reason to exclude collecting – that collecting can seem bound up with a kind of self-evasion, or a ‘skepticism of traces.’

Extending Cavell’s picture of collecting as an activity of passionate utterance and self-revelation, and aiming to describe the powers of found or repurposed footage as such an activity, I’d like to turn in closing to Bruno Varela’s forty-minute film *Monolito*. I take this film as significant for this discussion not only because Varela is an avowed reader of Cavell, but also because the film offers a sustained interrogation of the relations between repurposed footage and ‘global-holistic’ thinking, especially as regards questions about a world’s receding from view.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the film’s motivating philosophical reference is to Félix Guattari’s unproduced science-fiction screenplay, *A Love of UIQ*, which recounts the discovery of an ‘Infra-Quark Universe’ that ‘will eventually overturn and reshape the entire planet.’<sup>30</sup> Varela’s way of ‘filming’ Guattari, however, is to turn to his own personal archive, and above all to fragments from this: MiniDV footage of the 2006 popular uprising in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca shot by Varela; digitally distorted VHS images from films by Godard and Tarkovsky; still images from Varela’s previous work in Indigenous community video; and audio downloaded from YouTube of a speech on fire, transformation, and the Mexican gods by the Colombian-Mexican gnostic Samael Aun Weor. In other words, in speaking from his own archive, Varela here turns a science-fiction narrative into exactly the kind of act of self-revelation central to Cavell’s writing on collections and passionate utterances.

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<sup>29</sup> On Varela’s reading Cavell, see my ‘The Specter of the Electronic Screen: Bruno Varela’s Reception of Stanley Cavell’, in *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. David LaRocca (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Personal conversation with Varela. Félix Guattari, *A Love of UIQ*, trans. Silvia Magloni and Graeme Thomson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012), pp. 57, 50.

*Monolito*'s images revolve around the 2006 'Oaxaca commune' uprising and the titular monolith belonging to the autonomous community of Santa Cruz Yagavila (shown in an image recycled from Varela's 2000 video *Nuestra Ley*). Though Varela leaves his footage's sources and original context unidentified, he here (re-)documents the horror of the 2006 protests' violent repression. And yet, what he ultimately communicates is the feeling of an old world being transformed into a new one. We tremble at the sound of reordered fragments of Aun Weor's speech as they play over Varela's archival videos; these sonic invocations of fire's renewal of nature inform our sense of disruption across images of police barricades and disparate electronic screens. Varela's collecting and recycling old footage then functions much like finding one's words – or finding one's place – at just the moment a world is receding from view. Such conditions also elicit a kind of provisionality and openness in expression, which Varela thematizes in labeling *Monolito* as a continual work in progress.<sup>31</sup> As with other forms of passionate utterance, *Monolito*'s refusal of completeness is crucial to its self-revelations.

Cavell himself never lost his interest in what it is for a world to recede from view. The notion of release from previous ties to something cosmic, and the imperative of finding new modes of expression in that moment, even structure the final pages of his autobiography.<sup>32</sup> It is the aspect of his 'global-holistic' approach that most survives his turn away from modernism – and rightly so, since it is the aspect most richly complemented by his late embrace of the fragmentary in film. After all, as Cavell and *Monolito* have their ways of asking: what other means do we have of making sense of a 'world lost' but its fragmentary traces? And if we can

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<sup>31</sup> See <https://vimeo.com/368070969> (accessed August 19, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> See the reading of Maurice Blanchot in Cavell, *Little Did I Know* (Stanford: Stanford, 2010), pp. 522-48.

*project* those traces – if they can be means for passionate self-revelation – what other kind of *wholeness* could we want?