

CONVERSATIONS WITH STANLEY

SÉRGIO DIAS BRANCO

What we call thinking may be just a kind of conversation with others and myself. Which kind? It may be simply, or exactly, a conversation in which, and through which, I discover that my reflections on the world are limited and I come into contact with what lies beyond these limits. Such boundaries shift with the conversation, as does our perception of the world. Thinking is a distinctly human task, one that is *constitutive* of humanity in its confrontation with skepticism — the critical point within critical thinking and a threat to which we as humans are asked to respond on ethical grounds. Perhaps that is why few other intellectual works had the same effect on me as that of Stanley Cavell (1926–2018). Discovering *The World Viewed*^[1] was one of the highlights of my student years. I owe this reading suggestion to Andrew Klevan, then my teacher at the University of Kent before his appointment at Oxford. Stanley’s free way of writing, open thinking and rethinking, careful consideration of topics and concepts, and permanent connection of thought and art to life was engaging. Then came his other books. His philosophical contributions, which cannot be defined as a philosophy *per se*, were elaborated along these lines. That is why he wrote:

Cynics about philosophy, and perhaps about humanity, will find that questions without answers are empty; dogmatists will claim to have arrived at answers; philosophers after my heart will rather wish to convey the thought that while there maybe no satisfying answers to such questions in certain forms, there are, so to speak, directions to answers, ways to think, that are worth the time of your life to discover.^[2]

Talking about questions without answers, to which we reply nonetheless, is tantamount to an affirmation that thinking has no end, that it is a never-ending human endeavor of conversation. It was in this spirit that a colleague from Canada, Amir Khan, and I began to sketch out a journal of Cavellian studies. “Cavellian” does not describe a complete and closed philosophical system, but points to a field of dialogue opened up by a particular way of philosophizing. We pitched the project to the University of Ottawa, where Amir was affiliated, and that institution became the partner we needed. For the advisory board, we gathered scholars who engaged with Cavell’s thoughts and writings from different academic areas — aesthetics, film studies, literary theory, moral philosophy, political philosophy, theatre studies, theology —: Stanley Bates (Middlebury College), who passed away in late 2017, Sarah Beckwith (Duke University), Peter Dula (Eastern Mennonite University), Richard Eldridge (Swarthmore College), Adam Gonya (Braemar College), Larry Jackson (The New School), Andrew (University of Oxford), Stephen Mulhall (University of Oxford), Sianne Ngai (Stanford University), Andrew Norris (University of California, Santa Barbara), Lawrence Rhu (University of South Carolina), D. N. Rodowick (University of Chicago), and Miguel Tamen (University of Lisbon). The first issue of *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* was published in 2013.

Throughout its six published issues, the journal has set up *threads of conversation*. The opportunities to follow and peer into such conversations, we hoped, would keep readers interested. For instance, Stanley saw art criticism and philosophical thinking *each as the other*, both as human activities, that is, personal activities, which are inherently dialogical. The publication springs from the same view. He writes:

This [...] means, for me, defending the process of criticism, so far as criticism is thought of, as I think of it, as a natural extension of conversation. (And I think of conversation as something within which that remark about conversation is naturally in place. This one too.)^[3]

For Stanley, a philosopher must acknowledge and valorize human expression, particularly in its verbal form. Words have to be intimately charged with life and therefore philosophical thought has to return and be returned to the ordinary. In this sense, all of his writings have direct or indirect autobiographical connections. It is not that when he is thinking philosophically he cannot think beyond his own history. Rather, the meandering affair of thinking and rethinking from his own history, which is also the history of ideas and the history of others, makes his thought thick and inviting as if it were the starting of a potentially endless dialogue with himself as well as with us.

The rich history of film criticism shows us that films invite conversations, particularly about their relationship with reality and dreams. Stanley discusses these topics from the idea that film gives us an image of skepticism:

The moral of film’s image of skepticism is not that reality is a dream and not that reality confines our dreams. In screening reality, film screens its givenness from us; it holds reality from us, it holds reality before us, i.e., withholds reality before us. [...] To know how far reality is open to our dreams would be to know how far reality is confined by our dreams of it.^[4]

Stanley used to say that, in life, he was better at beginnings than endings. There is no end to our conversations with him. It is true that his voice belonged to him, but not his discourse once it has been said or written, interpreted, discussed, commented, contradicted or complemented, time after time. He has passed away. Yet the philosophical conversations he has initiated, sometimes resuming exchanges that preceded his life, have been passed along.

[1]. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[2]. Cavell, “The Thought of Movies”, in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1984), 9.

[3]. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 7.

[4]. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 19.

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