

The Future of Art Criticism

Objectivism Goes to the Movies

KYLE BARROWMAN

ABSTRACT: By virtue of an extended consideration of problems and possibilities in the discipline of film studies toward the goal of constructing an Objectivist aesthetics of cinema, this article examines some of the most pressing issues facing contemporary art criticism. Opposing tenets of an Aristotelian aesthetic tradition against tenets of a Kantian aesthetic tradition, the author attempts to resolve a number of long-standing aporias in the Objectivist aesthetics and in the philosophy of art more broadly in the hopes of charting a fruitful path for the future of art criticism.

KEYWORDS: Objectivism, authorship, aesthetics, Aristotle, Kant, poststructuralism, film, Cavell, Carroll, perfectionism

1. Introduction

In an essay entitled “Philosophical Problems in Contemporary Art Criticism: Objectivism, Poststructuralism, and the Axiom of Authorship,” I expressed a

desire to see transformations in the field of art criticism and in the epistemological and axiological commitments taken up by philosophers of art (Barrowman 2017). In light of a point made by Leonard Peikoff (1991, 447) with respect to the aesthetic writings of Ayn Rand—that, in the absence of a fully worked out philosophy of art, Rand’s aesthetic writings provide at most “a lead to some broad aesthetic principles [that] would have to be applied specifically to the major arts”—I encouraged scholars invested in the possibilities of the Objectivist aesthetics to take up the implicit challenge of applying Objectivist principles to the major arts.¹ Taking my own advice, I intend in what follows to apply Objectivist principles to the major art of film.² More specifically, I will work my way through the discipline of film studies toward the goal of establishing a solid foundation for the construction of an Objectivist aesthetics of cinema.³

For heuristic purposes, in what follows, I will frame the battle of aesthetics as a battle between two distinct traditions, the first of which I will call Aristotelian (of which Objectivism, for example, is a contemporary variant) and the second of which I will call Kantian (of which poststructuralism, for example, is a contemporary variant). Despite the heuristic value in framing the aesthetic battle in this fashion, there are, of course, innumerable discriminations and specifications that can and should be made with respect to the attempts of individual philosophers to fashion philosophies of art. For my purposes here, one such discrimination that I would like to make at the outset is that to label much of what can be said to fall in line with the Kantian aesthetic tradition as “Kantian philosophies of art” would be something of a misnomer, for much of what gets trafficked as Kantian philosophies of art are merely misguided attempts to fashion philosophies of art out of Kant’s general philosophy of beauty.⁴ To claim, as Roland Barthes did, for example, that an artwork is less like a “message” and more like “the thread of a stocking” (Barthes [1967] 1977, 147; cf. Barrowman 2017, 185–86 n.7), or to claim, as Jacques Derrida did, that an artwork is “a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin” (Derrida [1966] 2001, 369; cf. Barrowman 2017, 178), is to claim that an artwork is “purposive without purpose.” The Kantian basis for such claims as those made by Barthes and Derrida (and countless others) is often taken to be a section of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* titled “Analytic of the Beautiful” (Kant [1790] 2007, 35–74).⁵ In this section (in which Kant is importantly concerned with objects of nature, not art), Kant discusses the concept of aesthetic purposiveness in the following terms:

Purposiveness, therefore, may exist apart from a purpose, insofar as we do not locate the causes of this form in a will. . . . [Hence], we may at least observe a purposiveness with respect to form and trace it in objects—though by reflection only—without resting it on an end. (52)

I have already suggested that Barthes's quasi-Kantian conception of an artwork entails a reconceptualization of what an artwork is/does (Barrowman 2017, 185–86 n.7). By the same token, to reconceptualize what an artwork is/does on this quasi-Kantian ground further entails a reconceptualization of what *criticism* is/does. This latter issue will be my primary concern in what follows. On the critical front, scholars in the Kantian aesthetic tradition have used as inspiration the fact that Kant anchored what he called “aesthetic judgments” in judgments of *beauty* and *taste* as opposed to *meaning* and *value*—the consequences of which when extrapolated to philosophies of art have been nothing short of disastrous (see Carroll 2009). Rand once remarked that the formulation of aesthetic principles to anchor objective criticism was “a task at which modern philosophy has failed dismally” (Rand [1969] 1975, 33). To be more precise, this is a task that is anathema to modern philosophy, for what modern philosophy has instituted under the heading of criticism is an inherently subjective activity involving the exercise of taste with respect to purposive-without-purpose objects of aesthetic beauty. In this tradition, objectivity is anathema; hence the philosophical problems that plague contemporary art criticism.⁶

Though Rand was never comfortable accepting the dogma of aesthetic subjectivism, she was unfortunately never able to formulate a coherent alternative.⁷ In the interest of time and space, a comprehensive explication of Rand's aesthetic writings is beyond the scope of this essay. However, a brief sojourn will help to establish my position on Rand's writings and to clarify the specifically Objectivist terms of my intervention into debates in film studies. To start, one of the most significant aesthetic principles put forth by Rand (derived, as I will argue, from a dubious epistemological surmise) is that “emotions are not tools of cognition” (32).⁸ This aesthetic principle is epistemologically justified via her distinction between a *sense of life* (that is, an emotional response to the world) and a *philosophy of life* (that is, a cognitive response to the world) (15–19). This is a powerful and subtle distinction, yet, as far as I can see, nowhere in this distinction is the conclusion that “emotions are not tools of cognition” warranted. If anything, Rand ultimately ends up proving that emotions *are* tools of cognition, and *valuable* tools, at that.⁹

The consequences for the Objectivist aesthetics of Rand's tendency to equivocate on the relationship between reason and emotion are discernible across her considerations of the processes of artistic production and reception. Rand argues that “it is the artist's sense of life that controls and integrates his work, directing the innumerable choices he has to make, from the choice of subject to the subtlest details of style,” while it is similarly the critic's sense of life that controls and integrates the response to an artist's work “by a complex yet automatic reaction of acceptance and approval, or rejection and condemnation” (25). By arguing that it is an artist's sense of life that directs his creative actions, Rand

could be interpreted as arguing that the emotions are what guide the artist in the act of production (and which, at the same time, guide the critic in the act of reception), which is to say that artists (and critics) are “always-already” in the grip of irrationality.

This (bizarrely enough, given her vehement Aristotelianism over and against Platonism) would lead her to a Platonic theory of emotions (cf. Carroll 1997). However, if her remarks are interpreted against the background of a cognitive theory of emotions, then her pictures of the processes of artistic production and reception gain in complexity and acuity.¹⁰ In one of her lectures on fiction writing, Rand articulated a concept she referred to as a “screen of vision,” which speaks to a far more complex picture of the process of artistic production and on the basis of which Rand seems to hold an implicit view of the emotions as potential tools capable of being put to use by the best artists (Rand [1958] 2000, 2–3).¹¹ As for the related argument that it is likewise the critic’s sense of life that directs the process of artistic reception, it is on this premise that Rand puts forth one of her most contentious aesthetic propositions:

A sense of life is the source of art, but it is *not* the sole qualification of an artist or of an aesthetician, and it is *not* a criterion of aesthetic judgment. . . . Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy, and just as a philosopher does not approach any other branch of his science with his feelings or emotions as his criterion of judgment, so he cannot do it in the field of aesthetics. A sense of life is not sufficient professional equipment. An aesthetician—as well as any man who attempts to evaluate art works—must be guided by more than an emotion. The fact that one agrees or disagrees with an artist’s philosophy is irrelevant to an *aesthetic* appraisal of his work *qua* art. One does not have to agree with an artist (nor even to enjoy him) in order to evaluate his work. In essence, an objective evaluation requires that one identify the artist’s theme, the abstract meaning of his work (exclusively by identifying the evidence contained in the work and allowing no other, outside considerations), then evaluate the means by which he conveys it—i.e., taking *his* theme as criterion, evaluate the purely aesthetic elements of the work, the technical mastery (or lack of it) with which he projects (or fails to project) *his* view of life. (Rand [1969] 1975, 32–33)

As an initial step into the hermeneutic minefield that Rand is traversing in this complex passage, consider the first line where Rand argues that a sense of life “is *not* the sole qualification of an artist or of an aesthetician, and it is *not* a criterion of aesthetic judgment.” The emphasis in the first part is on “not” but “sole” is at least present; in the second part, however, the emphasis is once

again on “not” but “sole” has now been removed. This would seem to differentiate the processes of artistic production and reception, and in significant fashion. As if sensing the implications of her formulation, Rand mollifies her position when she writes that an aesthete “must be guided by more than an emotion.” The claim that an aesthete must be guided by *more than* an emotion does not invalidate the emotions *in toto* and instead implies that the emotions are valid as a cognitive tool in aesthetics. In light of Rand’s model of conceptualization—“something *exists* of which I am *conscious*; I must discover its *identity*” (Rand [1966–67] 1990, 59)—it seems that a comparable model of aesthetic judgment can be formulated as follows: I *like* (or *dislike*) an artwork; I must discover the *reason(s)*. On this model, emotion “directs” reason in an attention-guiding fashion; hence, aesthetic judgment may be posited as rational without necessitating the elimination of the emotions from the judgment process.

Crucial to this model of aesthetic judgment is the practice of *introspection*. Rand once lamented the fact that “the field of introspection” is “an untouched jungle in which no conceptual paths have yet been cut” and in which most people are “unable [or unwilling] to identify the meaning of any inner state . . . spend[ing] their lives as cowed prisoners inside their own skulls, afraid to look out at reality, paralyzed by the mystery of their own consciousness” (76–77); in her estimation, “if men identified introspectively their inner states one tenth as correctly as they identify objective reality, we would be a race of ideal giants” (227; see also Branden 1997). After reaffirming that it is each individual’s epistemological task “to set into motion a process in which emotions and reason are brought into harmony,” Chris Matthew Sciabarra takes the baton from Rand and emphasizes the centrality of introspection in the lives of rational individuals as they “seek to articulate the cognitive basis of [their] emotions”; as he explains, “though we experience emotions as immediate primaries in our awareness, the introspective person does not accept them as axiomatic” (Sciabarra [1995] 2013, 171). The model of aesthetic judgment that I am proposing here is thus the introspective process by which, in the aesthetic realm, each individual may articulate the cognitive basis of their aesthetic judgments rather than merely accepting their initial emotional reactions to artworks as axiomatic.

Furthermore, consider the second half of the previously quoted passage. The confusion emanating from this part of the passage is rooted, in my estimation, in Rand’s ill-advised amalgamation of different critical activities under the heading of “evaluation.”¹² The initial claim animating this part of the passage, that “one does not have to agree with an artist (nor even to enjoy him) in order to evaluate his work,” is reasonable as far as it goes. One obviously does not have to agree with or like an artist prior to evaluating his work. Yet, I confess

to having difficulty countenancing the idea that one may disagree with and dislike an artist's work and yet judge his work to be *good* (much less *great*). This strikes me as a cheap variant of the mind/body split—to which, it bears mentioning, Rand was vehemently opposed (Rand 1957, 1026–1030; 1961a, 43). Recalling Rand's epistemological razor—“*concepts are not to be multiplied beyond necessity*—the corollary of which is: *nor are they to be integrated in disregard of necessity*” (Rand [1966–67] 1990, 72)—I think that, in the interest of conceptual clarity, the Objectivist aesthetics will benefit from a distinction between two related but distinct critical activities: *Interpretation* and *evaluation*. Proceeding from the previously articulated model of aesthetic judgment—I *like* (or *dislike*) an artwork; I must discover the *reason(s)*—the steps a critic takes in coming to terms with the initial emotional response provoked by a given artwork are as follows: First, the critic *interprets* the artwork toward the goal of understanding what it is, how it works, and whether or not it succeeds on the terms established by the artist; second, the critic *evaluates* the artwork toward the goal of articulating why he likes it (or does not like it), that is, articulating what it is about the artwork (if anything) that he *values* and why.

To *interpret* an artwork, then, a critic must accept the terms established by the artist; to *evaluate* an artwork, however, a critic must consider the terms established by the artist *in relation to his own terms*. Through these principles of aesthetic judgment, a link may be—and, as I will argue in what follows, should be—established between ethics and aesthetics. It is one of the central tenets of the Objectivist ethics that the source of ethical action is the “independent mind that recognizes no authority higher than its own” (Rand 1957, 1030). In a similar fashion, the moral vigilance for which Rand argues in relation to what she calls the Morality of Life (1051, 1069) must, I submit, be conterminally asserted in the realm of the Objectivist aesthetics, thereby elevating the Objectivist aesthetics to an Aesthetics of Life. Indeed, as I will argue at length in this essay, this is the only path to *objective* and, ultimately, *moral* criticism.

As far as sojourns go, it is my hope that this (all-too-)brief sojourn has helped to establish my position and to have clarified the Objectivist terms of my intervention into the discipline of film studies. To shift now to debates within film studies, and with respect to my distinction between interpretation and evaluation, I will begin by considering some of the most pressing concerns in the realm of film interpretation in an effort to justify—metaphysically, epistemologically, and ethically—an intentionalist philosophy of art anchored by what I have previously termed *the axiom of authorship* (Barrowman 2017, 156–58).

2. Objectivity and Interpretation

Inspired by John Crowe Ransom's characterization of literary criticism, David Bordwell (1989c) famously labeled the discipline of film studies “Interpretation,

Inc.” (26). Despite the many changes in theoretical fashion, interpreting films quickly became and has since remained “a going concern to be maintained at all costs” (26). At the same time, and again despite the many changes in theoretical fashion, interpretation has suffered from the persistence of premises deriving from the Kantian aesthetic tradition.¹³ In this and the following section, I will focus on the two following Kantian premises as they have been (implicitly or explicitly) applied to film: First, that *artworks are purposive without purpose*, which is to say, *artworks are objects of free beauty*; second, that *aesthetic judgments are judgments of taste*, which is to say, *aesthetic judgments are subjective*.

Given that this aesthetic tradition has its roots in Kantian philosophy, it will be useful initially to refute these premises in Kantian terms. The first premise, that artworks are purposive without purpose, presupposes that artworks are objects of what Kant calls free, as opposed to dependent, beauty. Kant explains the distinction in the following manner:

There are two kinds of beauty: Free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or beauty which is merely dependent (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object should be; the second does presuppose such a concept and, with it, an answering perfection of the object. Those of the first kind are said to be (self-subsisting) beauties of this thing or that thing; the other kind of beauty, being attached to a concept (conditioned beauty), is ascribed to objects which come under the concept of a particular end. (Kant [1790] 2007, 60)

Kant’s example of choice for an object of free beauty is a flower. According to Kant, “no perfection of any kind, no internal purposiveness as something to which the arrangement of the manifold is related,” underlies a judgment such as, “This flower is beautiful.” Since a flower is not “defined with respect to its end,” it may “please freely”; were it to be defined with respect to its end, it would introduce “an incumbrance which would only restrict the freedom of the imagination that, as it were, is at play in the contemplation of the outward form” (60). Extrapolating to a philosophy of film, the preceding implies the following: First, that an interpretation/evaluation of a film presupposes no concept of what the film should be (that is, neither a concept of medium nor of genre), and, second, that an interpretation/evaluation of a film presupposes no perfection or internal purposiveness and instead inclines toward a freedom of imagination and play.

This, however, is the exact opposite of how we actually engage with films in our everyday lives. Ordinarily, we not only presuppose a concept of “film,” we presuppose such concepts as “action film” or “horror film” or “romantic comedy,” and with them, an “answering perfection.” Added to which, we ordinarily interpret and evaluate films with respect to their ends based on their

internal purposiveness, a purposiveness often attributed to the filmmakers. We also ordinarily restrict our imaginations in the contemplation of films to what can be plausibly attributed to the filmmakers. Thus, it would appear to be the case, in both ordinary and academic life, that films are most naturally and most commonly treated as objects of dependent beauty rather than objects of free beauty. Ironically, Kant meant for this distinction to “settle many disputes” in criticism, “for we may show [critics] how one side is dealing with free beauty and the other with that which is dependent” (62). The reason that confusion rather than clarity has been Kant’s legacy is because occluded in his aesthetics is the concept of objectivity. Consider the following passage:

In respect of an object with a determinate internal end, a judgement of taste would only be pure where the person judging either has no concept of this end, or else makes abstraction from it in his judgement. But in cases like this, although such a person should lay down a correct judgement of taste, since he would be judging the object as a free beauty, he would still be censured by another who saw nothing in its beauty but a dependent quality (i.e., who looked to the end of the object) and would be accused by him of false taste, though both would, in their own way, be judging correctly, the one according to what he had present to his senses, the other according to what was present in his thoughts. (62)

The key phrase here is “both would, in their own way, be judging correctly.” Applied to film, if I were to judge *Inception* (2010) as an attempt on the part of Christopher Nolan to neutralize the threat of skepticism and someone else were to judge it as an unsolvable puzzle that thwarts the notion of objective reality and embraces skepticism, then we would both, in our own way, be judging correctly. That is, if *Inception* is conceived as an object of free beauty, then one’s imagination may—indeed, *should*—be given free rein and the question of which interpretation is “right” need not—indeed, *should not*—be of any concern; if, however, *Inception* is conceived as an object of dependent beauty, then one’s imagination may *not*—indeed, *should not*—be given free rein and the question of which interpretation is right should—indeed, *must*—be of the utmost concern in order to ensure that one is attending to the object in its specificity, as an objectively existing artwork the meaning of which it is the responsibility of the critic to accurately interpret and conscientiously evaluate.¹⁴

To eliminate this confusion, scholars in the Kantian aesthetic tradition must agree on whether artworks are objects of free beauty or objects of

dependent beauty. I have argued that they are objects of dependent beauty. If this is true—and I hope that I have convincingly demonstrated that it is—then not only does the first premise, that artworks are purposive without purpose, go by the board; so, too, does the second premise, that aesthetic judgments are judgments of taste. I will deal with the second premise more thoroughly in the next section. For the moment, it is worth highlighting the fact that interpreting a film as if it were an object of free beauty is not a matter of taste, it is not a subjective preference; it is a *mistake*, it is objectively *wrong*. Recalling Rand’s “Existence is Identity, Consciousness is Identification” formula (Rand 1957, 1016), if an artwork objectively exists, then it has an identity. Moreover, if an artwork has an identity, then it can be identified in criticism. The purpose of criticism, on this picture, would be to identify and interpret objectively existing artworks. Unfortunately for many scholars, this picture of criticism precludes the notion of free play attendant to objects of free beauty. Hence the all-too-familiar scholarly tactic of trying to have one’s cake and eat it—a tactic which, it warrants mentioning, was endorsed by Kant:

Since the freedom of the imagination consists precisely in the fact that it schematizes without a concept, [aesthetic judgment] must found upon a mere sensation of the mutually enlivening activity of the imagination in its *freedom* and of the understanding with its *conformity to law*. It must therefore rest upon a feeling that allows the [artwork] to be estimated by the purposiveness of the representation (by which an [artwork] is given) for the furtherance of the cognitive faculties in their free play. (Kant [1790] 2007, 117)

Try as critics might to have this Kantian cake and eat it, once it is conceded that artworks are objects of dependent beauty, to proceed in criticism as if they are objects of free beauty (in pursuit of ideals of free play, infinite polysemy, *différance*, etc.) is childish obstinacy at best.¹⁵ As Stanley Cavell ([1971] 1979) has put it with his characteristic equipoise:

The idea of infinite possibility is the pain, and the balm, of adolescence. The only return on becoming adult, the only justice in forgoing that world of possibility, is the reception of actuality—the pain and balm in the truth of the only world: That it exists, and I in it. (117)

From a similar vantage point as the one from which Cavell designates philosophy “the education of grownups” (Cavell 1979, 125), the Objectivist aesthetics of cinema for which I am arguing may be designated *criticism for grownups*. Grownup

criticism proceeds in accordance with the principles of objectivity, identity, and causality (Barrowman 2017, 157), and it sees in art not Kantian “finalities without end,” but rather, instances of Aristotelian *final causation*. Rand ([1958] 2000) explains the logic of an Aristotelian philosophy of art in the following manner:

I call your attention to Aristotle’s concepts of *efficient* and *final* causation. Efficient causation means that an event is determined by an antecedent cause. For instance, if you strike a match to a gasoline tank and it explodes, the striking of the match is the cause and the explosion is the effect. This is what we normally mean by causality as it exists in physical nature. Final causation means that the end result of a certain chain of causes determines those causes. . . . Final causation applies only to the work of a conscious entity—specifically of a *rational* one—because only a thinking consciousness can choose a purpose ahead of its existence and then select the means to achieve it. . . . An obvious example here pertains to writing. As a writer, you must follow the process of final causation: You decide on the theme of your book (your purpose), then select the events and the sentences that will concretize your theme. The reader, by contrast, follows the process of *efficient* causation: He goes step by step through your book being moved toward the abstraction you intended. Any purposeful activity follows the same progression. (20–21)¹⁶

For Rand, then, artworks very clearly have purposes, purposes which it is the responsibility of artists to be as clear, coherent, and consistent about in the creation of art as possible and which it is the responsibility of critics to be as discerning, precise, and scrupulous about in the criticism of art as possible. Already, however, the Objectivist aesthetics would appear to be faced with an insurmountable problem: What about (post)modernist/avant-garde/experimental art? I have claimed that it is wrong to proceed in criticism as if authorial intention is irrelevant and as if there is no objective meaning to be discovered in artworks. But am I not presupposing very specific kinds of artworks? What about artworks the purpose of which are to be ambiguous and to encourage the free play of subjective interpretations? Is the ontology of art presupposed by the Objectivist aesthetics not woefully restrictive?

From an evaluative perspective, one could argue, as Rand does, that such art, if it is art at all, is merely “child’s play along its periphery” (Rand [1969] 1975, 75). I will return to this argument in the following section.¹⁷ For now, I would simply like to clarify that this ontological “problem” is, in reality, a pseudo-problem. As I demonstrated in my critique of Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author,” the idea that authors have sought to problematize in various ways and to varying

degrees the concepts of authorship and objectivity still presupposes authorial intention (that is, problematizing the concept of authorship *is* the authorial intention—is, in Kantian terms, the purpose) and objective meaning (that is, the problematization of objectivity *is* the objective meaning) (Barrowman 2017, 162). Applied to film, if I were to argue that it is impossible to objectively resolve the central enigma of Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005), this would in no way invalidate the concepts of authorship or objectivity, for its ambiguity is *intentional* and the lack of a determinable, objective resolution to the film *is* its determinable, objective meaning.

In fact, in an ironic twist of fate, clarifying this pseudo-problem allows me to make an additional and seemingly paradoxical point. Even though my previous efforts were to make the case that poststructuralism has no philosophical merit (Barrowman 2017), I would like to stress that, from this, it does not follow that poststructuralism has no merit tout court. Its merit, I would argue, is hermeneutical rather than philosophical; that is to say, poststructuralism can be of use as a hermeneutic tool even though it is not valid as a conceptual orientation. Malcolm Turvey (2013) makes this point with respect to psychoanalysis:

The way psychoanalysis is used [is] for the most part . . . as a theory that generates interpretations. People will look at a Hitchcock film or a David Lynch film and say, “You can interpret this film through psychoanalytic theory.” You can, for example, interpret the behavior of a character as being motivated by unconscious desires or impulses. I see no problem with this because there are certain films and works of art that lend themselves very easily to psychoanalytic interpretation. And that’s no surprise, because the psychoanalytical view of human nature, broadly speaking, is one shared by many artists, and therefore they will design works in which characters have unconscious desires. . . . It’s more problematic to me to say that psychoanalysis is true as a theory of mind and mentality. . . . That seems to be a much more problematic enterprise. (90–91)¹⁸

In a similar vein, I have argued that, as a philosophical perspective on metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political, and aesthetic issues, poststructuralism is nonsense. As a hermeneutic tool, however, poststructuralism can be put to productive use when it comes to interpreting films concerned with poststructuralist hallmarks such as the phenomena of miscommunication and misunderstanding, the play of presence and absence, the impossibility of objective knowledge, etc. Cartesian skepticism may be nonsense, but interpreting *The Matrix* (1999) as if Descartes never conjured up that evil demon strikes me

as an exercise in futility.¹⁹ Likewise, interpreting Jarmusch's films as if Derrida never waxed philosophical on the vicissitudes of communication will make it difficult to come to terms with Jarmusch's enigmatic dialogue and ambiguous narratives.²⁰ In other words, selecting the proper interpretive tools for the job is a matter of knowing what the job requires. Speaking in such a register presupposes, of course, that it is possible to (objectively) *know* the job (that is, the film) prior to opening one's toolkit. That is, it presupposes that the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a given interpretive tool is determinable only with reference to the objective content of the film to be interpreted.

If I have managed to dodge the ontological bullet, I must now dodge a series of epistemological bullets. First, have I not entered the realm of the chicken or the egg (or, to preserve Kantian terminology, the realm of "phenomena and noumena")? Far from the objective content of a film (the "thing-in-itself") determining the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a given interpretive tool, is it not the case that the interpretive tool "determines" the "objective content"? This is what I will refer to as the *paradigm subjectivity argument*, the "logic" of which is discernible in the following exemplary explication:

Questions that bear on the institutional maintenance of the hermeneutical field as such [such as which interpretive tool is most appropriate for a given film] . . . are not concerns which come *after* the particular text in question or which are properly "extrinsic" to it—they are concerns which address the very definition of the textual artifact as an artifact. Insofar as the artifact is meaningful . . . it is because [scholars] continue to support the [hermeneutical] structures . . . which read the artifact on their terms. (Mowitt 1992, 214–15)

The paradigm subjectivity argument has been running rampant in film studies for decades.²¹ Dudley Andrew (1984b) has argued that "there is no objective truth about signification in films, only a tradition of reading them in such and such a way" (14). Likewise, Slavoj Žižek (2001) has argued that postulating the existence of a given film as an "objective reality" merely "begs the question of what 'objective reality' means . . . [for] the procedures of posing problems and finding solutions to them always and by definition occur within a certain [paradigm] that determines which problems are crucial and which solutions acceptable" (17–18). It would appear that the paradigm subjectivity argument relies principally on the phenomenon of disagreement. Noël Carroll (2009) has commented on the frequency with which disagreement is adduced as evidence against the possibility of objective evaluation (32–43), which is an issue to which I will return in the following section. For the moment, I wish to extend this argument to defend the possibility of objective interpretation.

Obviously, so the argument goes, given the different philosophical/political/historical/critical perspectives/agendas of different paradigms, it stands to reason that different paradigms will have different investments and will thus “discover” different “objective truths” in the “same” artwork. Does this actually stand (up) to reason, though? Recall the controversy between Derrida and Jacques Lacan vis-à-vis Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter” (1844) (Barrowman 2017, 193 n.37). Part of Derrida’s strategy was to use Marie Bonaparte as a foil; he indicates the numerous methodological differences and interpretive strategies that separate Lacan and Bonaparte in their interpretations of the story. Yet, at the conclusion of his consideration of Lacan *avec* Bonaparte, which corresponds to the point at which their interpretations “mysteriously” converge, he asks a question with very important consequences:

Why [if Lacan’s method is so different from Bonaparte’s] does [he] refind, along with the truth, the same meaning and the same topos as [she] did. . . . Is this a coincidence? Is it a coincidence if, in allegedly breaking with psychobiographical criticism . . . one rejoins it in its ultimate semantic anchorage? (Derrida 1972, 444)

Put simply: No, it is not a coincidence. It is not a coincidence that, despite protestations against author-based criticism, Lacan ultimately “rejoins it” (any more than it is a coincidence that Derrida does the same in his own work [Barrowman 2017, 178–79]). Nor is it a coincidence that, despite methodological differences and despite differences in interpretive strategies, Lacan’s interpretation fits neatly alongside Bonaparte’s (and, at some points, matches it exactly). After all, there is only so much that one can do with a finite amount of material.²² This point corresponds to what Paul Ricoeur formulates as the “injunction of the text” (Ricoeur [1981] 2016, 155; see also Britton 1979, 424–25). By contrast, according to the paradigm subjectivity argument, it is the injunction of the paradigm that is paramount. To this notion—which leads inexorably to the patently ludicrous conclusion that interpretive paradigms are used not to (objectively) *understand* but to (subjectively) *construct* artworks—Andrew Britton (1986) was justifiably hostile, arguing that “this proposition, when it is not a truism, is little more than a self-serving scholastic fiction and a license for intellectual irresponsibility” and proclaiming that “such theory is anti-theoretical, as well as a betrayal of the function of criticism” (383).

If, having debunked the paradigm subjectivity argument, I have managed to dodge the first epistemological bullet, the second bullet will not be far behind. Signaled by Britton’s remarks, the question has now become: *What is* the function of criticism? Let’s say it is conceded that artworks are objectively existing, intentional objects (or, in Kantian terms, objects of dependent beauty). If this

is true—and, once again, I hope that I have convincingly demonstrated that it is—then the function of criticism is to interpret and evaluate such objects. Recalling once again Rand’s “Existence is Identity” formula, if films objectively exist, then they have identities; if films have identities, then their identities can be identified. Interpretation, then, is the identification of the identities, or the meanings, of objectively existing films. Now I must dodge the second epistemological bullet: How can I know if I have correctly identified the identity of a given film? Even if it is conceded that objective interpretation is *ontologically* possible—a concession that I hope is now easier for scholars to make—is it *epistemologically* possible? Is it not the case that, eventually, I will be forced to admit that, no matter how thorough or sophisticated a given interpretation of mine may be, I have no grounds on which to claim that I know the interpretation to be *right*?

This is what I will refer to as the *aesthetic skepticism argument*. Incidentally, it is on this issue that Peter Wollen’s point that a critic puts himself “at risk” in every engagement with an artwork hits with the most force (Wollen [1972] 2013, 139; cf. Barrowman 2018a). In the Objectivist sense that thinking is volitional rather than automatic and subject to error rather than infallible, Wollen’s point is absolutely true. To then claim, as Wollen did (and, truth be told, as all scholars with an affinity for poststructuralism or the Kantian aesthetic tradition invariably do), that artworks are subjective constructs which do not objectively exist, which have no essential meaning, and which neither originate in nor emanate from human consciousness, however, is to try to eliminate that risk. But that risk cannot be eliminated. Every interpretation, as with every knowledge claim, comes with the risk of being wrong. Thus, as it relates to film interpretation, the answer to the question “How do I know?” can only be answered in what Cavell ([1971] 1979) refers to as a specific “act of criticism” (219), an act in which the critic willingly and bravely decides, as Daniel Morgan (2014) has put it, to “play with danger.” In order to avoid such critical danger, scholars all-too-frequently go the route of the Kantian “Copernican Revolution”—which dictates that “objects must conform to our cognition” (Kant [1787] 1998, 110)—and demand that films conform to their interpretations of them. In the hopes of making less appealing to grownup critics this route of the child smashing or biting off parts of puzzle pieces to make them fit into whatever slot he wants, I would like to attempt, before getting into the specifics of the aesthetic skepticism argument, to blunt the force of the general skepticism fueling it.

The first source of unease motivating any form of skepticism is likely to be the concept of knowledge deployed. I have previously discussed what Cavell refers to as *the truth of skepticism* (Barrowman 2017, 189 n.23), that “*what* skepticism questions or denies my knowledge of *is* the world of objects I inhabit, is the *world*” (Cavell 1979, 448). From this point, he argues that the desire of skeptics

to know with certainty the existence of the world paradoxically gives ground to “a sense of powerlessness” in the face of “the precariousness and arbitrariness of existence, the utter contingency in the fact that things are as they are” (236), thus leading skeptics to embrace subjectivism and to replace *the* (objective) world—or, in the terms of aesthetic skepticism, *the* (objective) film—with *a* (subjective) world/film they fancy as subject to their whims. Expanding on this argument, Cavell shifts to what he refers to as *the moral of skepticism*, that “the human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing” (241).

The key phrase is obviously “what we think of as knowing.” What do we think of as knowing?²³ More often than not—and always in skeptical arguments—the concept of knowledge deployed is some sort of quasi-Hegelian “Absolute Knowledge” to rival the omniscience enjoyed by God. In response to this tendency, Cavell asks: “What rootlessness, or curse, made us, lets us, think of our basis in this way?” (241). Religion is one obvious curse.²⁴ The intrinsic/subjective dichotomy is another.²⁵ A third source of confusion, and one with direct relevance for the aesthetic skepticism argument, is the very language of criticism. When critics discuss *the* interpretation of a film, is the implication not that they know *the one and only true* interpretation? In addition to a confused conception of knowledge, it turns out that there is also often floating around in aesthetics a confused conception of truth, one which Carroll rejects under the heading of “the final word conception of truth” according to which “a proposition about some state of affairs *x* is true if and only if that proposition exhausts *x* to such an extent that there is nothing left to be said about *x*.” This, to Carroll’s mind, is “simply a nonstarter,” although the currency of this “phony conception of truth” does at least help to clarify one of the reasons that aesthetic skepticism gains purchase. Carroll acknowledges the possibility of scholars being misled “by the fact that we sometimes speak of *the* interpretation of an artwork,” the definite article implying, as already indicated, the one and only true interpretation; however, he also avers that “generally we are speaking of *an* interpretation,” an interpretation which, moreover, “may be complemented or supplemented or otherwise enlarged by others” (Carroll 2009, 125).

A skeptic may consider the endpoint of this line of thinking to be aesthetic skepticism, for am I not endorsing the claim that there is no one “right” interpretation of an artwork? Indeed, does this position not also unwittingly let the paradigm subjectivity argument back in? Am I not conceding that, since there are only *interpretations* of an artwork, different interpretations generated by different paradigms may, in Kantian terms, each be correct in their own way? In fact, I *am* conceding that different interpretations generated by different paradigms may each be correct in their own way. But this is a far cry from endorsing the aesthetic skepticism argument or the paradigm subjectivity argument. It is,

by contrast, to promulgate what I will refer to as the *complementary paradigm argument*.²⁶

To clarify the terms of this argument, consider the following example. On the one hand, according to a psychoanalytic paradigm, I could interpret the coming-of-age romantic comedy *Secret Admirer* (1985) as an expression of Lacan's thesis that "a letter always arrives at its destination" (Lacan [1966] 2006, 30); on the other hand, according to a deconstructionist paradigm, I could interpret the film in light of what Derrida describes as the "postal principle" (Derrida 1979, 189–93); still not exhausted by these two competing paradigms, I could even interpret the film according to an ordinary language paradigm as an indication of the centrality of intention in "performative utterances" (Austin 1962). These paradigms may not be philosophically compatible, but they each illuminate aspects of *Secret Admirer* based on their respective hermeneutic strengths. And, brought together, the interpretations of crucial aspects of the film generated by these three paradigms contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the film's objective content, which is neither determined by nor exhausted by a single paradigm.

As this example should make clear, what is crucially missing from the paradigm subjectivity argument is the concept of objectivity (hence its name). Since there is allegedly no objectively existing film, each paradigm is free to generate myriad interpretations without worrying about right and wrong (for on what grounds could one even claim an interpretation to be right or wrong?). The key to avoiding confusion on this point is to know at what level claims of right and wrong ought to be pitched. Preserving the example of *Secret Admirer*, if I were to claim that the Lacanian interpretation on the basis of which the film proves that a letter always arrives at its destination is true, the implication, as Carroll pointed out, is that the Lacanian interpretation exhausts the meaning to be discovered, that the Lacanian interpretation says all that there is to say about the film. It may be true that, for a given film, a certain paradigm affords a more comprehensive interpretation than any other paradigm; it is unlikely, however, that any one paradigm could exhaust an entire film.

But the point is that none of this is in any way problematic for either the complementary paradigm argument or for the concept of objectivity as such. It is simply to acknowledge a fact about interpretation—a fact, moreover, that connects art and its criticism in a very important respect. In the same vein as Rand defines art as the "selective recreation of reality" (Rand [1969] 1975, 8), I will define interpretation as *the selective recreation of artworks*. Having similarly intuited the necessarily selective nature of interpretation, Cavell has argued that the completion of an interpretation "is not a matter of providing *all* interpretations but a matter of seeing one of them *through*," the benefit of which for criticism is the way this "leaves open to investigation what the relations

are” between a film, an interpretation of a film, and complementary/conflicting interpretations of a film (Cavell 1981a, 37–38).²⁷

The proponent of aesthetic skepticism is likely still skeptical. I may have usefully clarified certain facets of interpretation, but even if it is conceded that films are objectively existing, intentional objects; even if it is conceded that interpretation is an objective process; and even if it is conceded that objective interpretation is a necessarily selective process the focus of which is on selected aspects of films, I still have not addressed the problem of the alleged groundlessness of the process. That is, I still have not answered the fundamental question: How do I know? If it is my goal to build an Objectivist aesthetics of cinema anchored by the axiom of authorship, such a goal would imply that I believe authors to be the most obvious sources of knowledge about artworks. But how can I know an author’s intentions? To answer this question, I will have to clarify the terms of the intentionalist philosophy of art logically entailed by an Objectivist aesthetics of cinema.

To this point, my considerations of skepticism have been focused on only one side of the skepticism coin, namely, skepticism of the external world (or, in the terms of the aesthetic skepticism argument, skepticism of the external film). But there are two sides to the skepticism coin. The other side is skepticism of other minds (or, in the terms of the aesthetic skepticism argument, skepticism of authorial minds). Having reached the point of considering the possibilities of an intentionalist philosophy of art, I have also reached the point at which I must deal with this other side of the skepticism coin. With respect to skepticism of the external world, Cavell (1979) has argued that the final destination reached by skeptics is insanity;²⁸ with respect to skepticism of other minds, however, he has argued that the final destination reached by skeptics is tragedy (389–496). Skepticism of the external world is, for Cavell, the easier dilemma to solve. As he puts it, recalling his discussion of “living one’s skepticism” (Barrowman 2017, 181–82), to say that one cannot live skepticism of the external world “is to say that there is an alternative to its conclusion that [one is] bound, as a normal human being, to take” (Cavell 1979, 448). Therefore, if one does not take that conclusion, then one is clearly not normal—one is, to recall the remark of Wittgenstein’s invoked vis-à-vis Barthes’s aesthetic hedonism, demented (Barrowman 2017, 186 n.8). Skepticism of other minds is, epistemologically and ethically, the far more difficult dilemma, for “there is no such alternative, or no such conclusion” (Cavell 1979, 448).

Interestingly, part of Cavell’s strategy in dealing with skepticism of other minds is to observe that, despite being harder to resolve, it is, logically speaking, rarely as radical as skepticism of the external world. The endpoint of the skeptical argument against the external world is often that it is not only unknowable, *it may not even exist*; the endpoint of the skeptical argument against other minds, however,

is often only that they are unknowable. The existence of other minds is rarely doubted. As Cavell expresses it, “the other is [often] left, along with his knowledge of himself; so am I, along with mine” (353). And yet, despite the fact that, in the terms of the aesthetic skepticism argument, the existence of authorial minds is often conceded, it is likewise far more difficult for scholars to acknowledge the authorial mind than to acknowledge the external film. Cavell maintains that “the alternative to my acknowledgment of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him” (389). Proponents of aesthetic skepticism tend to rely, in their last-ditch attempts to justify the avoidance/denial of authors, on two further epistemological objections.

The first and most common epistemological objection to acknowledging the author is that nobody is psychic. I cannot possibly *know* what Martin Scorsese was thinking when he devised the camera movement during Robert De Niro’s uncomfortably awkward phone call to Cybill Shepherd following their disastrous date in *Taxi Driver* (1976) . . . or can I? Do I need to be a psychic to be able to be a mind reader? Carroll points out that, short of being psychics, we nevertheless spend most of our time reading minds:

Mind reading, as the evolutionary psychologists call it, is one of the most important advantages that natural selection has bequeathed to human beings. The man lines up to the hot dog stand and the vendor recognizes that he intends to buy a frankfurter. My secretary knocks on my door, and I infer she needs something signed. The driver stops behind my parking space and waits for me to pull out; I suspect he wants my space. We spend our days and nights reading the minds of our conspecifics continuously, and a simply stunning number of our surmises are correct. Other people are hardly consummately unfathomable. We are wrong on numerous occasions, but most of us are right far more often than we are wrong. If we weren’t, neither our life nor human life in general would probably last for long. But if we are so good at [groking] intentions in everyday life, why suppose we sour at it when we turn to art? (Carroll 2009, 71)²⁹

This would appear to be one epistemological objection down. The second epistemological objection is that nobody is a medium. If I claim, short of being a psychic, to be able to read Scorsese’s mind and “divine” his intentions in *Taxi Driver*, there is at least the possibility of having my claims verified by the author. What about my claims for Charlie Chaplin’s intentions in making *The Circus* (1928)? I certainly cannot ask him to verify my claims. In this instance (and, truthfully, in all instances of interpretation), I must let the reasoning in my interpretation stand against any objections. This is where the Wittgensteinian notion of “bedrock” becomes relevant (Wittgenstein [1949] 1967, 3 [§1], 85 [§217]).

Cavell relates how the persistence of the “How do I know?” question is the reason why skepticism, “should we feel its power, is devastating: [The skeptic] is not challenging a particular belief or set of beliefs about, say, other minds; he is challenging the ground of our beliefs altogether, our power to believe at all” (Cavell 1969b, 240). With reference to the aesthetic skepticism argument, the persistence of the “How do I know?” question has led countless scholars to the erroneous belief that it is impossible to actually know what a film means. To avoid making this error, scholars must recognize the nonsensical argumentative protocols on which skepticism relies for its “power.”

If I answer the “How do I know?” question by formulating an interpretation (which, in effect, is an answer in the form of “*This* is how I know”) but the skeptic remains skeptical, then I have reached bedrock. The point that I wish to make with reference to the Wittgensteinian notion of bedrock is that if, in response to my answer (in the form of an interpretation) to the “How do I know?” question, the skeptic cannot produce a counterargument (in the form of an alternate interpretation), then I may consider the question answered and the interpretation correct. Of course, in lieu of a counterargument, skeptics often have recourse, as a corollary to the “How do I know?” question, to the statement “Maybe you are wrong.” But this pseudo-rebuttal, as Peikoff (1981) has cogently argued, is merely the hollow Hail Mary of skepticism; it is not a counterargument to be rebutted in turn. Moreover, as Wittgenstein argues, the position from which the “Maybe you are wrong” statement is uttered betrays “a false picture of doubt” (Wittgenstein [1951] 1969, 33e). Wittgenstein explains his logic by way of two examples of this false picture:

If someone said that he doubted the existence of his hands, kept looking at them from all sides, tried to make sure it wasn’t “all done by mirrors,” etc., we should not be sure whether we ought to call that doubting. We might describe his way of behaving as *like* the behavior of doubt, but his game would not be ours. (33e–34e; emphasis added)

If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body, I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn’t know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one. And if I had said something, and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why. (34e)

J. L. Austin, for his part, takes a similar tack. Wittgenstein remarks that doubt is epistemologically valid, but only “in particular circumstances” (33e). It is from this position that Austin argues the following:

Doubt or question[ing] . . . has always (*must* have) a special basis, there must be some “reason for suggesting” [the “How do I know?” question/“Maybe you are wrong” statement] in the sense of some specific way, or limited number of specific ways, in which it is suggested that [I do not know]. . . . [Otherwise] I am entitled to ask, “How do you mean?” . . . The wile of the [skeptic] consists in [asking the “How do I know?” question/making the “Maybe you are wrong” statement without] specifying or limiting what may be wrong with [the argument], so that I feel at a loss “how to prove” it. (Austin [1946] 1961, 55)³⁰

“Fair enough,” I may have convincingly defended my proposed Objectivist aesthetics of cinema and the author-based critical methodology presupposed by it on both metaphysical and epistemological grounds. But I have yet to defend it on ethical grounds. Even if films are objectively existing, intentional objects; even if the interpretation of films is an objective process; and even if it is possible in the formulation of interpretations to ground knowledge of films in the intentions of their respective authors, why *should* interpretation be concerned with authorial intention? A skeptic may have recourse at this point to what is commonly referred to as the “is-ought gap” and claim, following David Hume, that what one *ought* to do does not automatically follow from what *is* the case—or, translating this Humean dilemma into Kantian terms, as often happens, what *is* the case does not automatically generate an *imperative*.

But this ethical “problem” is yet another pseudo-problem. Hume was wrong (as was Kant after him) to implicitly shift the terms of “ought” to (an unconditional) “must.” This, in effect, betrays a desire for ethics to be taken out of our (human) hands, for choice (and responsibility) to be removed from the equation. Against this picture, Rand (1961a) emphasizes that ethical action “is a process of reason, of thought; it is not automatic nor instinctive nor involuntary nor infallible. Man has to initiate it, to sustain it, and to bear responsibility for its results” (11). Aesthetically speaking, Cavell (1967) frames the ethical responsibilities involved in art, for both authors and critics, in the following terms:

In morality, tracing an intention limits a man’s responsibility; in art, it dilates it completely. The artist is responsible for everything that happens in his work—and not just in the sense that it is done, but in the sense that it is *meant*. It is a terrible responsibility; very few [artists] have the gift and the patience and the singleness to shoulder it. But it is all the more terrible, when it *is* shouldered, not to appreciate it, to refuse to understand something meant so well. (236–37)

This is, in relation to the aesthetic skepticism argument, the nature of the tragedy that results from skepticism of authorial minds. It is important to note, however, that, even though in my critique of poststructuralism I exposed the essence of the altruistic aesthetics promulgated by Barthes as an Aesthetics of Death (Barrowman 2017, 163–66; see also Barrowman 2018a), it does not follow that critics will automatically promulgate an Aesthetics of Life. If a critic does not value (his) life, then it follows that he will not act for the sake of (his) life and will instead act as a destroyer, potentially even *his own* destroyer. This ability to act as our own destroyers is one of our less noble traits as human beings, and one on which Rand (1957) had the following to say:

Man has the power to act as his own destroyer—and that is the way he has acted through most of his history. A living entity that regarded its means of survival as evil would not survive. A plant that struggled to mangle its roots [or] a bird that fought to break its wings would not remain for long in the existence they affronted. But the history of man has been a struggle to deny and to destroy his mind. Man has been called a rational being, but rationality is a matter of choice—and the alternative his nature offers him is: Rational being or suicidal animal. (1013)³¹

Incidentally, this is why Rand conceives *moral perfection* as “an *unbreached rationality*—not the degree of your intelligence, but the full and relentless use of your mind, not the extent of your knowledge, but the acceptance of reason as an absolute” (1059).³² If I have already demonstrated the consequences of unreasonably pursuing the goal of free play for art, that it entails nothing less than the destruction of art, then what remains to be demonstrated are the consequences of unreasonably pursuing free play for criticism. Contrary to the violence entailed by Barthesian aesthetic hedonism, I have argued that the moral alternative is a conception of art which is not predicated on *looting*, on demanding and taking the unearned, but on *trading*; in line with Rand’s emphasis on trade as “the moral symbol of respect for human beings” (1022), I proffered a conception of art as trade and authors and critics as traders (Barrowman 2017, 167–68). The nature of aesthetic trade is similar to the exchange of ideas in a conversation. Carroll provides a useful formulation for understanding our engagement with an author’s work as akin to entering into a conversation with him:

When we read a literary text or contemplate a painting, we enter a relationship with its creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation. Obviously, it is not as interactive as an ordinary conversation, for we are not receiving spontaneous feedback concerning our own responses.

But just as an ordinary conversation gives us a stake in understanding our interlocutor, so does interaction with an artwork. We would not think that we had had a genuine conversation with someone whom we were not satisfied we understood. Conversations, rewarding ones at least, involve a sense of community or communion that itself rests on communication. A fulfilling conversation requires that we have the conviction of having grasped what our interlocutor meant or intended to say. This is evinced by the extent to which we struggle to clarify their meanings. A conversation that left us with only our own clever construals or educated guesses, no matter how aesthetically rich, would leave us with the sense that something was missing. That we had neither communed nor communicated. . . . This prospect of community supplies a major impetus motivating our interest in engaging literary texts and artworks. We may read to be entertained, to learn, and to be moved, but we also seek out artworks in order to converse or commune with their makers. We want to understand the author, even if that will lead to rejecting his or her point of view. (Carroll 1992, 174)

As for the ethical stakes of conceptualizing aesthetic experience as conversational, Carroll points out (in an ironic fashion considering the vehement anti-capitalist rhetoric that is part and parcel of poststructuralism) that the goal of prioritizing critical free play indifferent to or even in opposition to authorial intention “has a very ‘consumerist’ ring to it” inasmuch as “it reduces our relation to the text to an I/It relationship” where the “it” is unceremoniously chewed up and spit out; this as opposed to cultivating “an I/Thou relation to the author of the text.” To Carroll’s mind, when we watch films, one of our “abiding interests” is to commune with other human beings, to get insights into the minds of other people and to consider what they think in light of what we think (175).

It would be easy at this point for a scholar invested in the Kantian aesthetic tradition to simply retort: “But I have no conversational interest in films. Nor do I have any interest in what anyone else thinks. My interest is in fashioning the most elaborate, sophisticated, imaginative, politically useful, transgressive, etc., interpretation that I possibly can.” This is, in line with Rand’s dismay at those to whom she has disparagingly referred as “Nietzschean egoists” (Rand 1961b, 10; see also Barrowman 2017, 158–68, 186 n.8), a corruption of art and a short-range view of aesthetic experience that reduces (if it does not preclude entirely) the range of satisfaction and enlightenment afforded by art. It is, in short, not merely destructive, but also self-destructive. As Carroll puts it:

We [ought to] have an investment in really encountering interesting and brilliant authors, not simply in counterfeiting such encounters. Knowing that [Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959)] is a schlock quickie, but responding to it as if it were superbly transgressive, is . . . a matter of sacrificing genuine conversational experiences for aesthetic pleasures. And, in doing so, one is willing to lower one's self-esteem for the sake of an aesthetic high. (Carroll 1992, 178)

In a similar vein, Cavell once expressed his dissatisfaction with the ontological position of anti-author criticism not only for its fallacious conception of authorship but even more importantly for its abnegation of ethics:

I [have been] told that it is not [the author] speaking to us, but a mask of [the author] speaking to . . . anyway not to us. We don't so much hear his words as overhear them. That [conception of authorship] explains something. But it does not explain our responsibility in overhearing, in listening, nor [the author's] 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 not merely our interest, nor our transport—these may even serve as betrayals now. 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 1967, 229)

I acknowledge that there may still be scholars out there who are unconvinced, scholars I have failed to persuade to abandon the irrational and immoral philosophical premises that drive the Kantian aesthetic tradition. But then, in line with the Objectivist ethics, the purpose of the Objectivist aesthetics is not to provide a basis for punishment, it is not a club with which to beat critics over the head until they fall in line.³³ If critics refuse to act like grownups, it does not fall on the shoulders of grownup critics to force them to acknowledge the error of their ways. They must be left to suffer the grownup consequences of their childish actions. In Cavellian terms, their suffering takes the form of a tragic, self-inflicted “spiritual torture”:

Skepticism . . . is a cover story for . . . the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle. . . . Tragedy is the place [where] we are not allowed to escape the consequences, or price, of this cover. . . . The failure to acknowledge a best case of the other is a denial of that other, presaging the death

of the other . . . and the death of our capacity to acknowledge as such, the turning of our hearts to stone, or their bursting. The necessary reflexiveness of spiritual torture. (Cavell 1979, 493)³⁴

Rand (1957) once expressed the sentiment that “no man can predict the time when others will choose to return to reason” (771). No more can he force others to return to reason or force them to stop torturing themselves. My efforts in this section have not been to provide aesthetic “commandments” that scholars must obey. I have sought, rather, to provide a rational and moral foundation for film interpretation in accordance with the Objectivist aesthetics. If scholars remain unconvinced, then, to invoke Wittgenstein again, all that is left for me to say is: “This is simply what I do” (Wittgenstein [1949] 1967, 85 [§217]). Indeed, this Wittgensteinian position—which is also echoed in Austin’s position vis-à-vis the goldfinch, that, at some point, “enough is enough” (Austin [1946] 1961, 52)—is endorsed by Rand:

We do not tell—we *show*. We do not claim—we *prove*. It is not your obedience that we seek to win, but your rational conviction. You have seen all the elements of our secret. The conclusion is now yours to draw—we can help you to name it, but not to accept it—the sight, the knowledge, and the acceptance must be yours. (Rand 1957, 735)

I have made my case for objective interpretation in accordance with the Objectivist aesthetics. I have, in other words, shown the elements of the secret to objective film interpretation, and I have endeavored to prove its validity beyond a reasonable doubt. The conclusion is now yours to draw—or else, the counterargument is now yours to make.

3. Objectivity and Evaluation

In the previous section, Kant served as the starting point for my discussion of the possibility of objective interpretation. It is on the strength of Kantian premises (first, that artworks are objects of free beauty, and, second, that aesthetic judgments are subjective) that what I have been calling the Kantian aesthetic tradition has all but displaced what I have been calling the Aristotelian aesthetic tradition. I worked in the previous section to prove that the first premise, that artworks are objects of free beauty (and, by extension, that there is no objective basis to the interpretation of artworks), was false. In this section, I will work to prove that the second premise, that aesthetic judgments are subjective (and, by extension, that there is no objective basis to the evaluation of artworks), is also false. The question that I wish to address in this section is the following: If there

is no sense in arguing against the claim that the interpretation of art is firmly within the realm of the objective, is there also no sense in arguing against the claim that the evaluation of art is firmly within the realm of the subjective?

In the introduction, I observed that the Objectivist aesthetics lacks a coherent alternative to Kantian aesthetic subjectivism. So, too, it is important to stress, does the discipline of film studies. In film studies, it is a matter of fact that evaluation is subjective and hence of no use, of no *value*, to the “serious” study of the cinema. Consider, as a representative example of this state of affairs, Swagato Chakravorty’s remarks in his review of Daniel Yacavone’s recent book *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (2015). Responding to a point in Yacavone’s text where he was arguing that correctly interpreting films is a prerequisite to evaluating their “artistic success and interest” (Yacavone 2015, 255), Chakravorty characterized Yacavone’s emphasis on evaluation as “archaic,” for, as he opined, “it can surely be said that we are some decades past the time when judgment and taste constituted crucial parts of art criticism and theory” (Chakravorty 2017, 153).

In response to Chakravorty’s review, Yacavone confessed to being “perplexed” by the “bald assertion” regarding the irrelevance of evaluation to film studies (Yacavone 2017, 159). What I find perplexing, however, is Yacavone’s confession to being perplexed. In the previous section, I brought up David Bordwell’s famous characterization of film studies as “Interpretation, Inc.” I wonder if Yacavone would still find Chakravorty’s assertion perplexing if he considered that at no point in the history of film studies was the discipline ever characterized as “Evaluation, Inc.” Indeed, so entrenched in the study of the cinema is the idea that evaluation is a worthlessly subjective activity that, even today, it is hard to imagine a future for film studies in which the discipline might be characterized as such. This is true all the way down to the undergraduate level, where students are routinely instructed to leave out of their essays any evaluative claims or references to any emotional investments. The result is the sad state of affairs lamented by F. R. Leavis ([1952] 2011) where scholarship consists of “those depressing ‘contributions to knowledge’ which are so patently uninformed by any first-hand perception of why the subject should be *worth* study” (97).

Looking back at the history of film studies, I am consistently drawn to the coincidence that, in 1972, the same year that Peter Wollen published the influential third edition of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* and thereby set the philosophical agenda for the discipline of film studies (Barrowman 2018a), there was another book published that could have set a very different agenda: V. F. Perkins’s *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*. Robin Wood considered *Film as Film* to be “among the most valuable books on the cinema,” and he considered Perkins’s arguments to be “beautifully developed with meticulous logic” to the point of being “virtually impregnable” (Wood [1976] 2006, 30).

Carroll took Wood's praise one step further, claiming that *Film as Film* stands as "the most thoughtful, ambitious, and original attempt to construct a film theory in the seventies" (Carroll 1988a, 74) and commending Perkins for being the only film scholar to have even attempted "to deal rigorously with the issue of film evaluation" (256).

At these earlier moments in the history of film studies, the opinions of Wood and Carroll were, regrettably, minority opinions (74–75). Today, however, scholars are (re)turning to Perkins's text and the issues with which he was grappling with greater frequency.³⁵ I consider this (re)turn to be symptomatic of a more general desire for a (re)turn to the question of value. Murray Pomerance, for instance, argues that "something is inevitably missing" in all academic analyses of films, "and that something is the experience of actually watching the film" (Pomerance 2008, 5; see also Barrowman 2013). Taking his cue from the renowned French film critic André Bazin,³⁶ Pomerance passionately affirms that:

Because cinema is art, it remains true that the most assiduous and earnest commitment to looking at its historical, social, psychological, compositional, authorial, and political aspects finally brings any serious viewer to a consideration of love: Love of the screen, love of the cinematic image, love of the peculiar kind of light that is to be glimpsed in the dark theater coming from this magical world, that holds us fast to our fixation upon film—love of life, because, just as it includes people, life includes cinema. (8)

In a similar spirit, contemporary scholars such as William Rothman,³⁷ D. N. Rodowick,³⁸ and Tom Gunning³⁹—as well as, of course, the two preeminent voices on this front, Cavell⁴⁰ and Carroll⁴¹—have all voiced similar sentiments. In the hopes of contributing to this surge of scholarly interest in film evaluation, I will proceed in what remains of this section to dissolve a number of additional Kantian worries toward the goal of establishing the rationale for an Objectivist conception of evaluation. To start, I would like to return to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. If the basic premise on which I am focusing in this section—that aesthetic judgments are subjective—is a premise that scholars invested in the Kantian aesthetic tradition believe to be true, they are not without their reasons. Consider, for example, the following passage:

The green color of the meadows belongs to *objective* sensation . . . but its agreeableness belongs to *subjective* sensation . . . i.e., to feeling, through which the object is regarded as an object of delight (which involves no cognition of the object). (Kant [1790] 2007, 38)

To (illicitly) extend this line of thinking to art, the judgment of an artwork as good/agreeable or bad/disagreeable would likewise be a matter of feeling (that is, relegated to *emotions*). And matters pertaining to feelings/emotions are not, on this picture, connected in any way to thinking/reason. Thus, since only that which pertains to thinking/reason may be considered objective, and since aesthetic judgments ostensibly do not pertain to thinking/reason, aesthetic judgments cannot be objective. This is a fallacious chain of “logic” that Kant himself implicitly rejected. In a discussion of the aesthetic value of tragedy, Kant observed that “many an individual . . . thinks himself improved by a tragedy”; he observed further that this seemed to be an indication that aesthetic judgments “in every case have reference to our *way of thinking*” (104).

Breaking that chain of “logic” was easy enough. But then why do scholars persist in dividing interpretation/reason/objectivity and evaluation/emotion/subjectivity? Carroll has identified as the major problem on this front Hume’s (and, later, Kant’s) misguided choice to anchor aesthetic judgments in the concept of *taste*. As he has framed the consequences of this choice for critical practice:

Critics have a taste for beauty that is analogous to the sensitivity for sweetness that certain of our taste buds possess. . . . Because critical taste is being analogized so closely to sensory taste, and beauty is being associated with sensations like sweetness, the use of the very model of taste for critical judgment brings with it not only the notion that critical approbation (or disapprobation) is subjective, in the literal sense of being in the subject (where, in fact, all experiences belong), but also the suggestion that critical judgments are subjective in the contemporary sense of being highly personal, individual, widely variant, and even idiosyncratic. The latter surmise follows smoothly from the analogy between critical approval (Taste with a capital T) and taste (with a small t). For, we know that gustatory taste is extremely variable—highly personal and even idiosyncratic. So, isn’t it reasonable to suppose that Taste is likewise? (Carroll 2009, 157–58)

For his part, Kant was very explicit with respect to his choice on this front (though less so with the consequences as laid out by Carroll):

If anyone reads me his poem, or brings me to a play, which, all said and done, fails to commend itself to my taste, then . . . I stop my ears: I do not want to hear any reasons or any arguing about the matter. . . . This would appear to be one of the chief reasons why this faculty of aesthetic judgement has been given the name of taste. For someone may recount

to me all the ingredients of a dish, and observe of each and every one of them that it is just what I like, and, in addition, rightly commend the wholesomeness of the food, yet I am deaf to all these arguments. I try the dish with my own tongue and palate, and I pass judgement according to their verdict . . . I [therefore] take my stand [regarding the aforementioned judgment passed on the hypothetical poem or play] on the ground that my judgment is to be one of taste, and not one of understanding or reason. (Kant [1790] 2007, 114–15)

The “logic” of this passage is very clearly that of the Copernican Revolution. To corroborate this charge, consider the claim that Kant makes when he has occasion to return to his earlier example of the flower:

To say, “This flower is beautiful,” is tantamount to repeating its own proper claim to the delight of everyone. The agreeableness of its smell gives it no claim at all. One person revels in it, but it gives another a headache. Now what else are we to suppose from this than that its beauty is to be taken for a property of the flower itself which does not adapt itself to the diversity of heads and the individual senses of the multitude, but to which they must adapt themselves, if they are going to pass judgement upon it? And yet this is not the way the matter stands. For the judgement of taste consists precisely in a thing being called beautiful solely in respect of that quality in which it adapts itself to our mode of receiving it. (111–12)

To avoid going too far down the rabbit hole of Kantian epistemology, I will leave my objection to the “logic” of the Copernican Revolution at calling attention to the way it manifests at this point in Kant’s discussion of aesthetic judgment and the way it underscores Kant’s evident frustration that humans must adapt to artworks rather than artworks having to adapt to humans. As it relates specifically to claims of criticism, the problems one encounters in Kant’s arguments are, in Wittgensteinian terms, grammatical problems. First, it is important to note that the aesthetic judgment vis-à-vis the flower (viz., “This flower is beautiful”) and the grounds upon which the judgment is made (viz., its smell) have no logical connection. Beauty is ordinarily a matter of sight (“That is a beautiful canvas”), though the concept may also be extended to sound (“That is a beautiful melody”). But to say of an odor that it *smells* beautiful (or of a wall that it *feels* beautiful, or of a steak that it *tastes* beautiful) is, in Wittgensteinian terms once again, to conflate very different language-games. Added to which, suffering a headache upon smelling a flower (due presumably to some sort of allergic reaction) is not, strictly speaking, a judgment (even so, however, is it not possible to determine the *reason* why a person may suffer a headache upon smelling a certain flower?).

As regards Kant's aesthetic judgment vis-à-vis the hypothetical poem or play, his argument again suffers from a faulty chain of "logic." As far as Kant is concerned, aesthetic judgments *must be* subjective *because* he has the inclination to stop his ears when his judgment is challenged. But it must be pointed out that this inclination is not evidence of a metaphysical fact regarding the nature of aesthetic judgments; rather, it is evidence of an (un)ethical decision regarding the nature of aesthetic argument. Kant is making a (poor and childish) *choice* to stop his ears and to refuse to listen to reason. The fact that he then had the gall to try to pass off such childish nonsense as philosophical insight merely adds insult to injury, and any scholar who provides such impudence with the sanction of reason and virtue is guilty of sanctioning the reduction of criticism to a playground full of children stomping their feet with their hands over their ears shouting, "I can't hear you!"

In point of fact, Kant's very phrasing here—saying that he does not want to hear any *reasons* or arguing about his hypothetical aesthetic judgment—undercuts his Copernican position inasmuch as it presupposes both the existence of reasons that could explain said judgment (that is, that could confirm that said judgment was, in fact, *reasonable*) and the existence in the realm of aesthetic judgment of reason as such. To introduce taste at this point merely muddies the conceptual waters, for judgment and taste are not analogous. Just as suffering an allergic reaction to the smell of a flower is not a judgment passed on the basis of reasoned deliberation, a given food object being or not being to someone's taste is not, strictly speaking, a judgment. Even Kant points out that, upon trying a dish with *his* "tongue and palate," *his* "judgment" is a result of "*their* verdict." Kant does not even allow a space for "his own" "judgment" when it comes to taste. For an obvious reason, too: Because judgment and taste are two very different concepts.⁴² And only the concept of judgment is relevant in aesthetic philosophy.⁴³

Though his decision to place his consideration of aesthetic judgments on the Humean ground of taste was misguided, Kant's critique is nonetheless evidence of his well-intentioned refusal to simply write aesthetic judgment off as irredeemably and uselessly subjective. Similar to the way that Derrida valiantly struggled to refuse to acquiesce to nihilism despite a susceptibility to nihilistic tendencies (Barrowman 2017, 179–82, 192 n.32), Kant struggles throughout his critique of aesthetic judgment to refuse to acquiesce to subjectivism. This struggle comes into sharp focus as he works to solve what he calls the antinomy of taste:

The first commonplace concerning taste is contained in the proposition under cover of which everyone devoid of taste thinks to shelter himself from reproach: *Everyone has his own taste*. This is only another way of saying that the determining ground of this

judgement is merely subjective (gratification or pain) and that the judgement has no right to the necessary agreement of others. Its second commonplace, to which even those resort who concede the right of the judgement of taste to pronounce with validity for everyone, is: *There is no disputing about taste*. This amounts to saying that, even though the determining ground of a judgement of taste [is] objective, it is not reducible to definite concepts, so that, in respect of the judgement itself, no *decision* can be reached by proofs. . . . Between these two commonplaces, an intermediate proposition is readily seen to be missing. It is one which has certainly not become proverbial, but yet, it is at the back of everyone's mind. It is that there may be contention about taste (although not a dispute). This proposition, however, involves the contrary of the first one, for in a matter in which contention is to be allowed, there must be a hope of coming to terms. Hence, one must be able to reckon on grounds of judgement that possess more than private validity and are thus not merely subjective. And yet, the above principle, *everyone has his own taste*, is directly opposed to this. (Kant [1790] 2007, 165–66)

Once again, there are a number of grammatical problems in this passage that warrant investigation. Prior to conducting a grammatical investigation of Kant's antinomy of taste, however, I would like to follow his chain of "logic" through to the end so as to bring to light the mystical core of the Kantian aesthetic tradition. Kant's "solution" to the antinomy of taste involves the postulation of a "supersensible substrate" in which the answers to all our questions are contained but which reason is (inexplicably) constitutively incapable of entering:

The solution of an antinomy turns solely on the possibility of two apparently conflicting propositions not being in fact contradictory, but rather, being capable of consisting together, although the explanation of the possibility of their concept transcends our faculties of cognition. . . . The thesis should therefore read: The judgement of taste is not based on determinate concepts . . . [while the antithesis should therefore read:] The judgement of taste does rest upon a concept, although an indeterminate one (that, namely, of the supersensible substrate of phenomena); and then there would be no conflict. . . . Beyond removing this conflict between the claims and counterclaims of taste, we can do nothing. To supply a determinate objective principle of taste in accordance with which its judgements might be derived, tested, and proved is an absolute impossibility, for then it would not

be a judgement of taste. . . . This illusion is [allegedly] natural and for human reason unavoidable . . . [though, with Kant's "solution," it] no longer misleads us. (168)

In Objectivist terminology, this is Witch Doctoring at its most transparent. This also reflects more perfectly than parody Gunning's aforementioned observation that discussions of evaluation often resemble "prudish parents invoking the stork rather than answering tricky questions" (Gunning 2016). The stork in Kant's story of the birth of objective evaluation is "the supersensible," a dimension from which we are forever barred but the existence of which Kant tries to assure us is beyond question. Here, Kant betrays an operating procedure that Rand warned against as patently nonsensical; recalling Rand's distinction between Witch Doctors and Attilas (Rand 1961, 10), Witch Doctors often postulate "a mode of consciousness superior to reason" (Rand 1957, 1034) and which they typically traffic under the heading of *faith*:⁴⁴

They keep telling you what it is not, but never tell you what it is. All their identifications consist of negating: God is that which no human mind can know, they say, and proceed to demand that you consider it knowledge—God is non-man, Heaven is non-Earth, soul is non-body, virtue is non-profit, A is non-A, perception is non-sensory, knowledge is non-reason. Their definitions are not acts of defining, but of wiping out. It is only the metaphysics of a leech that would cling to the idea of a universe where a zero is a standard of identification. . . . [And] if an honest person asks them "How?" they answer with righteous scorn that . . . the concept of superior spirits is "Somehow." (1035)⁴⁵

And yet, despite the myriad of equivocations and contradictions that mar his critique of aesthetic judgment, there is contained in Kant's critique a moment of clarity. In the previously quoted passage, Kant remarked that to claim objectivity for a given aesthetic judgment is "an absolute impossibility" because "then it would not be a judgment of taste." This leads him precisely to the point that he needed, but failed, to make: *Aesthetic judgments are not judgments of taste*. Rather, as I will argue, aesthetic judgments are judgments of *value*.⁴⁶ To shift the terms in discussions of aesthetic judgment from taste to value would be a small victory, but it would by no means magically solve all the problems attendant to the assertion of the objectivity of evaluation. Even if, in the interest of conceptual precision and clarity, the concept of taste is replaced with the concept of value, the objection is still the same: How can a judgment of value be made objectively? It will be my task in the remainder of this section to answer this

question, and I will do so by turning to arguments made by Rand in relation to the possibilities of the Objectivist aesthetics.

Starting from Rand's conception of art as a "concretization of metaphysics" the purpose of which is to bring human concepts to the perceptual level of consciousness in order that they may be grasped directly (Rand [1969] 1975, 8), Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi point out that "it is not with just *any* concepts that art is primarily concerned, but rather, with the basic value-judgments about reality that most profoundly bear upon [an] individual's life." They further clarify that art, from this perspective, "like language . . . serves the basic cognitive need to condense and integrate knowledge and experience into graspable concretes" (Torres and Kamhi 2000a, 27). The point here is that, from the Objectivist perspective, art is not detachable from life. This is an important point on which the Objectivist aesthetics departs from the Kantian aesthetic tradition. Rand asserted unequivocally that "there is no such thing as 'non-practical knowledge' or any sort of 'disinterested' action" (Rand 1957, 1066). Thus, the following axiom of the Kantian aesthetic tradition is obviously anathema to the Objectivist aesthetics:

Everyone must allow that [an aesthetic judgment] which is tinged with the slightest interest is very partial and not a pure [aesthetic judgment]. . . . One must not be in the least prepossessed in favor of the existence of the [artwork], but must preserve complete indifference in this respect, in order to play the part of judge. (Kant [1790] 2007, 37)

In the Kantian aesthetic tradition, it is axiomatic that art serves no *essential* function in human life, that there is nothing of *fundamental* value in either aesthetic creation or aesthetic experience. Rand, by contrast, argues that art *does* serve an essential function in human life, that aesthetic creation and aesthetic experience *are* of fundamental value. In fact, she goes so far as to argue that art is "inextricably tied to man's survival" (Rand [1969] 1975, 5). To support her argument regarding the essential function and enduring value of art, Rand points out that art has "existed in every known civilization" and has "accompan[ied] man's steps from the early hours of his prehistorical dawn" (3). Indeed, even in its role "as an adjunct (and, often, a monopoly) of religion," it served the purpose of concretizing the metaphysical value-judgments of primitive cultures (8). This is not a coincidence or a contingent historical oddity. This is what art does.⁴⁷

If this is the nature and the function of art, then such familiar notions from the history of aesthetic philosophy as "disinterested pleasure" and "art for art's sake" are nonsensical and have no place in the Objectivist aesthetics. On the

contrary, these ideas indicate a philosophical abnegation with respect to art. As Rand strenuously argued:

To isolate and bring into clear focus, into a single issue or a single scene, the essence of a conflict which, in “real life,” might be atomized and scattered over a lifetime in the form of meaningless clashes, to condense a long, steady drizzle of buckshot into the explosion of a blockbuster—*that* is the highest, hardest, and most demanding function of art. To default on that function is to default on the essence of art. (75)

At this point, I think that it is worth recalling my brief discussion in the previous section of (post)modernist/avant-garde/experimental art. In discussing artworks the purpose of which are to be ambiguous and to encourage the free play of subjective interpretations, I observed that one could argue, as Rand did, that such artworks, if they even qualify as art in the first place, are merely “child’s play along its periphery” (75). The sense of this observation should now be clear. To compare, at opposite ends of the cinematic spectrum, the poignancy and profundity of Sergio Leone’s meditation on the passage of time in *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) to the self-indulgent flickerings of Stan Brakhage’s *Mothlight* (1963) is to compare two completely different filmic objects the first of which is definitively an art object and the second of which is, if anything, an *anti-art* object.⁴⁸ I would argue that such experimental work as Brakhage’s films is not even on the periphery of art; it is outside the realm of art—perhaps, generously, as a *challenge to* art, but nevertheless not *as* art according to the nature and the function of art properly so called.⁴⁹

It might appear, based on the preceding argument against anti-art, that the Objectivist conception of aesthetic value is essentially utilitarian, that the value of art is directly related to its utility in life. I would not feel compelled to reject such a characterization, as the Objectivist conception of art does, indeed, emphasize the importance of art in the life of individuals. However, if one were to attempt to take this argument a step further and say that the ethical foundation of the Objectivist aesthetics is therefore essentially utilitarian, *that* I would feel compelled to reject. The Objectivist aesthetics is inextricably linked with the Objectivist ethics, in which utilitarianism is rejected as a valid ethical model (Rand [1946] 1998, 90; Peikoff 1982, 119). More specifically, Rand stressed that art “belongs to a non-socializable aspect of reality which is universal (i.e., applicable to all men) but non-collective”—that is, “the nature of man’s consciousness” (Rand [1969] 1975, 4). That said, just as difficulty is often encountered when trying to reconcile “the virtue of selfishness” (Rand 1964) and the concept of objectivity in the realm of the Objectivist ethics, there is likewise

difficulty in trying to reconcile the concept of selfish, interested aesthetic judgments and objective evaluation in the realm of the Objectivist aesthetics. If I have established the nature, function, and value of art in general, I have yet to establish the grounds on which one might formulate an objective aesthetic judgment regarding the value of a given artwork. I will try to do so now.

In the introduction, my brief discussion of Rand's position on aesthetic judgment was limited to debunking her oft-repeated and dubious epistemological surmise that "emotions are not tools of cognition" (Rand [1969] 1975, 32). I demonstrated on the contrary that emotions *are* tools of cognition, and *valuable* tools, at that. Moreover, I demonstrated that Rand herself recognized as much, and that her distinction between a sense of life and a philosophy of life did not serve the same purpose as the familiar distinction between (respectively) subjectivity and objectivity. Rather, it served to distinguish between a life lived on the basis primarily of emotions (but with reason as an ineliminable constituent) and a life lived on the basis primarily of reason (with emotions following from consciously held premises). I will now take the opportunity to expand on this discussion, particularly in relation to Rand's concept of a sense of life and the role it plays in artistic production and reception.

To recall her own conceptions, a sense of life is, according to Rand, an "implicit metaphysics," it represents an "implicit view of life" formed after years of "habitual," "automatic" responses to various experiences (15). Every thought and every action taken, she maintains, implies an estimate about oneself and of the world. From the habits and automated responses that have generated an individual's implicit metaphysics over the course of the maturation process, she points out that any given individual "may draw conscious conclusions" from this implicit metaphysics, which would then set him on the path of defining an explicit philosophy of life, "or he may remain mentally passive," which would keep him on the path of functioning according to an implicit, undefined "sense" of life (15). In Rand's usage, a sense of life is not a pejorative. That said, it is clear that there is a developmental path from a sense of life to a philosophy of life that any individual committed to moral perfectionism must follow. She speaks of a sense of life as representing an individual's "early" value judgments as he gathers knowledge and experience "to reach full conceptual control and thus to *drive*" his sense of life (18). From a similar vantage point as the one from which she distinguishes between humans and heroes (Rand 1957, 1017, 1050, 1069; [1969] 1975, 119), she acknowledges as heroic the "rare exception" for whom the shift from guidance by merely a sense of life to a fully formed philosophy of life "is a natural, absorbing, if difficult, process" in which one is committed to "transforming [his] wordless feeling[s] into clearly verbalized knowledge and laying a firm foundation, an intellectual roadbed, for the course of his life," ultimately "validating and, if necessary, correcting in conceptual terms what he had merely sensed about the nature of man's existence" (Rand [1969] 1975, 18; see also Branden 1997).

It is a smooth transition from this conception of moral perfectionism to what I will call, in the aesthetic register, *aesthetic perfectionism*. Aesthetic perfectionism obviously has two sides to it—in this case, vis-à-vis film, one pertaining to *filmmakers* and one pertaining to *filmgoers*. A perfectionist filmmaker is an individual who has shaped his sense of life into an explicit and conscious philosophy of life and in whose work that philosophy is clearly manifest as the driving force of his art. A perfectionist filmmaker must possess a fully formed philosophy of life and be committed to exploring via his chosen artistic medium the elements of that philosophy. A perfectionist filmgoer, meanwhile, is similarly an individual who has shaped his sense of life into an explicit and conscious philosophy. Where the perfectionist filmgoer differs from the perfectionist filmmaker is in the fact that, whereas the latter is committed to *exploring* the elements of his philosophy via his chosen artistic medium, the latter is committed to *cultivating* the elements of his philosophy by entering into what I will call, following D. N. Rodowick (2015), “artful conversations.”

According to Rodowick, artful conversation encompasses both the mode of conversation that I discussed in the previous section, where a filmgoer communes with a filmmaker in the experience of one of his films, as well as the mode of conversation that I have been discussing in this section, where a filmgoer communes with another filmgoer regarding a given film. Rodowick stresses (and rightly so) that, in both modes of conversation, the point ought to be to come to a better understanding of oneself, of those with whom one has chosen to commune, and, ultimately, of the artwork in question (Rodowick 2015, 262–63). That Rodowick was led to this conception of artful conversation by Cavell’s aesthetic writings is no surprise; even less surprising is the fact that, as Rodowick acknowledges, the concept of artful conversation is bound up with the concept of moral perfectionism (262). As Cavell once put it:

In confronting another with whom your fate is, by your lights, bound up . . . you risk your understanding of the other as of yourself—it is part of the [artful conversation] you have initiated, or accepted the invitation to enter, to determine whether you have sufficiently appreciated the [artwork] from the other’s point of view, and whether you have articulated the ground of your own conviction. (Cavell 2004, 235)

The moral force of Cavell’s conception of artful conversation follows from his broader conception of conversation as such.⁵⁰ Over the course of his articulation of the concept of a *passionate utterance*, which he was inspired to conceptualize following an explicitly Aristotelian “rehearsing” of the (neglected) place of passion in rhetoric, specifically in Austin’s work on performative utterances (Cavell 2005a, 178), Cavell profoundly retools the Austinian mode of ordinary

language philosophy for use in ethics and aesthetics. In Austinian terms, “in the case of [a] performative utterance, failures to identify the correct procedures are characteristically repairable. . . . Our future is at issue, but the way back, or forward, is not lost.” In Cavellian terms, however, in the case of a passionate utterance, “failure to have singled you out appropriately . . . characteristically puts the future of our relationship, as part of my sense of my identity, or of my existence, more radically at stake.” A performative utterance, on Cavell’s understanding, is “an offer of participation in the order of law”; a passionate utterance, in Cavell’s articulation, is “an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire”:

From the root of speech, in each utterance of revelation and confrontation, two paths spring, that of the responsibilities of implication and that of the rights of desire. It will seem to some that the former is the path of philosophy, the latter that of something or other else. . . . In an imperfect world, the paths will not reliably coincide, but to show them both open is something I want of philosophy. Then we shall stop not at what we should or ought to say, nor at what we may and do say, but take in what we must and dare not say, or have it at heart to say, or are too confused or too tame or wild or terrorized to say or to think to say. We do not know where the dream of harmony may take us, with others, with ourselves, nor when—so often—time or patience and talent or magnanimity and conscience or perception, in a word, our responsiveness, will run out on our efforts to make the dream practical. Philosophy must nevertheless not lose its thread [which, for Cavell, is the perfectionist challenge of] acknowledging a mode of speech in or through which, by acknowledging my desire in confronting you, I declare my standing with you and single you out, demanding a response in kind from you, and a response now, so making myself vulnerable to your rebuke, thus staking our future. (194–95)

This leads Cavell to a conception of artful conversation “as confrontation, as demanding, as owed,” and “not only, but perhaps especially, when it is molded in the form of moral reasons,” for each artful conversation “directs, and risks, if not costs, blood” (196).⁵¹ As to the question of value, which Cavell identifies as “the heart of the aesthetic matter” (thus placing it at the heart of artful conversations), it is from this position that Cavell contends that no (form of) argument and no (kind or amount of) reason(s) can, in and of itself/themselves, convince an individual of the value of a given artwork (as opposed to the way that counting easily dispels disputes in arithmetic, to borrow one of Plato’s examples from his *Euthyphro*). Instead, and much more difficultly, value is

something that you have to discover “in your own experience, in the persistent exercise of your own [judgment], [a process which] hence [necessitates] the willingness to challenge your [judgment] as it stands, to form your own artistic conscience” (Cavell 1981b, 93).

This rehearsal of Cavell’s Platonic slant on artful conversation will help to shed light on the most significant problem in his philosophical position—a problem which Rodowick compounds over the course of his explication of Cavell’s aesthetic writings and his concomitant articulation of the concept of artful conversation. At a key moment in the formulation of his own position, Rodowick misconstrues Cavell’s most significant contribution to the philosophy of art vis-à-vis his attempt to “revisit Kant’s examination of the paradoxical quality of aesthetic conversation in the context of ordinary language philosophy”; after correctly identifying Cavell’s engagement with Kant as the lynchpin to his aesthetic philosophy, Rodowick proceeds to incorrectly identify as the purpose of Cavell’s engagement with Kant the remapping of “a series of relationships . . . wherein aesthetic and moral discussion[s] are investigated and revalued such that criteria of logic . . . [would] no longer dominate . . . the rational exercise of [aesthetic] thought” (Rodowick 2015, 192–93).

It must be stated very clearly that this was never, in any sense or in any context, Cavell’s aim in revisiting Kant’s aesthetic philosophy. Perhaps this is *Rodowick’s* ideal destination for the philosophy of art—a distinctly Kantian realm wherein something other than logic (such as?) determines what counts as rational thought (is this not concept stealing, or is there a way of conceiving of “rational thought” without relying on/stealing the concept of “logic?”)—but Cavell’s ideal destination for the philosophy of art was a realm wherein the logic of aesthetic judgment is properly understood as rational and, indeed, objective. In his most sustained engagement with Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, Cavell starts by pointing out that, “catching the assumption that agreement provides the vindication of judgment, but no longer able to hope for either,” Kant proceeded as if aesthetic arguments “lack something” in light of the fact that “the arguments that support them are not conclusive the way arguments in logic are nor rational the way arguments in science are.” Indeed, he goes on to aver, “they are not, [for] if they were, there would be no such subject as art.” Having said this, the key point that Cavell makes is that, just because there are different argumentative protocols in artful conversation, and just because those protocols extend beyond the realm of science, it does not follow that artful conversations are not “conclusive and rational” (Cavell 1965, 88).

To support his argument, Cavell explicitly takes up the question of how and where concepts of logic and rationality are applicable in artful conversations. He contends that “those of us who keep finding ourselves wanting to call [aesthetic judgments] ‘logical’ are, I think, responding to a sense of necessity

we feel in them, together with a sense that necessity is, partly, a matter of the *ways* a judgment is supported.” Additionally, he maintains that “it is only by virtue of these recurrent patterns of support that [an aesthetic judgment] will count” as logical, for, as he persuasively contends, being able to support an aesthetic judgment with reasons “is essential to making an aesthetic judgment” in the first place (93). By contrast, he argues that scholars like Rodowick “who refuse the term ‘logic’” are responding to a sense “that ‘logic’ is a matter of arriving at conviction in such a way that anyone who can follow the argument must, unless he finds something definitely wrong with it, *accept the conclusion*, agree with it” (94).⁵² They are responding, in other words, to the sense that, if aesthetic judgments are logical, then, by extension, they are objective. But that obviously cannot be true, for, if aesthetic judgments were objective, then it would be possible for aesthetic judgments—or, to put it more accurately (if more affrontingly) so as to explain the hostility often shown toward this position, it would be possible for scholars making aesthetic judgments—to be *wrong*. And that is clearly unacceptable.

Throughout his (ostensibly Cavellian) articulation of the concept of artful conversation, Rodowick seems reticent at the prospect of and hence avoids taking the (properly Cavellian) step from arguing that “encounters with art and the artful conversations [artworks] inspire may lead to perfectionist moments of self-education in which I grant myself the possibility of change . . . or undergo transformation” (Rodowick 2015, 263) to arguing that, in an artful conversation, an individual has the potential to educate another individual and inspire him to change or undergo a transformation. In other words, so long as scholars are educating themselves, everything is fine, but to even suggest, much less to explicitly argue, that all scholars do not already know everything that there is to know about everyone and everything is to allegedly commit the heinous academic crimes of moralism and dogmatism.⁵³

Moralism is a particularly irritating academic buzzword that serves most often as a smoke screen meant to afford scholars a “safe space” in which they may do and say anything they wish without having to worry about being held accountable, much less being proven wrong. Cavell once lamented the “amnesia of the fact, or a wish to be free of the fact, that we have claims upon one another, count for one another, matter to one another” suffered by most philosophers of art, and he contrasted with this amnesia/apprehensiveness his conception of moral perfectionism, which he hoped would foreground “the demand to make ourselves, and to become, intelligible to one another.” Moralism only results if, upon entering into an artful conversation with another individual, one expects/demands one’s interlocutor to change without allowing for the possibility of having to change *one’s own* mind or reconsider *one’s own* judgments (which, ironically, is the bullying tactic of choice for those who most frequently and

most forcefully level charges of moralism).⁵⁴ As Cavell (2000) formulated it, “confronting another morally risks one’s identity; otherwise one risks moralism” (339).⁵⁵

It should now be clear that to characterize Cavell’s aim in revisiting Kant’s aesthetic philosophy as an attempt on his part to eliminate logic from the aesthetic realm is to commit an egregious error. How was Rodowick led to such a misguided characterization of Cavell’s efforts? Not unlike the way I argued that Derrida’s confusion vis-à-vis Husserlian objectivity was ultimately attributable to Husserl’s own confusion (Barrowman 2017, 172–76), I would argue that, given his unfortunate tendency to equivocate, the fault is ultimately with Cavell. I do not think that it is a coincidence that one of the key passages from Cavell for Rodowick is the following, in which the seed for the concept of artful conversation was originally planted:

The philosopher appealing to [artful conversation] turns to [his interlocutor] not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say. . . . The implication [of this] is that [an individual engaged in an artful conversation is] . . . powerless to *prove* [his aesthetic judgment]. . . . All [he can do] . . . is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own. (Cavell 1965, 95–96)

On the basis primarily of his confused conception of “proof,” this passage contradicts on several points Cavell’s most impassioned arguments relating to epistemology (inasmuch as it acquiesces to the anti-Wittgensteinian notion of a private language), ethics (inasmuch as it acquiesces to moral relativism), and aesthetics (inasmuch as it acquiesces to aesthetic subjectivism).⁵⁶ Most pertinent to the present discussion is the fact that Cavell’s contention that individuals are powerless to prove the validity of their aesthetic judgments relies for its persuasiveness on the same implicit premise that Socrates’s question to Euthyphro relies on, namely, that there is no objective basis on which to ground an aesthetic (or, for that matter, an ethical) judgment. Trying to make the point that “confronting another morally risks one’s identity” while at the same time trying to argue that individuals are powerless to prove their judgments after having so confronted another results in nonsense. On my reading, this is an example of even Cavell’s susceptibility to skepticism and, more specifically, to the fear that motivates acquiescence to aesthetic subjectivism.

This point of contradiction in Cavell’s *oeuvre* has interestingly brought the discussion back to the related issues of risk and fear in criticism. I have previously argued that there is *epistemological* risk in the formulation of interpretations

of artworks and that scholars have concocted all sorts of nonsensical philosophical tracts on the impossibility of objective interpretation in response to their fear of this risk (Barrowman 2018a). In a similar vein, I will argue that there is also *ethical* risk in the formulation of evaluations of artworks and that it is in response to an even greater fear that scholars automatically assume the impossibility of objective evaluation. Before mounting this argument, it will be useful to recall my proposed Objectivist model of aesthetic judgment, which I outlined in the introduction as follows: I *like* (or *dislike*) an artwork; I must discover the *reason(s)*. From this, I argued that the steps a critic takes in coming to terms with the initial emotional response provoked by a given artwork are as follows: First, the critic *interprets* the artwork toward the goal of understanding what it is, how it works, and whether or not it succeeds on the terms established by the artist; second, the critic *evaluates* the artwork toward the goal of articulating why he likes it (or does not like it), that is, articulating what it is about the artwork (if anything) that he *values* and why.

As if criticism is not scary enough, in the event that a given artwork has been interpreted correctly—which is to say, in the event that the epistemological risk braved in formulating an interpretation has paid off—the next step (namely, evaluation) comes with not just more, but even greater, risk. According to Rand, when one pronounces judgment on a given artwork—as well as, it warrants mentioning, when one creates an artwork—one puts oneself, one’s very soul, on the line; as she once poignantly put it in a discussion of literature: “An artist reveals his naked soul in his work—and so, gentle reader, do you when you respond to it” (Rand [1969] 1975, 34). Cavell’s realization of this fact inherent in artful conversation takes the following form:

Whatever the difficulties will be in trying to characterize this procedure fully and clearly, this much can be said at once: If we find we disagree [in our respective aesthetic judgments, then] . . . what we should do is either (a) try to determine why we disagree (perhaps we are [interpreting] the [artwork] differently)—just as, if we agree in response, we will, when we start philosophizing about this fact, want to know why we agree, what it shows about our concepts; or (b) we will, if the disagreement cannot be explained, [try to] find some explanation for *that*. . . . Disagreement is not disconfirming: It is as much a datum for philosophizing as agreement is. At this stage philosophizing has, hopefully, not yet begun. (Cavell 1965, 95)

In the previous section, I mentioned that the phenomenon of disagreement vis-à-vis aesthetic judgments is often adduced as evidence of the impossibility of

objective evaluation. On this issue, Carroll has observed that the conclusion that scholars often reach (or, more accurately in my estimation, often start from) in light of the fact that aesthetic judgments can be “wildly divergent and obdurate” is that, “strong as they may be, [aesthetic judgments] are not reasoned” (Carroll 2009, 34). Taking the baton from Carroll on this front, I intend to demonstrate in what remains of this section that the preponderance of divergent/obdurate aesthetic judgments speaks not to the ontological impossibility of objectivity in aesthetics but rather to the preponderance of epistemologically/ethically dubious aesthetic judgments formulated with the ontological impossibility of objectivity as a tacit (illicit) presupposition. To do so, I will work through two exemplary artful conversations. My primary example will be an artful conversation between Robin Wood and V. F. Perkins, while my secondary example will be a prior artful conversation between Wood and Alan Lovell.

Around the time of these artful conversations, Wood and Perkins were often linked for their shared commitment to close analyses of films and their shared belief that the question of value is, indeed, as Cavell put it, the heart of the aesthetic matter. However, Wood confessed that, despite his overall agreement with Perkins’s arguments with respect to film theory and film criticism, he nevertheless found that he would often “disagree with [Perkins] over details of evaluation” (Wood [1976] 2006, 30). In trying to “pinpoint the sources of [his] dissatisfaction” (30–31)—specifically with reference to Perkins’s considerations of certain dramatic effects used by Nicholas Ray and Michelangelo Antonioni in *Bigger Than Life* (1956) and *Red Desert* (1964) respectively (Perkins 1972, 84–86)—Wood admitted that “the precise evaluative status of many of Perkins’s examples [was for him] rather difficult to determine” (Wood [1976] 2006, 32). This uncertainty prompted Wood to postulate that what was motivating Perkins’s responses to these film(makers)s—and, equally, what was motivating Wood’s own oppositional responses, as well as, by implication, what motivates any individual viewer’s response to any individual film(maker)—was something subjective and thus not “textually demonstrable” (32).⁵⁷

The critique that Wood fashioned from this postulation, though neither accurate nor convincing, is nevertheless instructive. In order to grasp the terms and the stakes of this artful conversation, I want to explore a particular moment in Perkins’s consideration of *Bigger Than Life* that Wood singles out and the counterargument by which he seeks to invalidate it:

As [the protagonist of *Bigger Than Life*] walks away from the school building, with its background of respectable greys and browns, the image dissolves into a general view of the cab-park photographed so that the screen is virtually covered with the garish yellow of the taxi-ranks. The

transition thus handled gains an emotional coloring which conveys not only the physical strain under which the man lives but also his *déclassé* feeling of shame in his secondary occupation. (Perkins 1972, 84–85)

This complex significance seems to depend almost exclusively on our responding to the yellow cabs as “garish.” Substitute “bright and cheerful” and the significance vanishes, the transition then conveying (perhaps) a sense of release that is soon to be ironically contradicted, but no “physical strain,” let alone a “*déclassé* feeling of shame.” (Wood [1976] 2006, 33)

What is of interest here is the way that Wood’s point in his artful conversation with Perkins contradicts a point that he had made previously in an artful conversation with Alan Lovell in the pages of the influential British film journal *Screen*. In that earlier artful conversation, which involved, among other issues, a quarrel over Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959), Lovell objected to Wood there in the same manner as Wood is objecting to Perkins here.

Mr. Lovell quotes me at some length on *North by Northwest* and remarks: “I see no evidence in the film that Hitchcock invites us to make such a judgement of [Cary Grant’s character Roger O. Thornhill],” (i.e., that he is “immature” and “his life a chaos”), “and Wood quotes none.” Hitchcock presents a man who has got through two marriages, his attitude to which is extremely casual; who, in early middle age, is still dominated by his mother; who drinks heavily; who shows no attachment to other people (mother partly excepted) and *uses* them very irresponsibly. This, I think, establishes him as immature. Are “beliefs and values” so uncertain that there is really no agreement as to what constitutes immaturity? The movement of the film as a whole carries Thornhill (whose initials are R.O.T.—“O for nothing,” as he says) to the point where he is willing to risk his own life to save a woman and preserve his relationship with her. His success in doing these things is presented, I think, as a happy, rather than tragic, outcome. This, for me, is “evidence.” (Wood 1969, 38–39)

At the center of both of these disputes, between Lovell and Wood and between Wood and Perkins, is a dispute over (what counts as/the correct interpretation of) “evidence.” To Wood’s mind (and rightly so), for an evaluation to be valid, the interpretation of the film on which it is based must also be valid.⁵⁸ Wood judges Grant’s character, Roger Thornhill, to be immature, and he believes that this

characterization was intentional on Hitchcock's part for the sake of the character arc over the course of the ensuing narrative. Confronted with the evidence provided by Wood, Lovell expressed dismay at Wood's arrogance and presumptuousness to have pronounced *any* moral judgment on Thornhill's character, let alone the "severe" judgment of immaturity, and attempted to counter Wood's example of Thornhill cheating two women out of a taxi as an indication of his immaturity and obliviousness by alleging that it could just as easily be interpreted as indicating his "ability for quick improvisation (getting the taxi by inventing an excuse on the spur of the moment) and witty rationalization (his claim that he has made the people he cheated out of the taxi feel like Good Samaritans)" (Lovell 1970, 82).

In line with David Kelley's conception of ethical argumentation (Barrowman 2017, 168–69), over the course of an artful conversation, one must be committed to "observing *how* a person thinks," to "attending to his reasoning rather than his conclusions in isolation" (Kelley [1990] 2000, 56). Above and beyond simply refuting Lovell's counterargument, it is important to refute the position from which he mounted the counterargument. After his (in his mind successful) attempt to checkmate Wood, Lovell confessed that, where Wood felt invited by Hitchcock to pronounce a negative moral judgment on Thornhill's character, he did not feel invited to make any such judgment (Lovell 1970, 82). Having previously betrayed his dubious premises in his admitted confusion as to why Wood puts such stress on the "moral qualities" of films, filmmakers, and scholars in the first place, to say nothing of what he thinks "gives him the right to judge" anything or anyone at all (77), Lovell's desire—full of contradictions to the point of being self-refuting, not to mention, as evidenced by the plethora of severe negative judgments that he pronounced on Wood over the course of their artful conversation, hypocritical and dishonest—to "shift the emphasis from *the critic* to *criticism*, from personal qualities to impersonal ones, from moral qualities to intellectual ones" (77) makes it painfully obvious why he failed to recognize Hitchcock's invitation to pronounce moral judgment: Because, in his mind, *no one* should *ever* make moral judgments of *any* kind for *any* reason. Thus, having blanketed Hitchcock's film with his own (a/im)moral agenda, is it any surprise that Lovell's interpretive and evaluative efforts never so much as touched the film?

The fact that Wood was on the right side of this dispute in his artful conversation with Lovell makes it all the more ironic to see him on the wrong side in his artful conversation with Perkins. As an early (and, to my mind, despite his sharp and extreme Marxist turn later in his career, still the most exemplary) herald of the kind of moral criticism for which I have been arguing, Wood, to his eternal credit, rejected as patently ludicrous any such desire for the separation

of “intelligence” and “morality,” of morality and art, or of art and life as was expressed by Lovell.⁵⁹ However, Wood endlessly waffled on the issue of critical objectivity. In his debate with Lovell, he very clearly (and, as I indicated, correctly) asserted as objectively true the nature of Grant’s character and the function of that character within Hitchcock’s larger narrative in *North by Northwest*. Yet, in his engagement with Perkins, he objects to Perkins’s interpretation of the nature of James Mason’s character and the function of that character within Ray’s larger narrative in *Bigger Than Life* by implying that Ray’s reason for including the yellow cabs at that point in his film is not objectively knowable.

Wood’s claim that the substitution of “bright and cheerful” for “garish” would invalidate Perkins’s interpretation and subsequent evaluation of the taxi scene in *Bigger Than Life* is equally as misguided (hence as vacuous) as Lovell’s claim was that the substitution of “witty” for “immature” would invalidate Wood’s interpretation and subsequent evaluation of the taxi scene in *North by Northwest*.⁶⁰ Lovell’s reasoning is the far more dangerous for its perversion of morality, but in both instances, the presupposition is that such meanings can be mixed and matched based on nothing more (and requiring nothing more, for there allegedly is nothing more) than critical whim.⁶¹ On the contrary, it must be stated that Perkins’s interpretation of the scene and his evaluation of Ray’s skill in executing it is valid not because yellow is garish *as such*, nor because yellow cabs are garish *as such*, but because, *in this case*, based on the “textually demonstrable” evidence adduced and analyzed, the yellow cabs are being used by Ray, and used efficiently and eloquently, to conjure up garishness for the purpose of conveying salient character and plot information at that point in the narrative. Hence, Perkins’s aesthetic judgment must be objectively correct.

Of course, the points on which the artful conversations between Wood and Perkins and Wood and Lovell turned were relatively minor points. All the same, the fact that I was able to produce two different cases in which disagreements over judgments of value could be objectively resolved should contribute to the overall effect of this section to the end of dissolving a number of additional Kantian worries vis-à-vis objective evaluation, as well as provide a lever with which to open up a space for the types of artful conversations that I think can and should be initiated on the strength of the Objectivist aesthetics. If scholars are committed to engaging each other in passionate and perfectionist artful conversations, then, in Cavellian terms, disagreement should no longer be viewed as a “Do Not Enter” sign for the philosophy of art. Rather, disagreement should represent an opportunity for scholars to cultivate their powers of reason, clarify their moral and aesthetic premises, and arrive at better understandings—of themselves, of each other, and of the artists and artworks under consideration.

4. Conclusion

Despite the lengths to which I have gone across multiple essays now to identify philosophical problems in contemporary art criticism and to point the way toward potential solutions for the sake of the future of art criticism, I have no illusions that the conversation is closed. Indeed, for my part, I hope that all that I have said with respect to the possibilities of the Objectivist aesthetics marks the beginning of new conversations. As for any scholars for whom none of what I have said has appeared to have so much as touched the questions that pertain to the problems and possibilities of objective criticism, let alone to have provided answers or a playbook for how to go about always ensuring the objectivity of one's aesthetic judgments, I am reminded of one of Perkins's most perspicacious observations. As if anticipating the objections to his work of scholars in the Kantian aesthetic tradition—namely, that his arguments for the possibility of objective aesthetic judgments do not provide a list of rules to determine how each judgment is to be made so as to be *a priori* correct in every instance—Perkins averred that “a theory of judgment cannot remove the necessity for judgment” (Perkins 1972, 193), which is to say that determining the objective validity of particular judgments of value can only be determined on a case-by-case basis.⁶² Or, to put it another way, given that artful conversations demand every part of an individual's constitution—reason *and* emotion, intellect *and* desire—each artful conversation is no better or worse than its participants.

To this point, I have been vociferously making the case that, before artful conversations can yield the greatest profit, the philosophy of art requires considerable philosophical overhaul. And I do, indeed, mean for my vociferation to take the form of a rebuke, for it is my sincere hope that inspiring scholars to check their premises will ensure that we are in the best possible position to overhaul the philosophy of art and thereby increase the profitability of our artful conversations. Cavell once remarked that, short of such an overhaul, we will not be able “to make our desires, hence our actions, intelligible (and to ourselves)”; that, instead, we will find ourselves “hampered in our demand and right to be found intelligible” as well as in our ambition “to ask residence in the shared realm of reason” (Cavell 2005a, 196–97). To reconceive artful conversation along these lines, as a mode of conversation on the basis of which each participant asks the other for residence in the shared realm of reason, is to bring artful conversation into an Objectivist realm wherein scholars converse on the following Randian terms: “When I disagree with a rational man, I let reality be our final arbiter. If I am right, he will learn; if I am wrong, I will. One of us will win, but

both will profit” (Rand 1957, 1023). This is the aesthetic Atlantis that awaits philosophers of art.

KYLE BARROWMAN, barrowmank@cardiff.ac.uk, <https://cardiff.academia.edu/KyleBarrowman>, received his Ph.D. from the School of Journalism, Media, and Culture at Cardiff University. In addition to his work on the philosophy of Ayn Rand and the possibilities of an Objectivist aesthetics of cinema, his research focuses on issues of philosophy and aesthetics throughout the history of film.

NOTES

1. On this point, I took my lead from earlier work on the Objectivist aesthetics done by Peikoff (1991), Chris Matthew Sciabarra ([1995] 2013), Allan Gotthelf (2000), Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi (2000a; 2000b; see also Kamhi 2003; 2014), Kirsti Minsaas (2000; 2004; 2005), Stephen Cox (2000; 2004), and Roger E. Bissell (2002; 2004).

2. In extant work on the Objectivist aesthetics, not only has very little been written about film (Borton 1983; Torres and Kamhi 2000a, 74–75, 253–61; Riggenbach 2001), but what has been written has in my estimation suffered from a lack of disciplinary context vis-à-vis film studies.

3. Following on from the previous note, I have already attempted to bring Objectivist principles to bear on specific disciplinary issues in film studies and thereby establish a context for a potential Objectivist intervention (Barrowman 2018a).

4. For detailed breakdowns of the logical missteps that are part and parcel of such misunderstandings/misapplications of Kantian philosophy, as well as the consequences for aesthetic philosophy that have stemmed from them, see the work of Noël Carroll (1991; 1998, 89–109) and Michelle Marder Kamhi (2003, 415–16; 2014, 15–21). In the Objectivist context, Kamhi has not only demonstrated the persistence of this problem throughout the history of aesthetic philosophy, she has actually implied that it would be beneficial to integrate Kant’s philosophy of art into the Objectivist aesthetics (Kamhi 2003, 416; 2014, 21). Given the long-standing rejection by Objectivists of Kantian philosophy generally (for more on this front, see Rand 1961a; Peikoff 1967; and Sciabarra [1995] 2013; 2017), I think that trying to integrate Kant’s philosophy of art is a dubious proposition to say the least, though this is not to say that it is not at the same time an intriguing proposition.

5. In an effort to head off confusion, I think that it is worth stating for the record that, for my purposes in this essay, Kant himself is not my primary target. Over the course of my critique of the Kantian aesthetic tradition, I will at times take aim at Kant himself, but more often than not my primary concern will not be what Kant himself actually did/ tried to do, but rather, what scholars have done/tried to do with reference to certain of Kant’s ideas and arguments. If, in response to my critique of the Kantian aesthetic tradition, readers find themselves taking issue with what they consider to be the mangling of Kantian ideas/arguments, then the issue should be taken up, as I am taking it up here, with scholars in the Kantian aesthetic tradition.

6. Hence also a sense of confusion even in Objectivist contexts regarding the very possibility of objective criticism. In his contribution to the “Aesthetics Symposium” hosted by this journal, John Hospers gave voice to this sense of confusion: “If you say there are nine planets around the sun and I say there aren’t, one of us is mistaken. If you

say that a Rachmaninoff symphony has great aesthetic value and I say it doesn't, is one of us mistaken? As would seem to befit the term 'Objectivism,' one would expect Rand to say: 'Yes—aesthetic value is indeed objective'" (Hospers 2001, 324). Hospers went on to acknowledge that Rand does say this, but he confessed that, for his part, he "would hate to try to judge the aesthetic value of any particular work of art on the basis of what Rand says about objective criteria" (325). There are several key issues that Hospers places on the table here, and I will in what follows return to and try to work my way through a number of them; for the moment, however, I will simply let Hospers's remarks stand as exemplary of the long-standing confusion with regard to where, if anywhere, the concept of objectivity fits in critical practice.

7. To be fair, Rand herself acknowledged (in a tantalizing parenthetical in *The Romantic Manifesto* that has served as my jumping off point) that "the aesthetic principles which apply to all art, regardless of an individual artist's philosophy, and which must guide an objective evaluation, are outside the scope of this discussion" (Rand [1969] 1975, 33). I myself must similarly acknowledge that, as this essay is a prolegomenon, the many questions and issues that surround the Objectivist aesthetics will not all be resolved by its end, though I do hope to eliminate much of the confusion that has beset philosophers of art and signal interesting avenues down which scholars can travel in future work on the Objectivist aesthetics.

8. For additional examples of this fallacy in operation, see Rand 1961a, 46; 1961b, 20; 1974a, 6. By contrast, for a far more nuanced and astute consideration of emotions, see Rand 1957, 1021–22.

9. Here, I am taking my lead from Marsha Familaro Enright, who has argued that every individual's epistemological task is one of "learn[ing] how to [most effectively] use the access to our subconscious through our emotions" (Enright 2002, 61); Bissell, who has usefully clarified that "reason and emotion, while distinguishable, are not mutually exclusive from one another. They are concomitant, necessarily connected aspects of a cognitive-evaluative experience" (Bissell 2009, 346); and Sciabarra, who has discussed how people "may unwittingly adopt defense techniques that numb their awareness of unacceptable or painful impulses, feelings, [and] ideas. . . . As they mature, they may genuinely seek to dissolve their unarticulated guilt, fear, anger, and internal conflicts. But such [psychological] repression cannot be merely commanded out of existence. . . . In such cases, [people] must first practice the art of 'owning' [their] emotions, of bringing the aspects of [their] inner experience into full awareness. Whereas lifelong evasion and repression engender cognitive *disintegration*, the removal of obstacles to the experience of one's emotions reignites the mind's integrative processes" (Sciabarra [1995] 2013, 185; see also Branden [1971] 1978). As for Rand's (at times irrational) suspicion of emotions, Sciabarra has usefully contextualized Rand's tendency to perhaps protest too much with reference to the Russian backdrop against which she initially set out to transcend the false reason/emotion dichotomy; as he has explained: "[Rand's] first reflections on the nature of emotion [took] place within the context of [her] condemnation . . . [of] Russian religious philosophy, [which,] like much of Russian culture, had rejected the 'Western' emphasis on reason as an absolute. . . . Rand's insistence on the centrality of reason is [thus] in many ways an outgrowth of her antipathy toward such mysticism. . . . For Rand, anything that even hinted at a devaluation of the rational faculty was to be rejected and criticized" (Sciabarra [1995] 2013, 170).

10. In this vein, see the work of, among others, Branden 1969; Damasio [1994] 2006; 1995; 1996; Robinson 1995; Carroll 1997; Peterson 1999, 48–61; and Haidt 2006.

11. My emphasis on the *best* artists rather than on artists tout court is an extension of what Minsaas observes is the “honorific sense” in which Rand tends to discuss art (Minsaas 2005, 24–26), which follows from Rand’s ethical distinction between the human and the hero (Rand 1957, 1017, 1050, 1069; [1969] 1975, 119; see also Gotthelf and Salmieri 2016, 460).

12. For an astute interrogation of the hermeneutical tendency to amalgamate different critical activities and the consequences stemming therefrom, see Lorand 2000.

13. A comprehensive genealogy of the many shifts in theoretical fashion in the disciplinary history of film studies to which I am alluding is far beyond the scope of this essay. However, for some surveys that can help to provide the type of disciplinary context that I claimed in a previous note was lacking in prior Objectivist engagements with film, see the work of, among many others, Andrew 1976; 1984a; 2009; Britton 1979; 1986; 1988; 1990; 1992; Bordwell 1985; 1989a; 1989b; 1989c; 1996; Carroll 1988a; 1988b; 1996; 2003; 2008; and Rodowick [1988] 1994; 1991; 2014; 2015. See also the anthologies of seminal texts/debates such as those (again among many others) edited by Caughie 1981; Rosen 1986; Freeland and Wartenberg 1995; Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Allen and Smith 1997; Gledhill and Williams 2000; Wartenberg and Curran 2005; Carroll and Choi 2006; Smith and Wartenberg 2006; Braudy and Cohen 2009; Livingston and Plantinga 2009; and Carel and Tuck 2011.

14. This example was inspired by the exceedingly problematic interpretations of *Inception* that have been offered by Fisher 2011, McGowan 2012, Tallman 2012, Southworth 2012, and Weijers 2012, to cite but a few examples.

15. In his famous tract on mysticism and logic, Bertrand Russell ([1913] 1959) identified this Kantian “attitude of mind” as antithetical to logic; contrariwise, Russell characterized logic as a matter, “in the interests of the desire to know,” of “sweeping away . . . any wish except to see [the object] as it is, and without any belief that what it is must be determined by some relation, positive or negative, to what we should like it to be” (44).

16. It bears mentioning that Rand is far from the only artist to have adopted an Aristotelian perspective. The playwright and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin (2016), for example, has vociferously urged all writers to consult Aristotle. As he puts it in his screenwriting *Masterclass*: “It’s the rules that make art not finger painting. . . . [And] the rule book is the *Poetics* by Aristotle.”

17. For the most elaborate ontological argument against such art from the Objectivist perspective, see Torres and Kamhi 2000a, according to whom such art is “more akin to madness, or to fraud, than to art” (1). See also Kamhi 2014.

18. My agreement with Turvey extends beyond theory to practice: While I share his sense of the dubiousness of psychoanalysis as an all-encompassing “theory of mind and mentality,” I have nevertheless generated an elaborate Lacanian interpretation of Hitchcock’s philosophy of filmic romance (Barrowman 2012).

19. This example was inspired by the Cartesian interpretation of *The Matrix* elaborated by Thomas E. Wartenberg (2007, 55–75).

20. This example was inspired by the Derridean interpretation of *Dead Man* (1995) elaborated by Evelina Kazakevičiūtė (2018).

21. Even though I am remaining within the disciplinary confines of film studies, the influence across both the sciences and the humanities of Thomas Kuhn cannot be

overstated, for it was Kuhn who gave currency to the paradigm subjectivity argument with the simple yet destructively mistaken postulation that “a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself” (Kuhn 1970, 113; cf. Sokal and Bricmont [1997] 1999, 67–73; Hicks 2004, 74–83; and Binswanger 2014, 383–90).

22. Not to mention Poe is one of the most profoundly Aristotelian of authors; the meticulousness with which he structured his stories accounts for the inevitability of interpretive convergence regardless of paradigm allegiances. For more on this point, see Poe’s extraordinary breakdown of his writing process for “The Raven” (1845), in which he argues, in a spirit that Rand no doubt would have appreciated, that “nothing is more clear than that every plot worth the name must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or *causation*, by making the incidents, and especially the tone, at all points tend to the development of the *intention*” (Poe [1846] 2012, 318; emphasis added).

23. For a stirringly ambitious attempt to unpack this question from a psychological perspective, see Peterson 1999, 237–42. From the Objectivist perspective, meanwhile, Binswanger (2014) has provided an astonishingly shrewd and precisely articulated explanation of what we know and how we know it.

24. For insights into the anti-theological thrust of Objectivism, see Rand [1934] 1983; [1943] 1968; 1945; 1948; 1950; 1957; 1961c; 1963; Berliner 1981; Peikoff 1982; 1986; Sciabarra [1995] 2013; and Binswanger 2014.

25. For recent Objectivist dealings with the intrinsic/subjective dichotomy, see Bissell 2007 and Baise 2017.

26. For a heraldic attempt by a film scholar to articulate something akin to what I am calling the complementary paradigm argument—an attempt to which my own work (Barrowman 2014) is very much indebted—see Wood 1977.

27. For further discussion of the complementary paradigm argument, see Barrowman 2019.

28. Here, Cavell is sounding a note that has been sounded by many thinkers throughout history. For example, the famous eighteenth-century Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler ([1761] 1802) once observed: “If a clown should take it into his head to conceive such [radical] doubt and should say, for example, he does not believe that his bailiff exists, though he stands in his presence, he would be taken for a madman, and with good reason; but when a philosopher advances such sentiments, he expects we should admire his knowledge and sagacity, which infinitely surpass the apprehensions of the vulgar” (375). Euler’s sentiment corresponds with the sentiment in Wittgenstein’s humorous parable: “I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again, ‘I know that that’s a tree,’ pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: ‘This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy’” (Wittgenstein [1951] 1969, 61e). The point, as Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont explain, is that “no one is *systemically* skeptical (*when he or she is sincere*)” (Sokal and Bricmont [1997] 1999, 53; emphases added).

29. Additionally, Carroll quickly acknowledges the follow-up objection: that sometimes there are aspects of films that were not intended (either not consciously intended or simply accidental). He also quickly rejects that follow-up objection (in perfect accordance with the Objectivist rejection of the fallacy of the stolen concept) by pointing out

that the ability to identify something as having been unintended presupposes (the ability to acquire) knowledge of what was intended (Carroll 2009, 79; see also MacDowell and Zborowski 2013).

30. Austin's famous example in his discussion is the goldfinch, with reference to which he expounds: "If you say, 'That's not enough' [to claim that you know that what is before you is a goldfinch], then you must have in mind some more or less definite lack. 'To be a goldfinch, besides having a red head it must also have the characteristic eye-markings,' or, 'How do you know it isn't a woodpecker? Woodpeckers have red heads, too.' If there is no definite lack, which you are at least prepared to specify on being pressed, then it's silly (outrageous) just to go on saying, 'That's not enough'" (Austin [1946] 1961, 52).

31. On a similar note, Cavell (1965) sees philosophy as concerning "those necessities we cannot, being human, fail to know. Except that nothing is more human than to deny them" (96).

32. Just as there is an affinity between Rand and Cavell vis-à-vis romanticism (Barrowman 2017, 189 n.22), there is also an affinity between them vis-à-vis perfectionism. For more on this latter affinity, see Barrowman 2019.

33. I have in mind here Rand's point that "a 'moral commandment' is a contradiction in terms," for the moral is "the chosen, not the forced; the understood, not the obeyed" (Rand 1957, 1018).

34. Peterson (1999) corroborates Cavell's claims, stressing that individuals who "flout" this ethic, "in ignorance or in willful opposition," are "doomed to misery and eventual dissolution" (xx).

35. For two representative examples of this (re)turn to *Film as Film*, see Sorfa 2015 and Lash 2017.

36. Pomerance was inspired by a moment in Bazin's discussion of Anthony Mann's film *The Man from Laramie* (1955). After differentiating between film *appreciation*, which "presupposes love and familiarity," and film *analysis*, which "can yield nothing but a crude enumeration which overlooks the essence that only taste can uncover," Bazin wryly exclaimed: "But try to make taste the subject of criticism!" (Bazin [1956] 1985, 165). More recently, as part of an investigation into the "taste of crime" in French New Wave cinema, Pomerance (2017) was again inspired to reflect on this Bazinian point, reaffirming that: "My claim—and, I think, Bazin's—is that the noblest and most serious aim of all film criticism is to make taste its subject, to elucidate and open the work of film in such a way as to make understandable how it can be a pretext for love."

37. In his most recent book, Rothman (2014) encourages as an alternative to rote scholarship that "purport[s] to tell us *a priori* what films are and are not capable of" that scholars (re)learn how "to *receive* films, to read them, moment by moment, trusting [in their] experience" (280). And this sentiment importantly continues a long-running thread in Rothman's work, as evident by the following (still unheeded) plea made to film scholars decades before: "Too many academic film critics today deny their experience [of films]. . . . Predictably, the resulting criticism reaffirms an attitude of superiority to the films. . . . Such criticism furthers rather than undoes the repression of these films and the ideas they represent. . . . [Hence,] we [as scholars] cannot play our part in reviving the spirit of the films we love without testifying, in our criticism, to the truth of our experience of those films" (Rothman 1986, 46).

38. In one of his most recent books, Rodowick (2015) considers the possibility of film scholarship becoming "a diagnosis of values" (95); indeed, he stresses the importance of

film scholars (re)learning *how to value* films, a process that would involve, as Rodowick adumbrates, “adding to one’s cognitive stock, amplifying one’s perceptual sensitivity and openness to new experience, acquiring new frameworks or contexts for judgment, and developing the potential for imaginatively applying or creating concepts” (103).

39. In a recent consideration of the state of academic film criticism, Gunning (2016) observes how, “as academic critics, we know that evaluative categories exist and shape what we write about . . . but where they come from seems to be avoided as if we were prudish parents invoking the stork rather than answering tricky questions.”

40. In a reconsideration of Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934), a film that he had already analyzed as part of a larger study of the genre of what he calls “the comedy of remarriage” (Cavell 1981a), Cavell opined that it is only in one’s “concrete” appreciation for individual films that “genuine conviction of [the cinema’s] value for study can, or should, develop” (Cavell 1985, 136).

41. In the only work by a film scholar where the possibility of objective evaluation is explicitly and elaborately defended, Carroll (2009) unequivocally avers: “I regard the discovery of value as the primary task of criticism in contrast to the championing of criticism as the almost clinical dissection and interpretation of various codes or signifying systems or regimes of power. Rather, I maintain that evaluation is the crux of criticism and that this inevitable connection to human value is the litmus test of membership in the humanities” (7).

42. In a related discussion of the concept of choice, Ralph Waldo Emerson ([1841] 1950) mounted a comparable critique. He characterized the “choices” of what he called “the appetites” as at best “partial” acts, whereas the choices of what he called (likely invoking Kant intentionally) the “faculties” he characterized as “whole” acts, as acts involving one’s “constitution” (195). It is in this vein that I mean to distinguish the act of judging a given dish from the act of judging a given artwork.

43. To corroborate this point, Carroll (2008) usefully contrasts the grammatical contours of conversations about movie preferences versus condiment preferences: “Of utmost importance, observe [that in conversations about movie preferences] we are *arguing*. There would [be] no point in our arguing [about condiments]. You like ketchup; I like mustard. That’s it. Period. Full stop. We accept each other’s preferences as facts; I don’t suppose it makes much sense to attempt to argue you out of your relish for ketchup. . . . However, in stark contrast, we are *arguing* [in conversations about movie preferences]. And that entails, furthermore, that our discussion revolves around coming up with *reasons* that we believe should sway or even compel others to accept our viewpoint” (195). This is just a choice example of what Carroll describes as the “ineluctable tendency for [aesthetic arguments] to drift from reports of subjective enjoyment or lethargy to questions of objective evaluation” (194). For more elaborate treatments of these issues, see also Carroll 2008, 194–99; 2009, 155–59.

44. For corroboration, recall that Kant ([1787] 1998) himself characterized his efforts with his three critiques as seeking a way “to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (116).

45. Regarding film studies in particular, this dubious operating procedure has been rightly rejected from the start. However, the only substitute that has been offered for mysticism of this Kantian variety has been skepticism of the poststructuralist variety (Barrowman 2017; 2018a; 2018b). To borrow from Peikoff’s characterization of the “progress” of Kantianism from Platonism to make the same point vis-à-vis the “progress”

of poststructuralism from Kantianism: “While condemning [Kant’s] *mystic* view [of aesthetic judgment], the [poststructuralists] embrace the same view in a *skeptical* version. Condemning [aesthetic judgments] as implicitly arbitrary, they institute an *explicitly* arbitrary equivalent. Condemning [Kant’s] ‘intuitive’ [conception of aesthetic judgment] as a disguised subjectivism, they spurn the disguise and adopt subjectivism . . . as though a concealed vice were heinous, but a brazenly flaunted one, rational. . . . The [poststructuralist] ‘advance’ over [Kantianism thus] consist[s] of *secularizing* his theory. To secularize an error is still to commit it” (Peikoff 1967, 96).

46. To extend an olive branch to scholars in the Kantian aesthetic tradition—as well as to perhaps justify Kamhi’s aforementioned interest in integrating Objectivist and Kantian aesthetics—I would like to draw attention to Kant’s final words on aesthetic judgment, which appear to indicate that he had intuited the inextricability of ethics and aesthetics (or else, at the very least, that he had sympathy for the intuition) and the necessity for the development of what I have conceived of as an Aesthetics of Life: “Taste is, in the ultimate analysis, a faculty that judges of the rendering of moral ideas in [aesthetic] terms . . . and it is this rendering also, and the increased receptivity, founded upon it, for the feeling which these ideas evoke . . . that are the origin of that [judgment] which taste declares [objectively] valid for mankind in general and not merely for the [subjective] feeling of each individual. This makes it clear that the true propaedeutic for laying the foundations of taste is the development of moral ideas and the culture of the moral feeling. For only when [aesthetics] is brought into harmony with [ethics] can genuine taste assume a definite unchangeable form” (Kant [1790] 2007, 183).

47. For more thorough Objectivist elaborations on the centrality of art in human existence and evolution, see Sciabarra [1995] 2013, 191–92; Torres and Kamhi 2000a, 109–30; and Kamhi 2014, 141–68. And, of course, it goes without saying that Rand was neither the first nor the last person to stress the essential importance of art in human history. Joseph Campbell (1966), for instance, highlighted “the unity of our species” by tracking the “mythological aims and concerns” that have been “shaping the arts and world of *Homo sapiens*” ever since “the emergence of our species” (21). In addition to Campbell’s work (Campbell [1949] 2004; 1960; 1962; 1965; 1968; 1972), see also the work of, among others, Eliade [1954] 1991; [1957] 1987; [1976] 1978; [1978] 1982; [1983] 1985; Frye 1982; 1990; Dissanayake [1992] 1995; Peterson 1999; 2012; and Saad 2012.

48. Though, as I said, I think that at this point the sense of the Objectivist rejection of experimental work such as Brakhage’s from the realm of art is clear, I would like to elaborate a bit so as to avoid having my characterization of Brakhage’s work as self-indulgent nonsense dismissed out of hand. Despite lacking Rand’s unique brand of vitriol (for example, Rand [1969] 1975, 67–70), Kamhi’s rejection of such work from the realm of art follows the same logical track: In a discussion of how certain (pseudo-) artists aim to convey “their inmost feelings” above/in disregard of all else, she makes the point that just because a piece of work “might well *feel* deeply meaningful” to its creator during the creative process does *not* mean that that piece “can be similarly meaningful to anyone else” (Kamhi 2014, 61). In Brakhage’s case, he described his creative process for *Mothlight* in the following manner: “Here is a film that I made out of a deep grief. *The grief is my business* . . . but the grief was helpful in squeezing the little film out of me, that

I said ‘these crazy moths are flying into the candlelight, and burning themselves to death, and that’s what’s happening to me. I don’t have enough money to make these films, and . . . I’m not feeding my children properly, because of these damn films, you know. And I’m burning up here. . . . What can I do?’” (Brakhage 2003; emphasis added). Obviously, I do not know everybody who has ever watched *Mothlight*; still, I am confident enough to contend that nobody who has ever watched *Mothlight* has said upon finishing it, “Wow, what a powerful artistic rendering of the pain of being unable to support one’s family due to one’s commitment to one’s passion.” More often than not, I would wager that the response is more of the “What the hell was that?” variety. And rightly so; as Rand put it, works like *Mothlight* should be “of no interest to anyone outside a psychotherapist’s office” (Rand [1969] 1975, 70). If it is not possible to make heads or tails of something without the author explicitly laying everything out blow-by-blow, then it is aesthetically meaningless (cf. Kamhi 2014, 61–68). That is not to imply that Brakhage’s or his ilk’s feelings have no validity whatsoever. Nor is it to imply that expressing one’s feelings has no artistic validity whatsoever. It is simply to say that the form that Brakhage’s and his ilk’s expressions of their feelings take is not art.

49. The logical conclusion to this argument is that such experimental work, while *potentially* valuable, is ultimately *less* valuable than art properly so called, and, if valuable, then valuable in different ways and for different reasons. Kamhi (2014) makes a similar point in a discussion of what is commonly referred to as “abstract art”: “What’s wrong with ‘abstract art’? My answer is: Nothing—if one is willing to regard it as merely decorative [as opposed to artistic]; that is, as having some visual interest or appeal owing merely to its color or design. But if one insists on claiming that it is an intelligible vehicle of meaning or emotional expression [which is to say, that it is art], I think it must be viewed as an essentially failed enterprise” (68). For greater elaboration on these and related issues, see Kamhi 2014, 50–96. And it is worth mentioning that Kamhi is by no means alone on this issue. As Cavell (1989) once related: “It is worth trying to go on with some thought[s] of [a different] kind for the value of [their] opposition to what is, I believe, the currently reigning view (among philosophers? among critics?) that everything and anything and nothing else but something that just about any ‘community’ calls (or institutes as) art (or rather an ‘artwork’) is art” (3).

50. Though I will not develop this line of inquiry here, I would like to point out that the Cavellian conception of conversation that I intend to articulate has a number of interesting affinities with the conception of conversation articulated by Sciabarra ([1995] 2013) in his dealings with the work of Nathaniel Branden (238–39) and Jürgen Habermas (290–92).

51. This point seems to have developed out of Cavell’s long-standing fascination, whether in a moral or an aesthetic register, with the question put to Euthyphro by Socrates, the question that perhaps inaugurated the philosophical conviction in disagreement as invalidating the possibility of objectivity in the realms of ethics and aesthetics: “But what kind of disagreement, my friend, causes hatred and anger? . . . If you and I were to disagree as to whether one number were more than another, would that make us angry and enemies? Should we not settle such a dispute at once by counting? . . . And if we were to disagree as to the relative size of two things, we should measure them and put an end to the disagreement at once, should we not? . . . Then what is the question which would

make us angry and enemies if we disagreed about it and could not come to a settlement? . . . Is it not the question of the just and unjust, of the honorable and the dishonorable, of the good and the bad? Is it not questions about these matters which make you and me and everyone else quarrel, when we do quarrel, if we differ about them and can reach no satisfactory agreement?" (Plato 395 BCE, 12–13). Cavell's interest in Plato's *Euthyphro* dates back to the very beginning of his efforts in philosophy; he references it in the title essay of his first book (Cavell 1969a, 21). For his most salient citations/examinations of this particular moment from the dialogue as they pertain to the issues with which I am concerned in this essay, see Cavell 1979, 45, 253–73; 2004, 12–18, 25–27.

52. Then again, as Charles Sanders Peirce once noted, "whether, when the premises are accepted by the mind, we feel an impulse to accept the conclusion also" is an issue neither of fact nor of knowledge—for "the true conclusion would remain true if we had no impulse to accept it"—but of *belief* (Peirce 1877, 1011). To this end, Peirce understood the impulse to "dismiss reason" in the interest of clinging to a particular belief or belief system—for example, with reference to religious people, "if it be true that death is annihilation then the man who believes that he will certainly go straight to heaven when he dies" enables himself, having dismissed reason, to enjoy a "cheap pleasure"—even if "we know how it must turn out at last" (1018). This also happens to be the issue that inspired Cavell to distinguish between *knowing* and *acknowledging*; as Cavell has explained: "Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge)" (Cavell 1969b, 257).

53. As Thomas Hobbes ([1651] 1996) observed in his *Leviathan*: "Such is the nature of men that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty or more eloquent . . . they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves" (87).

54. Elaborating on this irony, Ben Shapiro (2013) contends that "buried beneath all of [this] supposed hatred for bullying is a passionate *love* for bullying—the use of power to force those who disagree to shut up, back down, or face crushing consequences [such as] loss of reputation [and] career destruction" (4).

55. As for the charge of dogmatism, Cavell is equally eloquent: "The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. . . . It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic . . . [for] the wish and search for community is the wish and search for reason" (Cavell 1979, 20). Once again corroborating Cavell's claims, Peterson's conception of conversation similarly turns on the notion of accepting the risk of suffering a Jungian "ego death" (Peterson 2017c; see also Jung [1957] 2002): "If you're having a good conversation . . . [then] you're decomposing parts of yourself, your false presuppositions, you're letting them die and you're letting something new be born as an alternative. You're participating in this process of death and rebirth constantly when you're having a meaningful conversation. 'Oh, that was wrong, I'm going to let that die. That's a little painful, I was kind of attached to that concept, but I'll let it go, I'll let it burn off, and a new part of you will emerge. And then another part dies and the new part emerges. That's this process of eternal death and rebirth'" (Peterson 2017b; see also Peterson 2017a and Peterson 2018, 233–56). In its perfectionist emphasis, Peterson's conception of conversation attests to the truth in Cavell's observation that "knowledge of the self as it is always takes place in the betrayal of the self as it was" and that the pain that this process entails is the reason that the perfectionist path is "so rarely taken" (Cavell [1971] 1979, 160).

56. The source of this contradiction warrants investigation, as do the consequences of Cavell's tendency to equivocate generally, but such an investigation is beyond the scope of this essay. However, for a trenchant critique in this vein of what he refers to as Cavell's problematic penchant for "esotericism," see Krajewski 2016.

57. The question of how to objectively compare different film(maker)s, while of crucial importance to understanding the objective foundation of aesthetic judgments, is regrettably beyond the scope of this essay. Therefore, I will only focus in what follows on the questions of, first, whether or not judgments of value pronounced on individual films can be made objectively, and, second, whether or not disagreements in judgments of value pertaining to individual films can be resolved objectively. For further considerations of the issues surrounding the possibility of objectively pitting film(maker)s against one another, see Carroll 2008, 218–23; 2009, 35–37, 191–96.

58. As he expressed himself in his artful conversation with Lovell: "One writes every time a sort of personal testament out of one's sense of vital contact with a director's work, one's sympathy and recoil: This is what these films mean to *me*. At the same time, one tries to respond to the films *as they are*, avoiding temptations to produce one's own versions" (Wood 1969, 44–45).

59. In fact, Wood closed his response to Lovell by quoting a remark made by F. R. Leavis over the course of his (in)famous critique of C. P. Snow: "Criticism must begin and end with a sense of value, whatever comes in between. If the purpose of criticism is not a discussion of values, then I don't see what it is. To indicate briefly what I mean by 'values,' let me quote from . . . [Leavis's] answer to C. P. Snow: 'I don't believe in any "literary values," and you won't find me talking about them; the judgements the literary critic is concerned with are judgements about life'" (Wood 1969, 48; see also Leavis [1962] 2013).

60. As Perkins himself noted, as if in response to Lovell and Wood: "A failure to discern quality is not a demonstration of its absence. . . . If we fail to perceive functions and qualities, it may [simply] be because we are looking for them in inappropriate ways" (Perkins 1972, 190).

61. To add a final bit of irony, the objection that I am raising here against Lovell and Wood was raised by Wood himself against Penelope Houston and her treatment of Hitchcock's film *The Birds* (1963): "'Why not try the birds as the Bomb; or as creatures from the subconscious; or start from the other end with Tippi Hedren as a witch? . . . ' Why not, indeed? Go ahead, Miss Houston! ' . . . One could work up a pretty theory on any of these lines . . . ' (except that a minute's consideration of the film would be enough to show that one couldn't)" (Wood 1965, 60; cf. Houston 1963).

62. Similarly, Wittgenstein ([1951] 1969) once expressed the following: "Can't it be described how we satisfy ourselves of [for example, the validity of an aesthetic judgment]? Oh, yes! Yet, no rule emerges when we do so. But, the most important thing is: The rule is not needed. Nothing is lacking. . . . [If we could only] forget this transcendent certainty" (8e).

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