Criticism and Praise in the Terms of the Arcade

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The titles for the 1953 film *The Band Wagon* are seen against the set-piece display of a top hat and cane. The first scene shows an auction room: the auctioneer appeals in vain for bids for these items, the possessions, it turns out, of the now faded star Tony Hunter (Fred Astaire). The film, then, begins with loss — loss of celebrity and the devaluing of these mementoes of his talent. In the second scene, a train is speeding to New York. Two loudmouths talk about Hunter as a has-been, while Hunter himself, behind a newspaper, overhears. When the train arrives, he is initially reluctant to leave the carriage. Then, hearing that there is a reception party — a red carpet and eager reporters are waiting — his mood lifts. He steps out proudly but is immediately upstaged: Ava Gardner, playing herself, emerges from the carriage behind him and poses for the cameras, which are there for her. Hunter is left standing by himself, leaning on a cart piled high with luggage. It is only when a porter moves the cart that he is disturbed into action. He walks along the platform, singing somewhat mournfully "By myself, by myself." Throughout the whole sequence we do not see his feet. The sequence is carefully color-coded — the porters black, the passengers white, the aging Hunter's suit a pasty grey, the beautiful Ava Gardner in dazzling chiaroscuro. The train carriage bears the name "General Grant." There is already here then a questioning of the terms of praise, especially of when it is empty or hollow and when it is not.

Stefan Ramaekers and Joris Vlieghe's thoughtful analysis of the arcade scene that follows very shortly after this draws especially on Stanley Cavell's "Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise," originally presented in Amsterdam in 1998, a year after his Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association (Eastern), entitled "Something Out of the Ordinary," which had analyzed the sequence described above.[1] Mostly I am sympathetic to their reading, though its emphasis on the *experimentum linguae* tends to hide the *experimentum corporis*: bluntly, there is too much about language and not enough about the visual and movement itself, and the account ends up being somewhat one-tracked.

Some aspects of their description of the scene need questioning or correction. First, this is not "a shopping mall, called 'Arcade,'" but a penny arcade, and the amusements available there warrant attention. Second, the shoeshine boy is not so obviously "stereotypical," nor exactly "shabby, goofy, and cack-handed." Third, to say that Astaire "drags [him] along" in the shared dance seems overhasty, if not plain wrong.

Where they are exactly right is in their placing of Cavell's discussion against the backdrop of Michael Rogin's criticism of the film's representation of racial inequality.[2] It is not that Rogin is wrong, but criticism of this kind can come too easily, and it carries its dangers of hubris. This is to be contrasted with the more *uneasy* criticism that Cavell's reading has provoked from Robert Gooding-Williams, which again has

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contributed to further explorations of the sequence by, for example, Lawrence Rhu, Harvey Cormier, William Rothman, and Cavell himself.[3] The timbre of these lines of criticism is immensely relevant to Cavell's theme: Ramaekers and Vlieghe do not bring out sufficiently the terms of praise, and its place in criticism, as a question for Hunter's/Astaire's relation to the black dance traditions that have inspired his career, no less than for philosophy itself. It is a live question for Cavell whether or how, in an unjust society, Astaire can acknowledge and praise the black origins of his tradition. The film has laid the way for this by presenting us with scenes where praise might be thought idolatrous or empty (the red carpet, the auction-room values), which Cavell now differentiates from those that burden the arcade scene, and in contestation with which he wants to assert Astaire's right to praise. Let us attend more closely to the scene.

Astaire enters the arcade on a whim and drifts aimlessly from stall to stall: he plays pinball, tests his strength, pitches a ball; he measures his good looks; a mechanical clairvoyant reads his fortune; he sees himself in distorting mirrors. All this he does rather listlessly before he trips over the outstretched foot of the shoeshine man — whereupon the rhythm changes: Astaire breaks into song, urging the black man out of his apparently disconsolate mood.

Ramaekers and Vlieghe follow Cavell in casting the arcade as a kind of temporary, provisional, yet utopian space. But the arcade is also a transgressive place. Astaire wears a smart (though dull) suit, but others are dressed casually and shabbily. In this low-life mix of (mostly white) people the shoeshine man stands out, but not exactly as shabby or "goofy": what is striking is his surprisingly bright shirt, suggestive not so much of the garb of a poor black man in New York in 1953 as that of a fantasized Caribbean or conceivably Hawai`i. This draws the eye, suggesting a kind of energy. Ramaekers and Vlieghe speak of Astaire's interruption of this scene, but is this not to cast him too much as the agent and to underplay the way the outstretched leg interrupts *him*? Astaire might then be seen as reenergized by contact with the black man, in a repetition of the larger inheritance of black inventiveness in song and dance. This would turn the sequence into an acknowledgement and a tribute, the ensuing dance of the two men expressing some kind of attunement in this.

But this theme of tribute is precisely the interpretation to which Gooding-Williams takes exception. Such a reading inadvertently reinscribes the stereotype of the black man as a source of energy and sexual potency. Gooding-Williams goes so far as to read in the "spit-and-polish" of shoe cleaning an insemination of the white man by the black.[4] Certainly it seems that this big black man emerges somehow from the ground, where he sits or kneels, to find a kind of union with Astaire who, as it were, flutters above — a union of air and earth in dance, a registering of gravity, to be sure, but where the black man belongs with the earth.

But perhaps these readings underestimate the mutual recognition occasioned not by the willful action of either Leroy Daniels[5] or Astaire but by this chance encounter; it is this chance and the ability to make something of it that brings both to life.

The arcade is certainly a queerer space than a shopping mall, and a subversive sexual thread is there from the start. On entering, Astaire stands idly at a food stall,

and the seller hands him a wiener. Astaire does not know what to do with it and shortly passes it to a young boy who is eyeing it enviously. An unusually tall woman of somewhat masculine build passes a stall depicting a white woman threatened by a gorilla. And when, after the trip, Astaire hops up onto the raised chair for a shine, what ensues is gestural, stylized, and dance-like — a foot is extended, a cloth flutters over it. What follows is not quite a dance but a rhythmic, sometimes frenzied movement, around the arcade. At one point Astaire comes back to a mysterious closed box with a large question mark on the front, which can be opened only by twiddling the two handles to find the right key-combination. His earlier attempts to open this were to no avail. Now he cavorts in front of it, finally hitting it firmly with his backside — at which point the box opens with all manner of flags and razzmatazz, and a Yankee marching song blaring out.

How is this to be read? Gooding-Williams sees the black man not as being dragged around but as being in pursuit. But something stranger is going on here. Astaire is feminized, even seeming petite, and he is delighting in this unexpected connection, as the black man apparently does too. If we can see the space of the arcade as transgressive, and remember the other sexually pointed elements in the scene, as well as noting director Vincente Minnelli's homosexuality and unease with conventionally ascribed gender roles, not to mention legislation, the feminization of Astaire and the dance become all the more significant. The utopia of the arcade offers a temporary combined liberation from norms of race and gender, and of class too.

Ramaekers and Vlieghe's steering of their interpretation toward Agamben's notion of infancy has much to offer — provided it is accepted that the "infancy" of the adult cannot be the same as that of the child. My concern, as expressed at the start, is that this can encourage a one-tracked reading. The walk off at the end of the scene comes with a kind of disappointment, especially as Astaire exits under a sign marked "The Proud Land" — that is, America-as-usual. Here we have criticism of the norms to which he will return, in contrast to the terms of praise tested in the arcade.

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1. Both papers were subsequently published in Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2005).

2. Michael Rogin, *Black Face and White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

3. Robert Goodings-Williams, "Aesthetics and Receptivity: Kant, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Astaire," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Lawrence F. Rhu, *Stanley Cavell's American Dream: Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Hollywood Movies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); William Rothman, "On Stanley Cavell's *Band Wagon*" (keynote presentation delivered at the Conference on Stanley Cavell's *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, University of Paris I: Pantheon-Sorbonne, September 2012); and Stanly Cavell, "The Incessance and Absence of the Political," in *The Claim to Community*, ed. Norris.

4. Goodings-Williams, "Aesthetics and Receptivity," 251–253.

5. Daniels was a real-life shoe-shine man who was recruited to play the part. After the film was over, he went back to his job.