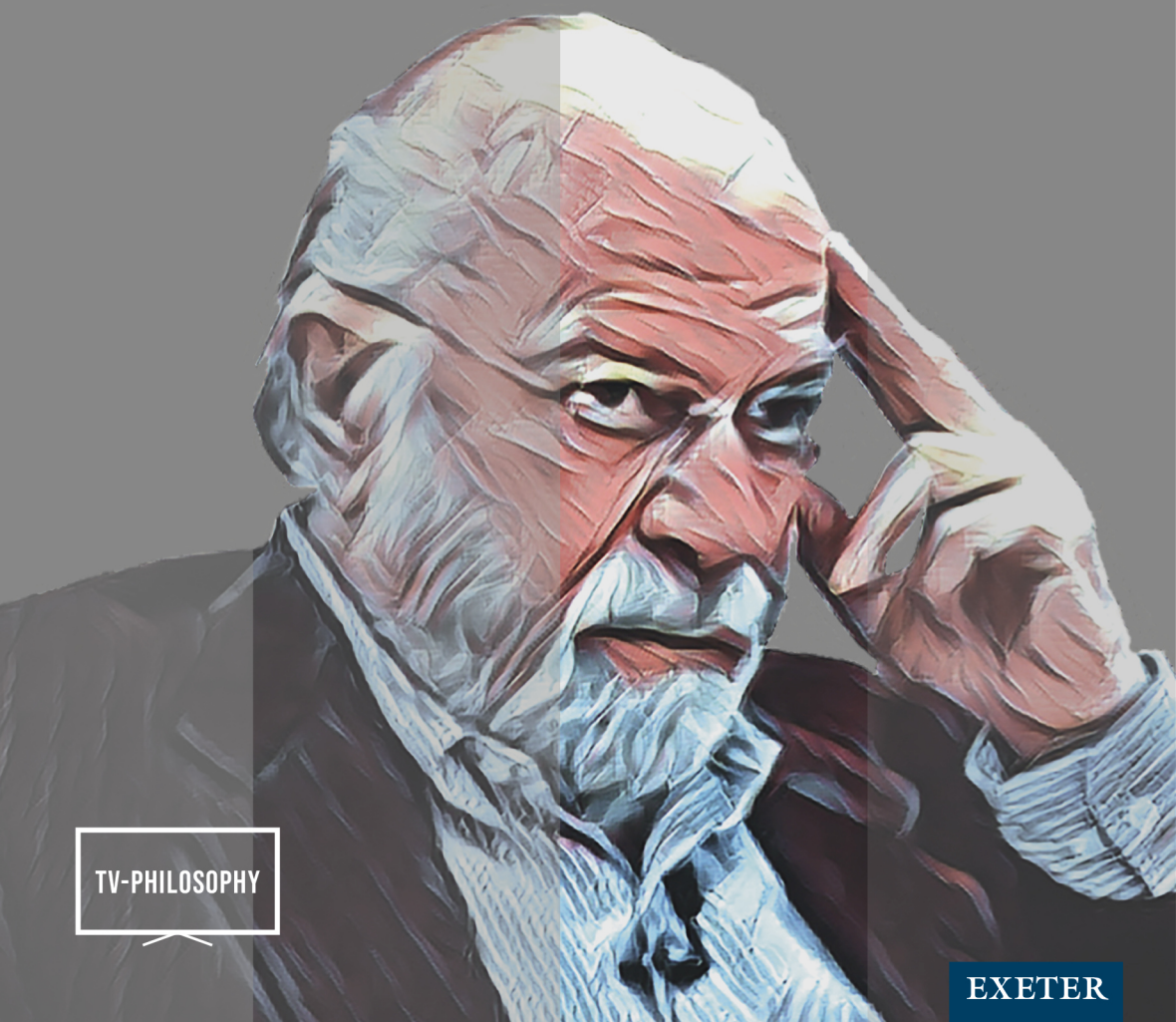


# TELEVISION WITH STANLEY CAVELL IN MIND

EDITED BY

David LaRocca & Sandra Laugier



TV-PHILOSOPHY

EXETER

Television with  
Stanley Cavell  
in Mind

# TV-Philosophy

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# Television with Stanley Cavell in Mind

edited by  
DAVID LARocca  
AND SANDRA LAUGIER

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*Television with Stanley Cavell in Mind*

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## The Event of Television: Sitcoms, Superheroes, and *WandaVision*

Stephen Mulhall

Despite its name, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (hereafter ‘MCU’) has always been involved in television, in its broadcast, cable, and streaming forms. Its centre of gravity during the first three phases of its development has certainly been in the twenty-three movies that collectively constitute ‘The Infinity Saga’, in which short sequences of films each focusing on individual superheroes (such as Iron Man, Thor, or Captain America) converge as their protagonists come together as the Avengers, and thereafter generate a complex set of self-contained but interrelated adventures involving various subgroups of these characters, eventually culminating in a two-part, six-hour conflict with the Titan Thanos, in which the universe first suffers the loss of half of its population (when Thanos gains control of all the Infinity Stones, whose individual vicissitudes helped interlink the films’ storylines), before the remaining Avengers manage to overcome their enemy and recover those lost.

Even during this period, however, the MCU reached repeatedly from cinemas into television. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Agent Carter*, and *Inhumans* all aired on ABC; *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, and *Iron Fist* streamed on Netflix as individual series before combining as *The Defenders* (a miniature, wholly televisual analogue of the MCU’s first phase); and *Cloak & Dagger* appeared on the cable channel Freeform. Moreover, the new, fourth phase of the MCU, conceived after Marvel Studios was integrated into Walt Disney Studios, is even more fully committed to televisual formats. Although this was to some extent an artefact of pandemic-imposed delays in cinematic release dates, the Disney+ streaming service hosted the first element in this phase, *WandaVision*, which was quickly succeeded by *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* and *Loki*, all before the first film in phase four—*Black Widow*—made



it to the big screen; and since then, the appearance of further cinematic and televisual instalments has accelerated in tandem.

One way of understanding the multimedia nature of the MCU is as the inevitable consequence of interlocking economic, technological, and cultural change. When corporate entities have repeatedly subsumed smaller institutions each with a track record in specific media, and the screens in our living rooms, laptops, and phones can with equal facility display content originally created for cinema, broadcast, and streaming, then the way to maximize the commercial value of intellectual property such as that controlled by Marvel Studios is to diversify into as many communicative media as possible, all the while ensuring that the identity of the brand or franchise overwhelms any lingering superficial differences between the media thereby colonized. On this interpretation, the omnipresence of MCU product both indicates and reinforces the increasing irreality of any distinction between different audio-visual media; the MCU's multidimensional cultural imperialism demonstrates the utter irrelevance of inherited assumptions about (and so inherited accounts of) the conceptual and aesthetic distinctiveness of television—in comparison to cinema, and more generally.

But that way of understanding this cultural behemoth is not compulsory. For it might rather be that the MCU has been able to establish and maintain its dominance precisely because those who create its films and shows have a very sophisticated understanding of what differentiates television from cinema (and so what links them), and have utilized their grasp of the distinctive aesthetic possibilities of each medium in shaping the work they do in both. It is this possibility that I will explore here, with the help of *WandaVision*.

In doing so, I will make extensive use of an essay entitled 'The Fact of Television' that Stanley Cavell published in 1982—long before the economic, technological, and cultural developments that have had such an impact on the evolution of television and its place in our lives over the last two or three decades.<sup>1</sup> That fact alone might lead one to suspect its irrelevance to contemporary debates in television studies. If Cavell's range of televisual examples was necessarily restricted to US shows (and UK imports) from the 1970s on his country's main broadcast channels prior to the rise of premium cable services, then how could his attempts to characterize the medium and media of television (together with their material basis) in relation to its distinctive aesthetic possibilities have any bearing on a streaming-dominated medium whose current claims to aesthetic interest have been radically transformed by what commentators have called 'Complex TV' or 'New Television'—showrunner-controlled, long-form narrative works of art such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad*, whose enduring influence on current television is so evident?

And if the object of Cavell's account might be thought to have mutated sufficiently to outflank him, the same could be said of the discursive fields to which his account was intended to contribute. For he focuses on the aesthetics of television by investigating the medium as it has disclosed itself

in its distinctive achievements, in a manner familiar from the modernist movements in American painting, sculpture, and literature in Cavell's youth and early adulthood. Philosophical aesthetics in general and television studies in particular, by contrast, are currently well populated with those sceptical of the elitist ideological presuppositions they detect in the very idea of evaluative hierarchies, and with those dismissive of the idea that there is such a thing as the essential nature of the televisual medium (let alone that its distinctive aesthetic possibilities might stand in some internal relation to that nature).<sup>2</sup> In a world where visual images are primarily captured, edited, and otherwise manipulated digitally, and displayed on screens of any size and shape from multiple input formats, it is hardly surprising to observe significant and growing support for the idea that television studies, like film studies, should be subsumed within a much broader field of investigation concerning 'the moving image' or 'the screened image'.

Of course, these sceptics do not lack for opponents, and some of the most interesting recent work in the field has come from them. Ted Nannicelli's *Appreciating the Art of Television* is exemplary in this respect, and I shall return to it.<sup>3</sup> In my view, for philosophers such as Nannicelli, Cavell's essay can and should provide some very congenial support—when it is properly understood. For even if it is wrong to claim that this essay has been largely neglected in television studies,<sup>4</sup> it is at least arguable that its full significance and implications have been missed, and on occasion even by those well versed in other aspects of Cavell's body of work. For example, Martin Shuster's interesting recent book *New Television*<sup>5</sup> gives Cavell a key orienting role; but his way of inheriting the essay on television seems to me to be severely, and peculiarly, limited. Hence, one important aim of my essay is to hold open an alternative way of inheriting Cavell: although I think that that alternative allows us to better understand both the MCU and *WandaVision*, I also believe that it can be far more generally useful.

### Cavell on Media, Material, and Modes of Perceiving: Film

'The Fact of Television' is a very dense and demanding essay, so achieving a perspicuous survey of it is challenging, and I will not be able to touch on every interesting aspect. Instead, I will focus on the fact that Cavell there means to characterize television in three interrelated ways: as a medium with a distinctive material basis, exhibiting a distinctive form of aesthetic composition, and inviting a distinctive mode of perception. As we shall see, however, none of these levels or registers of characterization is foundational with respect to the other two—none constitutes an independently established basis from which the other characterizations follow by logical implication; neither are any of the three graspable independently of the other two. Hence, light will dawn, if it dawns at all, over the whole.

Furthermore, Cavell clarifies his claims about television by comparing and contrasting it with the corresponding claims about cinema that he had

developed elsewhere. This exponentially increases our exegetical difficulties: at the very least, it means that to get a proper grasp on his conception of television, we need to see it against the background of his more extensive engagement with cinema, which is itself grounded in his general approach to philosophical aesthetics. The misunderstandings inherent in some attempts in television studies to learn from 'The Fact of Television' can often, I believe, be traced to the inaccessibility of these broader contexts, and to the sheer complexity of the material each harbours. So what follows, although complicated enough, is really only a first pass—an attempt to provide at least the indispensable minimum for a more productive engagement with Cavell's essay.

Throughout his career, Cavell takes the concept of a medium to be indispensable in differentiating kinds of artwork, and in understanding specific instances of those kinds; but he sees it as referring not simply to a physical material but to a material-in-certain-characteristic-applications, and hence as having a necessarily dual sense. Sound, for example, is not the medium of music in the absence of the art of composing and playing music. Musical works of art are thus not the result of deploying a medium that is defined by its independently given possibilities; for it is only through the artist's successful production of something we are prepared to call a musical work of art that the *artistic* possibilities of that physical material are discovered, maintained, and explored. We can, of course, identify the independently given physical possibilities of sound qua sound, qua physical phenomenon; but for any such possibility to constitute a way of making art, we must actually deploy it to make art—make something recognizable as a work of art from it.

Philosophers tend to think that possibility is prior to actuality—that something being the case presupposes its being possible; but when our concern is with a medium of art, it is less misleading to say that actuality is prior to possibility—that an aesthetic possibility is only established as such by someone actualizing it. And such aesthetic possibilities of sound, without which it would not count as an artistic medium at all, are themselves media of music—ways in which various sources of sound have been applied to create specific artistic achievements, for example in plainsong, the fugue, the aria, or sonata form. They are the strains of convention through which composers have been able to create, performers to practice, and audiences to acknowledge specific works of art.

In effect, Cavell conceives of an artistic medium as analogous to a language:

A medium is something through which or by means of which something specific gets done or said in particular ways. It provides, one might say, particular ways to get through to someone, to make sense; in art, they are forms, like forms of speech. To discover ways of making sense is always a matter of the relation of an artist to his art, each discovering the other.<sup>6</sup>

An artistic medium mediates between artist and audience member because it is a medium of communication, a vehicle of meaning; and just like linguistic meaning on a Wittgensteinian conception of it, artistic meaning is constituted by a dialectic between conventions and those employing them. Speakers inherit the norms and conventions of the pre-existing public language they share with other speakers; but that language's continued existence depends upon the collective, and so the individual, willingness of speakers to go on with those conventions, in part by projecting them into new circumstances and contexts, some of which might invite or compel them to revise or otherwise question those conventions, disclosing new possibilities or impossibilities of sense-making in the light of the world's unpredictable yieldings and resistances, and speakers' shifting conceptions of the intelligibility of what other speakers say and do. Speakers at once exploit and extend the meanings of words, and so the medium of communication that they constitute; and without their continued willingness to find sense in the ways individual speakers attempt to make sense to one another, there would be no language, no medium of speech. Linguistic conventions accordingly cannot ground or authorize, in any way that guarantees, the success of these attempts; on the contrary, the continued success of those attempts is what the continued viability of those conventions as ways of making sense consists in.

Four aspects of this analogy are worth noting, in relation to specifically artistic media. First, the primary locus of artistic sense-making is the particular communicative act, the specific artwork: this is where the continued viability of a given artistic convention, or the establishment of a new convention, is exhibited or seen to fail. Hence, second, media are essentially historical phenomena: their constituting conventions can alter over time, sometimes radically, and what was essential to their communicative success at one sociocultural moment might prove to be dispensable at a later one. Third, those at whom that communication is directed are necessarily involved in interpreting or making sense of it (as something that someone might intelligibly have meant to say or do); in short, they must engage in acts of criticism. Works of art are inherently criticizable, and criticism is inherent in any relation to a work of art qua artwork. And fourth, the artistic significance of any work cannot be determined by, and so read off from, the possibilities of its medium: not from its physical possibilities, and not from its aesthetic possibilities either (since each new attempt to exploit them *might* reveal their inability, here and now, to support artistic meaning).

Cavell's approach to film—undertaken in a time when all films utilized analogue photographic technology—bears clear marks of this background:

You can no more tell what will give significance to the unique and specific aesthetic possibilities of projecting photographic images by thinking about them or seeing some, than you can tell what will give significance to the possibilities of paint by thinking about paint or

by looking some over. You have to think about painting, and paintings; you have to think about motion pictures ...

The first successful movies—i.e., the first moving pictures accepted as motion pictures—were not applications of a medium that was defined by given possibilities, but *the creation of a medium* by their giving significance to specific possibilities. Only the art itself can discover its possibilities, and the discovery of a new possibility is the discovery of a new medium.<sup>7</sup>

On this approach, however, grasping the significance of specific motion pictures is not only the means through which a particular cinematic medium can and must be discovered; it is also the means through which its material basis is displayed. For if the relevant material is to be grasped *as* the basis of the medium and the media of film, only specific achievements of significance within those media can disclose some property of that material as their ground, as a way of conveying that significance, and so as capable of communicating it (or meaningful modifications of it) more generally.

Accordingly, Cavell defines the material basis of the media of movies not as light, or as photographs, or as sequences of photographs projected on delimited flat surfaces, but as 'a succession of automatic world projections'.<sup>8</sup> That characterization very ostentatiously does *not* characterize the physical means by which movies are made in terms that are graspable prior to and independent of viewing any and all films. It rather condenses or encodes the ways in which successful works in the various media of film have given specific point to those physical means, and so disclosed them as capable of such modes of sense-making, according to Cavell's critical account of his encounters with those films in the seventy pages that precede it. The literariness of its mode of perspicuous presentation is Cavell's way of acknowledging this doubled aesthetic mediation (involving his critical appreciation of specific cinematic artworks), and of indicating the extent to which its full implications might outrun their original promptings (as is generally true of aesthetic significance). Cavell's immediate gloss on his formulation brings this out:

'Succession' includes the various degrees of motion in moving pictures: the motion depicted; the current of successive frames in depicting it; the juxtapositions of cutting. 'Automatic' emphasizes the mechanical fact of photography, in particular the absence of the human hand in forming these objects and the absence of its creatures in their screening. 'World' covers the ontological facts of photography and its subjects. 'Projection' points to the phenomenological facts of viewing, and to the continuity of the camera's motion as it ingests the world.<sup>9</sup>

It would take a book fully to unpack the significance of those terms, individually and collectively, and to show how their grammar—although initially

shaped by analogue cinematic technology—can fruitfully be projected into digital environments.<sup>10</sup> Here, I simply want to emphasize that the whole formulation counts as ‘aphoristic’, in the sense Cavell defines when interpreting the role of aphorisms in Wittgenstein’s later philosophical writing.<sup>11</sup> It is a mode of exhibiting the clarity achieved by exercises of critical appreciation that simultaneously acknowledges the obscurity from which that clarity comes—reflecting not only the dense idiosyncrasy of the layers of sense his account has laid down, but also his sense that there is something constitutively mysterious about cinema’s seductiveness and our responsiveness to it. So when Cavell characterizes the material basis of the medium of television, we need to understand that it too functions aphoristically: its obscure clarity aims to condense the results of critical engagement with what he takes to be successful instances of the medium and media of television, whilst acknowledging our enigmatic fascination with it.

In the case of cinema, the relevant media through which the medium and its material basis were disclosed to Cavell—its distinctive modes of aesthetic achievement—were genres, and genres of two particular kinds. The first kind predominates in *The World Viewed*, and is there labelled ‘genre-as-cycle’. Cavell arrives at the claim that cycles of films (such as Westerns, horror movies, Civil War movies) constitute a genre, and so an aesthetic possibility of the cinematic medium, in part because they are an apt home for the presentation and investigation of human types—types such as the Villain, the Fallen Woman, or the Sergeant. Such types incarnate human individualities rather than individuals: the actors who realize them embody a distinctively cinematic acknowledgement of human individuation, which emphasizes the separateness of one type of person from all others, rather than their similarity with others of the same type. The other kind of cinematic genre is the principal concern of Cavell’s two other book-length studies of film, *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*:<sup>12</sup> the first focuses on what he calls ‘comedies of remarriage’, the second on ‘melodramas of the unknown woman’, and both are instances of what Cavell names ‘genre-as-medium’. For both kinds of genre, to belong to a genre is to be a member of it: but whereas one can roughly just see whether or not a film is a member of a genre-as-cycle such as the Western or the horror movie (in part, by recognizing the types that populate it), membership of a genre-as-medium imposes more demanding conditions.

Each comedy of remarriage, for example, shares something with every other genre member; but that is not a property or set of properties but an inheritance, together with a questioning relation to that inheritance, and so to its fellow inheritors: ‘[T]he members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and ... in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance.’<sup>13</sup> That inheritance centrally involves what Cavell calls ‘a problematic of marriage established in certain segments of the history of theatre’.<sup>14</sup> One source is Shakespearean romantic comedy, in which a young pair overcome



individual and social obstacles to their happiness and achieve resolution in marriage; the other is Ibsen's dramatic concern, exemplified in *A Doll House*, with the struggle for equality of consciousness between a woman and a man, and with the necessity and the possibility of reconceiving marriage so that it can be a site of such mutual acknowledgement. Comedies of remarriage remake these sources by casting a married woman as their heroine, and taking as their goal getting their central, older pair together *again*. Marriage is thus represented as inherently subject to the fact or the threat of divorce, hence as worth preserving or recovering only if both parties prove themselves willing to remarry—as if to be married just *is* to be willing to remarry, every day.

If we call this a myth of marriage, then each member of the remarriage genre embodies a way of making sense of that myth's way of making sense of things (of marriage, but also—in the terms of Cavell's construction of it—of sexuality, society, desire, separateness, finitude, and so on). Each such critical evaluation therefore amounts to a critical evaluation of the interpretations of all its fellow members, a view of the myth that is also a view of all the other views of that myth. Since each such film interprets the unifying myth in its own way, one genre member might in principle differ in any given respect from any other; but it can maintain its claim to membership of the genre by compensating for whatever feature of the myth it lacks—for example, by introducing a new clause to its retelling of the myth which proves to contribute to an illuminating re-description of the genre as a whole.<sup>15</sup> We may also, however, find that a new feature brought to the generic conversation by another film negates some central provision of the unifying myth—that it doesn't allow us to tell the same story differently, but rather decisively changes the story. If so (and whether it *is* so is of course a critical judgement rather than the registration of an observable fact), then the genre-as-medium to which this film belongs is different, and an adjacent genre is thereby identified. It is through this kind of negating operation that the melodramas of the unknown woman are derived from the comedies of remarriage.

These operations of compensation and negation are what justify Cavell in calling such genres instances of 'genre-as-medium'. For although all genres count as media insofar as they constitute a possible mode of aesthetic communication, and some instances of genre-as-cycle might significantly question their generic conventions, instances of cinematic genre-as-medium require that that membership is earned by interrogating, testing, and revising the conventions and resources that constitute it in a particularly fundamental way. In each comedy of remarriage, for example, the central pair converse about the very topics (the nature of marriage, sexuality, desire, and individuality) about which the film they inhabit is in conversation with the other remarriage comedies. And because these films make the question of their generic identity such an explicit preoccupation, they not only instantiate the processes of alteration over time that Cavell sees as characteristic of any communicative medium, but contribute centrally and deliberately to it. For each, membership of their genre in effect requires that they acknowledge,

interrogate, and modify the nature of that cinematic medium, and so that of every one of its members.

Thus far, we've seen what Cavell takes to be the material basis of the media of cinema (a succession of automatic world projections), and the distinctive form of its aesthetic work (the genre-member mode of composition). What he regards as its distinctive mode of perception he characterizes as 'viewing'—an apparently innocuous term which is in fact precisely as specific as (because it is grammatically dependent on) the constitutive terms of his characterization of the material exploited to achieve this perceptual mode. On Cavell's account, when we look at a photograph of an object, we see that object (the particular real thing present to the camera), and not some surrogate, representative, proxy or likeness of it (as when we see a painting of an object, or a model of it); and that object forms part of a world that is recorded along with it, whose larger extent is cropped from the photograph by the camera. The implied presence and explicit rejection of that larger world are thus as essential to the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents; and this phenomenology carries over to screened projections of motion pictures.

This is one sense attaching to Cavell's claim that the material basis of cinema genres is a succession of automatic *world* projections: the cinema screen screens us from the world projected upon it (that world is present to me, whilst I am not present to it); and it does so automatically (rather than as a matter of convention, which is how our absence from the world of a play is achieved). The cinema screen captures a world that is in every feature indistinguishable from reality; but the price we pay for the world's presentness is the screening of human subjectivity from that world. Reality is made present, at the cost of ensuring our absence, which places us in the position of viewing the world of the film as if from without—a position whose conditions are stringent and on first inspection significantly disabling, but that in fact enable certain distinctive kinds of aesthetic achievement:

The fact that in a moving picture successive film frames are fit flush into the fixed screen frame results in a phenomenological frame that is indefinitely extendible and contractible ... [It] is the image of perfect attention. Early in its history, the cinema discovered the possibility of *calling* attention to persons and parts of persons and objects [e.g., close-ups]; but it is equally a possibility of the medium not to call attention to them but, rather, to let the world happen, to let its parts call attention to themselves according to their natural weight.<sup>16</sup>

### **Cavell on Media, Material, and Modes of Perceiving: Television**

Now I'm finally in a position to summarize Cavell's understanding of the medium of television: its material basis is a current of simultaneous event reception (rather than a succession of automatic world projections); its



distinctive form of aesthetic composition is the serial-episode principle (rather than the genre-member principle), and its distinctive perceptual mode is that of monitoring (rather than viewing).

Before unpacking some implications of these interrelated characterizations, I want to emphasize that they presuppose the same understanding of the concepts of 'medium', 'genre', and 'individual work' that are presupposed in Cavell's work on film, which aligns him with those who continue to believe that the concept of a medium remains a useful, even an indispensable, resource in understanding the distinctive aesthetic possibilities of television. Cavell would thus be very much in sympathy with Ted Nannicelli's critical evaluation of Noël Carroll's general scepticism about the very concept of a medium, and in particular about the suggestion that aesthetic achievement in a given medium should or must exploit its distinctive properties.

Nannicelli rightly identifies some strong and highly questionable assumptions that underpin Carroll's scepticism. The first is that any concept of a medium must be a strongly essentialist one—according to which it possesses a timeless, unchanging essence (like a natural kind); and the second is that the only candidates for such essential characteristics must be the medium's physical properties, characterized independently of any communicative or aesthetic employment of them. This second assumption feeds into a third: that anyone who thinks that grasping the nature of a medium is relevant to understanding the nature and value of artistic work conducted within it must believe that any aesthetically excellent work in that medium should or must use only properties of the medium that are unique to it (that is, the physical properties invoked in the second assumption). This allows Carroll to portray all medium-specificity theorists as imagining that a study of paint or photographs will yield a grasp of the aesthetic possibilities of painting or film, and so dictate how an excellent work of art in either medium must be constructed.

Nannicelli, however, points out that media are cultural rather than natural kinds, and so are essentially historical phenomena: they evolve, in the light of similarly evolving human goals and purposes, and their unity or identity over time is thus more akin to that of a family or a nation (a matter of genealogy and teleology rather than physics). More specifically, a medium should be understood as 'a cluster of relatively coherent, stable practices of making things in a particular vehicular medium'.<sup>17</sup> With suitable adjustments for differences of cultural and philosophical contexts, that provisional definition seems to fit with the basic thrust and the fundamental shape of Cavell's approach. Indeed, much of what Cavell says about the relation between the medium and media of film and television and their material bases is as if designed to buttress Nannicelli's critique of Carroll; and his way of arguing that both a medium and its material bases are disclosable as such only by successful individual works of art offers something like the inverse of the logical and conceptual procedures that Carroll assumes to be essential to the work of medium-specificity theorists.

A further meeting of minds emerges when Nannicelli characterizes the distinguishing characteristics of the medium of television. For he claims in particular that [t]elevision and film differ in virtue of having quite distinct sets of practices for individuating their works temporally, establishing the temporal duration of those works, and affording viewers temporal access to those works'.<sup>18</sup> Televisual works are temporally subdivided in a variety of ways (format, series, season, episode); they can be indefinitely prolonged without losing organic unity; and these features inform both the creative practices of those working in television and the practices of receiving, interpreting, and evaluating those works (as narratives are shaped around commercial breaks, cliffhangers are created between episodes, or the passing of diegetic time is aligned with the real time that elapses between moments of access to the narrative—all formal features that have outlived the original exigencies of televisual broadcasting in the products of cable and streaming services). Such temporal prolongation brings out the priority of the series or the format over the individual episode, and so underlines a central contrast with the medium of film, which Nannicelli claims prioritizes the individual film over any larger aesthetic forms or types to which it belongs.

The consonance with Cavell's account is striking: for his initial characterization of the distinctive media of televisual art focuses on their deployment of a serial-episode principle. Two immediate consequences he draws from this are, first, that unlike film (whose compositional principle is genre-member, which prioritizes the individual member, or at least does not prioritize the genre as what is memorable, treasurable about the medium of film), television prioritizes the format over its instances (we treasure not an individual episode of *I Love Lucy* but the show or the series); and second, that the relation between narration across episodes and narration within an episode in a television series becomes aesthetically significant.

Cavell's point is not that films don't exhibit a mode of serialization: it is rather that it helps in understanding the difference between the medium of film and that of television to consider further how television series differ as media from film serials (of the kind that dominated Saturday morning shows for cinema-going children of a certain age). For a show like *I Love Lucy*, and sitcoms more generally, the default requirement is that the narrative comes to a classical ending each time; but Cavell notes that *Hill Street Blues* was already questioning that feature of the series format, and notes further that the (then merely projected) sequence of *Star Wars* movies questions the standard movie serial demand *not* to come to a classical ending before the final episode. These are plainly aspects of the cluster of features that Nannicelli christens 'temporal prolongation'.

Once these consonances are clearly seen, of course, they might prompt an exploration of more specific differences between Cavell's and Nannicelli's approaches. A Cavellian might, for example, query Nannicelli's explicit wish to separate the business of appreciating the art of television from aesthetically appreciating it.<sup>19</sup> If this simply means acknowledging that appreciating art

involves more than focusing on it as a generator of aesthetic experience (a concept which has certainly been given controversial interpretations in the history of the philosophy of art), then this may be eminently sensible. But it is striking that Nannicelli's listing of the features of televisual narrative that result from the medium's temporal prolongation doesn't explicitly declare that their disclosure as aesthetic possibilities of the medium was the work of artistically successful series (leaving it open to his reader to think that their significance can simply be read off from empirical acquaintance with the structure of their 'vehicular medium').

Whatever might result from such explorations, one can only regret the fact that many of Nannicelli's insights and emphases might not have required such extended restatement and defence if Cavell's essay had been properly attended to thirty-five years earlier. But in some ways, there is more for readers of that essay to regret (or perhaps there is regret of a more piercing sort) in the way Cavell's work has been explicitly taken up by an author well aware of Cavell's extended work on film and his essay on television. For although Martin Shuster builds his account of three series falling under his category of 'New Television' on an ontology of television that he derives explicitly from Cavell's writings, he does so by drawing on Cavell's account of the medium and media of film, entirely ignoring his parallel or complementary account of the medium and media of television.

Shuster's general claim is as follows:

Roughly with *Twin Peaks*, film and television become intertwined historically and aesthetically in ways that suggest a novel medium, a medium that combines elements—automatisms—of each. For example, the procedural and serial elements of television come to be combined with the aesthetic conventions of film and ... with classic film genres like the gangster and the western ... [T]he elaboration as much as the connections between these media that allow for a new one ... fundamentally rests on the ontology sketched in this chapter.<sup>20</sup>

That ontology is of course centred around (the viewing of projected) worlds, even though Shuster must know that in 'The Fact of Television' Cavell explicitly contrasts television with film by characterizing the material basis of televisual media in terms of (the simultaneous reception of) events. So Shuster must believe that 'new television' belies Cavell's event-centred account of television; but he doesn't say why, here or anywhere in his book. Our only clue comes at the single point at which Cavell's television essay is explicitly cited—in footnote 17 to his book's 'Introduction'—where Shuster remarks that 'Cavell largely finds the [televisual] medium wanting'.<sup>21</sup> Neither the belief nor the remark seem justified.

Shuster's belief that new television somehow outstrips or falsifies Cavell's account is not only unargued; it also seems highly questionable. As we have

already seen, Cavell's claim that the compositional principle of television is serial-episode (rather than genre-member) provides a perfectly appropriate lens through which to make sense of the long-form narrative structures of shows such as *The Wire* and *Justified*. It places them in the lineage of shows such as *Hill Street Blues*, which were already reformulating the aesthetic significance of the relation between the narrative arcs of individual episodes, seasons, and series (we might call this aspect of television's temporal prolongation the relation between events and their narrative backgrounds or contexts), and thereby implies that the aesthetic and ontological originality of such series (as opposed to their aesthetic worth) are being overestimated. I cede to no one in my admiration for *The Wire*, but what makes it so treasurable is the excellence of the acting, writing, and overall creative control: its compositional structure certainly modifies prior modes of extended dramatic narrative in television, sometimes significantly, but hardly constitutes a reason to declare the creation of a new hybrid medium.

As for Shuster's belief that Cavell disdains the medium of television: to see what is wrong with this, we need to look more closely at the implications of Cavell's emphasis on the interrelatedness of serialization, events, and monitoring.

What mode of attending is captured by the concept of monitoring? Some of its facets are implicit in a security guard's manner of attending, via his bank of monitors, to the empty corridors leading from points of entry to a building; and Cavell emphasizes (long before its explicit exploitation in contemporary digital broadcasting) how the same mode of access to reality underpins that staple of televisual coverage, the sports event:

[A] network's cameras are ... placed ahead of time. That their views are transmitted to us one at a time for home consumption is merely an accident of economy; in principle, we could all watch a replica of the bank of monitors the producer sees ... When there is a switch of the camera whose image is fed into our sole receiver, we might think of this not as a switch of comment from one camera or angle to another camera or angle, but as a switch of attention from one monitor to another monitor ... The move from one image to another is motivated not, as on film, by requirements of meaning, but by requirements of opportunity and anticipation—as if the meaning is dictated by the event itself. As in monitoring the heart ... —say, monitoring signs of life—most of what appears is a graph of the normal, or the establishment of some reference or base line, a line, so to speak, of the uneventful, from which events stand out with perfectly anticipatable significance. If classical narrative can be pictured as the progress from the establishing of one stable situation, through an event of difference, to the reestablishing of a stable situation related to the original one, [television's] serial procedure can be thought of as the establishing of a stable condition punctuated

by repeated crises or events that are not developments of the situation requiring a single resolution, but intrusions or emergencies—of humour, or adventure, or talent, or misery—each of which runs a natural course and thereupon rejoins the realm of the uneventful.<sup>22</sup>

The classic televisual formats of talk show and sitcom each relate events to the uneventful in their own ways. The former repeatedly stages the ordinary improvisatory business of taking up, maintaining, and concluding conversations with strangers; and each episode in *I Love Lucy* equally exemplifies the situation of that sitcom, with each generated by introducing an element of difference into it—an event that generates the comedy, reaches its natural end, and returns us (characters, watchers, and creators) to our stable starting point.

This idea of (event-)monitoring projects very easily into the contexts of ‘new television’. For these series have predominantly gravitated towards the kinds of dramatic situation for which monitoring seems a likely eventuality within the fictional universe (drug dealers, gangsters, and assorted other forms of criminality arrayed against the forces of law and order); monitoring is in fact the basic premise and governing figure of *The Wire*, as its title declares. Their long-form narratives also allow them to follow *Hill Street Blues* by essaying different modes of balance between narratives within an episode and narratives arcing across both episodes and seasons, thereby interrogating the extent to which the accumulation of foreground events can engender slow but fateful shifts within the original ‘situations’ to which we are returned (problematizing the distinctness of what Cavell calls classical narrative and serial procedure by disclosing uneventful change). More generally, Cavell’s illustrative image of banks of monitors transposes itself with equally remarkable ease into the world of streamed television—where coverage of the Olympics takes the form of dozens of simultaneous feeds of different live events, or where my Netflix home page presents me with an unrolling grid of icons for digital box sets, each of which awaits only a switch of my attention to begin unfolding its sequences of narrative events, and which together imply a multiverse of simultaneously accessible currents of serialization.

None of this strikes me as an account driven by, or inciting, disdain for the medium. First, insofar as Cavell takes media to be media of successful artistic communication, to offer his kind of characterization of our televisual medium and media is to presuppose available instances of aesthetic excellence in television whose achievements have disclosed its distinctive artistic possibilities. Second, Cavell insists that it takes real creative talent to invent the situations of good sitcoms, or to bear up under the burden of hosting talk shows, just as the features of everyday human life that such formats acknowledge—our capacity for improvisation, our hunger for the unrehearsed or unscripted, our ability and desire to respond to that which is new or unexpected—hardly constitute human meannesses or impoverishment. But (third) Cavell’s clearest declaration of the human and philosophical

significance of the way television can relate events to the uneventful lies in his explicit alignment of it with the way in which the *Annales* historians relate events to the uneventful.<sup>23</sup>

In a short essay published at roughly the same time ('The Ordinary as the Uneventful'),<sup>24</sup> Cavell argues that those historians have a legitimate and illuminating interest in getting beyond the familiar dramas of narrative history to the permanencies, or anyway the longer spans, of common life. To get that uneventful background into focus is not to discount the more episodic or momentary events around which other historical narratives turn. It is rather to invite the question of how the shorter and the longer spans of human forms of life relate to each other, and how both relate to their geographical, climatic, and geological (call it their planetary) contexts; and this rethinking of the historicity of our existence amounts to inviting us to reconceive our conception of human existence as such.

In this sense, the *Annales* project warns us that a prevailing concept of the historical event risks theatricalizing human existence, by attracting our attention to flashing, dramatic occurrences in a way that distracts from uneventful processes of change (historical changes of longer duration, and shifts in their non-human context) that may be at least as fateful. The traditional concept of an event allows our attention to be dictated by the precept and example of what a fairly definite public already attaches a definite importance to; the proffered alternative is to let our attention and our discourse determine our real interests for themselves—so that the human being, thinking historically about itself, should interest itself differently in human existence. And this not only brings the *Annales* project into alignment with that of ordinary language philosophy—which aspires to free us from the dictates of the history of philosophy's definite conceptions of what is of interest to human reason; it also suggests an internal relation between Cavell's conception of philosophy and his conception of the aesthetic possibilities of television. For if televisual formats depend upon relating events to the uneventful, then they can either reinforce our culture's ways of privileging dramatic events and dictating our modes of interest in them, or instead encourage us to attend to their enabling uneventful background, and thereby to reconsider what does or should really interest us about both.

### *WandaVision*

The MCU is patently built on the serialization principle: it derives from a universe of multiple, interacting serial narratives created by what we would now call graphic novels; and like them, its narratives centre around beings in whom the achievement of individual identity is facilitated or frustrated by enhanced powers in ways that amount to an intriguing variation on Cavell's theme of cinematic types and the genres-as-cycles that they inhabit. Unsurprisingly, then, the creators of the MCU quickly appreciated the internal relation between their cinematic compositional principles and those of



television, with the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* series constituting an exemplary instance of the aesthetic possibilities it facilitates.

The first season of that series aired at a point which ensured that its mid-season break would roughly coincide with the release of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, in which it is first revealed that the enemy organization HYDRA had extensively infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. and was using it to pursue its own authoritarian goals. This is one of the best of the 'phase two' movies, but it inevitably concentrates on events at the top of the organization, and on the planetary scale of destruction embodied in HYDRA's plan to use huge satellite-linked helicarriers to assassinate millions of potential enemies. It thereby risks theatricalizing the existential threat HYDRA poses in the sense abhorred by the *Annales* historians, telling its tale in terms of great men and their world-defining individual struggles. But when *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* returned from its break, it began to track the more quotidian consequences of those struggles. A key member of the central team is revealed as a HYDRA agent, and the impact of that individual betrayal on every other team member carefully articulated; and the long, draining, and stressful campaign actually to follow through on Captain America's foiling of the helicarrier plot and eradicate HYDRA at every level of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s organization takes up not only the rest of that first season, but several seasons thereafter. In this sense, the television show brought into view the uneventful background to the film's pivotal events, and showed how the victory won by a small group of superheroes not only radically altered the territory on which ordinary men and women lived their professional and personal lives, but could in fact only be realized as a victory by their willingness to make it real—to rewrite every crucial element of the structures and institutions that had made both the betrayal and its overcoming possible.

Once the first three phases of the MCU's development had been completed, its creators naturally turned to television to help launch phase four; but the way in which *WandaVision*—the first series to be released—went about this (re)creative business broke new reflexive ground. For its first three episodes take the form of a situation comedy, in which Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen) and Vision (Paul Bettany)—two romantically linked Avengers involved in the cinematic struggle against Thanos, in which Vision is definitively destroyed—appear as happily married inhabitants of a small town called Westview undergoing the typical trials and tribulations of sitcom life whilst trying to disguise the superpowers that define them. Each of these episodes amounts to a formal and substantial homage to classical US sitcom series from differing historical eras—initially filmed in front of live audiences, and lovingly recreating the set design, camera positions, costumes, and quick-fire dialogue familiar from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *I Love Lucy* through *Bewitched* to *The Brady Bunch* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. However, as each episode jumps from one style to the next and from black-and-white to colour, anomalies begin to accumulate, until—with Wanda having just undergone a massively accelerated pregnancy and given birth to twins—she expels a

neighbour who begins to talk of events involving her in the MCU, and we discover that Wanda's sitcom is taking place in a real town in the contemporary United States, and has attracted the attention of S.W.O.R.D. (a counterpart of S.H.I.E.L.D. initially focused on extraterrestrial threats but now on nanotechnology and sentient weapons).

We gradually learn that Vision's death—coming after Wanda's parents and brother have met violent ends—has pushed her to the brink of madness: having arrived at the town where Vision had bought a plot of land on which to build a house in which they might grow old together, she is driven to use her powers in unprecedentedly powerful ways to transform the town into a sitcom backdrop and to control the minds and lives of its residents so that they take on the role of its supporting cast and extras. This Herculean effort to deny the reality of her latest trauma (and her own exceptional status) becomes increasingly hard to maintain, and is ultimately abandoned—in part because of the suffering it inflicts on the real inhabitants of Westview, in part because the effort of maintaining it has helped her to understand the full extent of her powers, and so her true identity: she is the Scarlet Witch.

But why does this effort at denial take the form of a potted history of American television's situation comedy format? The preceding serialized narrative of Wanda Maximoff in the MCU provides one dominating reason: her childhood in war-torn Sokovia engendered a consuming love for those programmes, because her father earned a living by selling DVD box sets of such American shows during the conflict, and so their family spent many evenings watching the DVDs he hadn't managed to sell. Episode 8 of *WandaVision* re-presents this part of Wanda's story in more detail than was provided in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and in a way that airs a number of complex issues.

On the one hand, those shows allowed the Maximoff family to share an imagined world of love and safety in a time of untrammelled violence; on the other, they did so by presenting a version of reality in which the kinds of events that interrupt this rewarding uneventfulness essentially deny the ways in which reality can actually revise or upend the ordinary—so that we find in the sitcom format's unceasing return to the uneventful a means of denying its true significance. This is why the relevant episode shows how one such evening of viewing is ended when a missile hits their house, killing both parents, and leaving the two children to survive for days in the rubble. They are trapped by the close proximity of another missile, still apparently functional and clearly marked as the product of 'Stark Industries', the conglomerate founded by the father of Tony Stark, otherwise known as Iron Man—the Marvel character with whose series of films the MCU really began.

In this way, *WandaVision* affirms a sense Cavell expresses in his essay, that our enjoyment of television and our anxieties about it alike indicate a displaced fear of what it monitors—'the growing uninhabitability of the world'.<sup>25</sup> But more specifically, the show acknowledges the immensely troubling way in



which the United States colonizes the rest of the world both culturally and militarily, with the latter undermining the apparently more benign nature of the former (perhaps even declaring its true function); and it simultaneously acknowledges its own participation in that ongoing domination (as it adds one more witty, self-aware, and artistically sophisticated series to that bulldozing sequence of series, both cinematic and televisual).

A further element of *WandaVision*'s critique of its own form lies in its intensification of a surprisingly common strand of the various sitcoms it mimics: the extent to which female competence manifests itself as access to the occult (most obviously in *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*). It's as if the very idea of female autonomy is not sufficiently managed by being restricted to the domestic sphere: even there, its reality can only be acknowledged as a mode of witchhood, hence as involving not only the supernatural but a potentially dark or eldritch side of that realm. Here, *WandaVision* works hard to subvert this denial of female power by showing that Wanda's powers are being distorted in their sitcom format (harming not only herself but the others that she recruits to reinforce her fantasy), that they can be fully realized only by transcending its limits, and that in so doing they can help constitute an unprecedented kind of self-affirmation.

We mustn't forget, however, that these critiques of the US sitcom format are themselves conducted by means of a sitcom, and one which is exceptionally aware not only of what the nature of that format has so far revealed itself to be, but of its internal relation to the medium of television as such. On the former front, *WandaVision*'s incorporation into itself of a condensed history of the sitcom declares its participation in that format's accelerating self-awareness, and its ability to find new aesthetic possibilities for the format in acknowledging and transcending its previous enabling and limiting conditions (the kinds of possibility evident not only in sitcoms such as *Seinfeld*, *The Office*, or *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, but also in the ways that much more classically constructed series have incorporated radically heterogenous elements—as when [UK] shows such as *One Foot in the Grave* or *Not Going Out* undertake to account for a suburban household's acquisition of a flourishing pot plant in the downstairs toilet bowl, or to integrate a classical narrative arc of love, engagement, marriage, and children as the uneventful background to equally surreal episode-length dramas). In this respect, the sitcom is well established within the condition of modernism, in which its relation to the history of its own medium is an undismissible question (neither simply accepted nor flatly dismissed).

As for the Cavellian suggestion that the sitcom format is exemplary of the televisual medium and its aesthetic possibilities: *WandaVision* is as if made to validate and exploit that perception. For S.W.O.R.D. discovers what is really going on in Westview by tuning into the broadcast frequency emerging from it on which Wanda's show is alone accessible, and utilizing ancient television monitors to do so—using the naked eye reveals nothing (even when one knows that something is awry in the real Westview), because

the relevant mode of perception is that of monitoring. And the astrophysicist who first discovers this also discovers that the broadcast signal is interwoven with a broader energy field sustaining the sitcom's sequence of events that modulates cosmic microwave background radiation (CMBR)—the lingering traces of the Big Bang. *This* is how *WandaVision* conceives of the medium of distinctively televisual creative power: and it entails that both its and its protagonist's creative work (their chaos magic) is neither a mere illusion nor something created *ex nihilo*. It is made out of reality, but reality rewritten or revised at a molecular level—the level at which repeated transitions between the world of the sitcom and the real world from which it can be monitored engender hitherto-occluded superpowers (as with Monica Rambeau [Teyonah Parris]), rather than reinforcing that occlusion (as Wanda wishes). One might say that CMBR is the epitome of the uneventful background against which the apparently important events of life are monitored—that is, facilitated and anticipated.

So understood, the nature of the medium of television—that is, its ability to disclose the relation between events and the uneventful—is here disclosed as internally related to cinematic events, of the kind that MCU movies both depict and exemplify. *WandaVision* tells us that, just as Cavell foresaw in his essay, the risk of theatricalizing human existence that reaches a kind of apotheosis in superhero narratives can be alleviated by maintaining an openness to specifically televisual modes of advancing those narratives. It even suggests that there is something essential to those modes of transcending the human that is fully responsive to television's distinctive capacity for either reinforcing or redirecting our sense of what is truly important and interesting about the protagonists of such narratives.

In this sense, *WandaVision* was not only a bewitching instance of 'event television': it amounted to a televisual interrogation of the event of television—of its mode of interrupting not only the unfolding history of the MCU but that of cinema in general, and of its capacity to revise our concept of an event, and so our conception of the interweaving of events and the uneventful in human existence.<sup>26</sup>

## Postscript

A further step in this cross-media dialogue about media is taken in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Sam Raimi, 2022), which unfolds the ominous implications of *WandaVision*'s concluding depiction of Wanda living in an isolated cabin, having relinquished her hold over Westview, but preoccupied by reading the Darkhold (the book of dark sorcery bequeathed her by Agnes [Kathryn Hahn], her primary antagonist). That depiction alerted the audience to the possibility that Wanda's realization of her true identity as the Scarlet Witch, with the untrammelled access it gives her to universe-altering power, might threaten humanity rather than enhancing her willingness to protect us (and thereby disclose the dark side of the American

ideal of self-perfecting). The film shows us that the Darkhold has infected Wanda with the belief that her two children, who were central to the fantasy of ordinary life she used Westview to construct and who disappeared when she ceased to impose her traumatized desires upon it, exist in one of the alternate universes that make up the Multiverse—the gradually revealed framework within which phases four and five of the MCU's development play out. Her plan is to use America Chavez (Xochitl Gomez), who can travel between universes at will, to locate the one that includes her children and to possess her counterpart in that universe using a power known as 'dreamwalking'—by which she can inhabit their mother's body and acquire every aspect of her life.

Phase four's notion of the Multiverse offers the MCU a number of advantages. Above all, it is a means of accommodating multiple storylines for the same character, analogous to the graphic novels' capacity to reboot or reset storylines at regular intervals; and as with such graphic retellings, which are often prompted by the desire to see what happens when different creators of narrative and images are let loose on familiar characters and worlds, so the films making up phase four have each used different directors, with individually strong but very heterogeneous stylistic signatures—ranging from Chloé Zhao's awestruck receptivity to planetary shifts of culture, geography, and history (in 2021's *Eternals*) to Sam Raimi's love of the horror of death-in-life (the zombie, the undead). This strategy (we might call it the MCU transforming itself into the MCM) has radically disrupted the tendency established in previous phases to adhere to a single, unifying cinematic vision—seen most clearly in the Russo brothers' expanding sphere of influence in phases two and three, and standing in sharp contrast to that presented by its dour and ponderous DC counterpart. It expresses an aspiration to reflect the burgeoning multiplicity of narrative content into a variousness of cinematic form—an aesthetic multiverse. The resulting lack of predictability in its phase four films has unsurprisingly led to a mixed critical reception, which often seems to manifest a desire to have more of the same (admittedly very satisfying) original recipe, without registering sufficiently clearly the risk of diminishing returns.

But Wanda's transposition from *WandaVision* to Raimi's re-envisioning of Doctor Strange specifically raises the question of the relation between her two incarnations, and thereby the question of what distinguishes an alternate universe from a fantasy. For the Wanda of the television series came to recognize her fantasy for what it was, and to relinquish both it and the cruelty inherent in imposing it on the real lives of the ordinary citizens of Westview; but the Scarlet Witch of the film presents herself as believing that those fantasized children really exist in an alternate universe, and aims cruelly to impose herself on them (and their mother) before ultimately relinquishing that project. In this sense, the Scarlet Witch appears oblivious to her own achievement at the end of *WandaVision*: the fantasy Wanda overcame there as she became the Scarlet Witch has been reconfigured in

Raimi's film as something that is actually happening in an alternate universe, and his Scarlet Witch is introduced to us as once again in its thrall—quite as if she has forgotten her own creation of it, let alone her transcendence of its clutches. There thus seems to be a radical discontinuity between Elizabeth Olsen's televisual and cinematic incarnations of her character—to the point at which one might begin to suspect that the Wanda of *WandaVision* and the Scarlet Witch of *Multiverse of Madness* are two different people.

This cannot be explained by Wanda's transformation into the Scarlet Witch, since that occurred at the end of *WandaVision*; and although *Multiverse of Madness* implies that it is explained by the deleterious effects of her reading the Darkhold (as indicated in the television series' final sequence), that would only explain the Scarlet Witch's acquisition of a delusory belief that her children exist in an alternate universe, whereas the film she inhabits is premised upon, and so unconditionally affirms (to her and to us), the reality of that universe. So how are we to understand this transposition of the basic terms on which *WandaVision* presented Wanda's need for, and her manipulation and emancipation of, Westview?

On one level, this challenge raises the question of whether the very idea of a multiverse is (ultimately indistinguishable from) sheer fantasy—not so much a point at which the imagination expands upon a scientific understanding of reality as a point at which scientific understanding has been infiltrated by a fantasy of what reality could be. The matter is equally pressing on an internal narrative level if we reflect on the capacity for dreamwalking: for if counterparts can possess one another, to present that power as a kind of dreaming, and so as a version of our imaginative powers at their least inhibited, suggests that inhabiting a fantasy of oneself and inhabiting a counterpart of oneself might become as difficult to distinguish from one another as a fantasy from reality (especially given that fantasies are precisely that with which reality can be confused).

But a further range of implications emerges if we recall that there is a third Wanda to be considered: the mother of the children in the film's alternate universe. She too is played by Elizabeth Olsen; and since the Scarlet Witch intends to possess her through dreamwalking, she must be one of her counterparts. But this alternate Wanda appears entirely to lack the capacity for chaos magic; and since she also gives no indication of possessing the precursor powers that were instilled in Wanda Maximoff by HYDRA's experimenting upon her with an Infinity Stone, and that made her eligible to join the Avengers, she doesn't seem to have any better a claim to be a counterpart of the woman who became the Scarlet Witch (in the real world of the film). In short, the Wanda of this alternate universe appears simply to be an ordinary human mother: more precisely—and if we set aside the apparent absence of a counterpart to Vision, whose presence is perhaps implied by the existence of the children—she represents the realization of the fantasy that governed the behaviour of the Wanda of *WandaVision*, and that the Scarlet Witch of the films inherits from her: the

fantasy of being ordinary or everyday, and so of setting aside the burdens of being a superhero.

*Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* thus projects the fictional content of *WandaVision*'s sitcom as an alternate reality within its fictional multiverse; what was first a sequence of fictional events whose creation, broadcasting, and monitoring amounted to an event in the real world is transposed into a self-contained world that the Scarlet Witch views from without, and proves unable to enter (because she learns that possessing alternate Wanda could not give her the authentic love of the alternate's children, and thereby learns that it is sheer fantasy to think that we might take possession of a life that could have been ours if only we had chosen differently at some time in the past—as if taking ownership of the one and only life we have to lead might be achieved by disowning it in favour of someone else's).

It is the shared content of these fictions that gives substance to the presumption that the Wanda of *WandaVision* and the Scarlet Witch of *Multiverse of Madness* are one and the same person; and it is the difference in their (and our) relation to that content that discloses the extent and the nature of their non-identity. For their shared fantasy is articulated by each in a way that is informed by, and so reflects, the different media (the distinct aesthetic universes) in which they are incarnated. Wanda's fantasy of herself undergoes a monitored sequence of events disrupting and reconstituting an uneventful situation; the Scarlet Witch's fantasy of herself inhabits a world viewed whose integrity depends upon the assured absence of her viewing self. One might accordingly say that Raimi's projection of the Scarlet Witch simultaneously declares his indebtedness to, and his capacity and obligation to transform, his televisual predecessor—to reclaim his protagonist as a cinematic phenomenon who is marked but not determined by her prior transposition into that alternate medium.

## Notes

- 1 Stanley Cavell, 'The Fact of Television', reprinted in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).
- 2 For a particularly interesting and nuanced example of the former kind of scepticism, see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), which interrogates the evaluative hierarchies imposed within the history of television, particularly in discussions of more recent examples of highly valued series such as those counted as 'Complex' or 'New' television. For a massively influential example of the latter kind of scepticism, see Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 3 Ted Nannicelli, *Appreciating the Art of Television: A Philosophical Perspective* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

- 4 A view argued for by Sérgio Dias Branco in 'Situating Comedy: Inhabitation and Duration in Classical American Sitcoms', in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, ed. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 5 Martin Shuster, *New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- 6 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 32.
- 7 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 31–32.
- 8 Ibid., 72.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000) takes on the first task; David Rodowick's book *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) argues for the continued usefulness of Cavell's characterizations of film's material bases in a digital world.
- 11 Stanley Cavell, 'The *Investigation's* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', in *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 385.
- 12 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 13 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 28.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid., 29.
- 16 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 25.
- 17 Nannicelli, *Appreciating the Art of Television*, 63.
- 18 Ibid., 64.
- 19 Ibid., 6–7.
- 20 Shuster, *New Television*, 46–47.
- 21 Ibid., 205.
- 22 Cavell, 'The Fact of Television', 76–77.
- 23 Ibid., 78.
- 24 Stanley Cavell, 'The Ordinary as the Uneventful', in *The Cavell Reader*.
- 25 Cavell, 'The Fact of Television', 84.
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